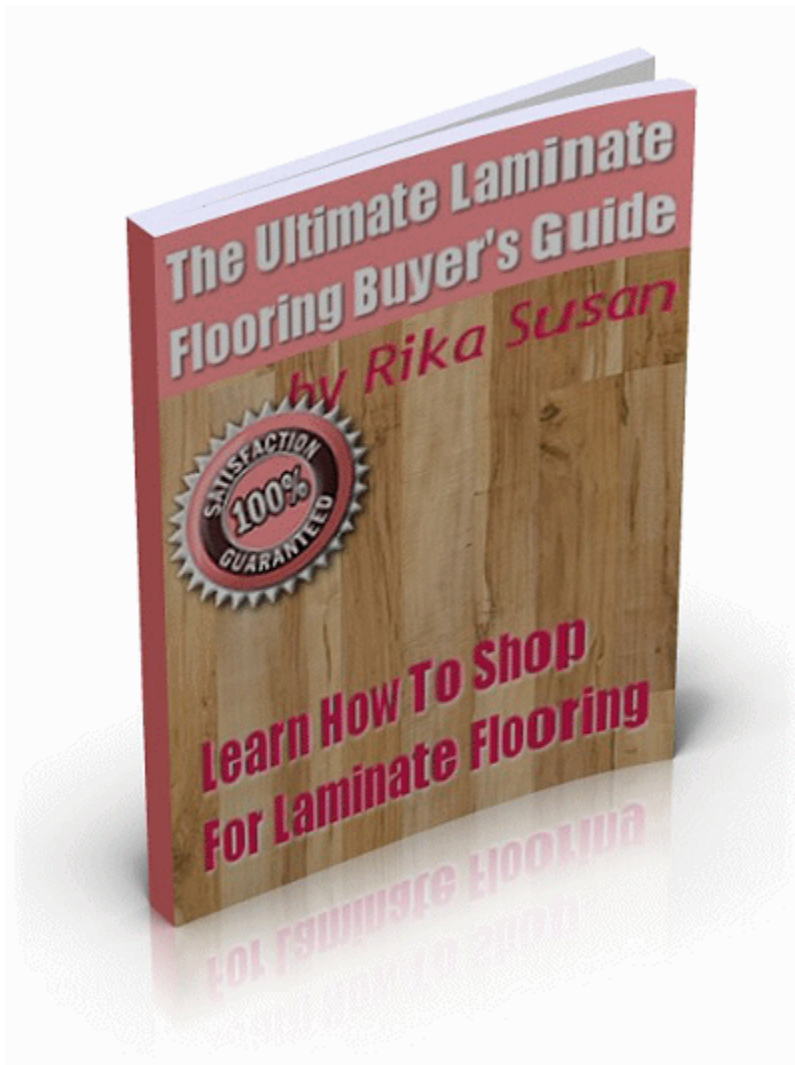


The Ultimate Laminate Flooring Buyer's Guide



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The Ultimate Laminate Flooring Buyer's Guide

Learn How To Shop For Laminate Flooring

by Rika Susan

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CONTENTS

- Chapter 1** - What Is Laminate Flooring?
- Chapter 2** - Why Is Laminate Flooring A Home Improvement Winner?
- Chapter 3** - How To Judge Laminate Flooring Pricing
- Chapter 4** - How To Avoid Quantity Calamities
- Chapter 5** - How To Fit Laminate Flooring Tones And Textures Into Your Design
- Chapter 6** - How To Plan Your Laminate Flooring Installation
- Chapter 7** - Invest In The Back-Up Of A Reputable Brand
- Chapter 8** - How To Avoid Warranty Pitfalls
- Chapter 9** - How To Choose Environmentally And Health Friendly Flooring
- Chapter 10** - How To Interpret The AC Rating?
- Chapter 11** - Learn How To Look At The Locking Mechanism Of Laminate Flooring
- Chapter 12** - What Is Underlayment And Why Do You Need It?
- Chapter 13** - Tools Of The Laminate Trade
- Chapter 14** - How To Maintain The Good Looks Of Your Laminate Floor

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Chapter 1

What Is Laminate Flooring?

Laminate flooring installation is creating an unheard of do-it-yourself buzz in the home improvement industry. Thanks to the glueless, easy installation technology, home remodeling rookies turn into flooring aficionados overnight. However, the diversity of ranges, qualities, designs and pricing structures can fluster a weak-kneed novice trying to decipher laminate flooring lingo.

The first question you may ask, is what exactly is laminate flooring? Laminate flooring tiles or planks look very much like hardwood planks. It usually consists of four or five bonded or fused layers. For the bottom layer, melamine is used as reinforcement. This substance is partly responsible for the stability of the floor. Its other main function is to protect the all-important core of the floor from moisture.

The second layer is the medium or high density fiberboard core with a thickness of between 6 and 12mm, impregnated with sealing substances or resins. These resins give the plank the hardness that makes the innovative tongue and groove technology possible.

In the third layer you will find the design. This is a detailed photograph that gives each plank its authentic real wood or stone tile appearance. The final layer of the laminate tile or plank is what is known as the wear layer. Here you will find a mixture of cellulose paper and melamine plastic resins. This combination gets a durable aluminum oxide coating. You want the best wear layer you can afford, as this is where the resistance to staining, moisture, scratches, and fading comes in.

In some instances, such as with the laminates in the Alloc Flooring range, an

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extra thick Kraft paper layer is fitted between the design layer and the core of the laminate flooring tile or plank. In this case the core is a uniquely engineered Aqua Resist fiberboard that has superb moisture resisting properties.

Two types of pressure is used in the manufacturing of a laminate flooring tile or plank. Direct pressure of around 300 pounds per square inch comes into play in the less expensive ranges. With the direct pressure method all the layers are fused together in one step.

If you have the budget for it, rather opt for high pressure planks where a slightly different process is used and pressure of up to 1300 pounds per square inch is applied. Here the craft paper sheets are glued together along with the design layer. This is then glued to the core of the plank. Only then is everything fused or bonded together under high pressure. With this method you can be sure of a more durable plank with improved moisture resistance.

Some ranges have superior moisture resistance and are suitable for use in bathrooms and kitchens. Some manufacturers, such as Formica Flooring, supply lines strong enough to cope with any kind of water damage.

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Chapter 2

Why Is Laminate Flooring A Home Improvement Winner?

So, you have qualified for a home equity loan and decided to use the funds to transform your home into a mansion with the stylish, gleaming hardwood laminate floors you have heard so much about. What exactly do you need to know before rolling up your sleeves? How do you sniff out the best laminate flooring service? How do you know what the difference is between Pergo Flooring and the laminates of Armstrong Flooring? How do you distinguish between the qualities of Wilsonart Flooring, Mohawk Flooring, and Woodmere Laminate Flooring? Do you opt for the most popular brand or the most expensive range? Is a discount laminate flooring installation an option?

Thanks to new technology memories of messy, sticky, time-consuming laminate flooring installations are thankfully fading into the distance. These home remodeling projects have become a snap with the innovative tongue and groove planks that simply click together to create a stable, floating floor. Laminate hardwood floor installations are now engineered to come with the authentic look of real wood, complete with grain patterns and a realistic weathered texture. Even ceramic tile and stone tile looks are now available compliments of the groutless, glueless laminate flooring service industry. Why is laminate flooring installation one of the fastest growth areas in the home improvement industry?

Low-Maintenance: Overloaded parents juggling to keep up in today's fast-paced world, love the low-maintenance, easy-care qualities of laminate flooring. A damp mop or brushless vacuum takes care of most flooring chores.



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Durable: The technology that goes into the engineering of laminate flooring has improved to such an extent that these ranges are now extremely durable and robust. Many of these floors will retain their looks for 20 or 30 years.

Stain-Resistant: If you have kids and pets, you will be happy to know that laminate flooring services offer products that are highly stain resistant. Spots can be cleaned with dedicated laminate flooring cleaning products, or something as simple as an acetone nail polish remover. However, never experiment with cleaning solutions before checking with your flooring supplier. Using the wrong product may void your warranty.

UV Protected: The flooring finishes are made to be fade resistant. When you move furniture, there will be no tell-tale dull spots or lines on the flooring.

Sub-Floor Suitability: One of the boons of a laminate flooring installation is that it can be done over virtually any existing flooring. The two exceptions are carpeting and real hardwood on concrete.

All Grade Levels: A laminate flooring installation is workable on any grade level.

Impact Resistant: If you choose wisely, you will find that the laminate flooring service industry offers products with superior impact resistance. A quality floor copes admirably with the common household mishaps.

Authentic Real Wood: A laminate floor can create an atmosphere with the same warmth and texture of real hardwood, at a fraction of the price. These days, many laminate flooring planks even come with beveled edges to bring it even closer to an authentic look. You will even find ranges with the typical weathered real wood appearance.

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Do It Yourself: Installing laminate flooring is one of the easiest and most gratifying projects a do it yourself novice can tackle. The click-'n-go concept has taken the home remodeling world by storm.

Rapid Replacement: In case of a mishap, a section of the laminate flooring can be replaced. You won't have to redo a whole floor. To allow for this possibility, always keep an unopened box of flooring planks in storage.

Renovation rookies love the laminate flooring service industry, because the flooring is so simple to install and progress is so noticeable. This is one project even an all-thumbs first-timer can attempt with confidence. A gleaming ready-to-use floor will reward you for your labor in as little as 8 hours. With the snap together designs, the joints are almost invisible.

Do your homework, stick to the laminate flooring installation and maintenance instructions, and your floor will retain its elegant looks for many years. With warranties of between 15 and 30 years, you can be sure that these ranges are made to last.

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Chapter 3

How To Judge Laminate Flooring Pricing

Once you get your flooring toes wet, you will soon notice that the pricing structure of a laminate flooring service isn't always an accurate indicator of value and quality. A wealth of other factors need to be considered before you take the plunge. A pricey range isn't necessarily a superior product.

At the other end of the spectrum, a cheap or discount laminate flooring service may turn out to be extremely costly, due to sub-standard quality and inferior core strength. Get a good overview of the prices of well-known manufacturers, before you decide on a budget. Even within a particular brand's lines you will find vast price differences. Luckily many manufacturers include more affordable lines in their laminate flooring collections. Check that budget lines will be suitable for your specific needs, for instance some of the less expensive ranges can't be used in a bathroom.

Pricing has to do with the thickness of the laminate flooring, the pressure system used during manufacturing, and the quality of the wear layer. If the underlayment is pre-attached, the flooring range is likely to come with a higher price tag. The AC Rating (*see Chapter 10*) also plays an important role in pricing. The warranty period is another factor that influences price. The more expensive the flooring range, the higher its moisture resistance level should be.

Don't opt for the cheapest range. Choose with long-term durability in mind. The best underlayment may cost a tad more, but will add to the walking pleasure your flooring choice gives you in the long run.

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Chapter 4

How To Avoid Quantity Calamities

There is nothing worse than discovering that you miscalculated during the planning stage of the flooring project. Imagine needing just one more box of flooring planks, but that it isn't to be found anywhere. Judging by the desperate pleas on do it yourself forums, this unhappy situation occurs far too often and leads to heartbreak and unforeseen expenses.

Take accurate measurements of the room chosen for a laminate flooring treatment. Take cabinets and cupboards - and the cutting these will necessitate - into account. Have someone double check all the digits if possible. It is generally accepted that you need to purchase 10% extra to allow for mishaps and factory flaws.

Remember that one of the benefits of laminate flooring is that it is possible to replace a section of flooring in the event of a serious accident. Plan for this possibility by storing one or two unopened cartons of flooring planks. It may seem like an unnecessary expense at the time, but you will not regret it later. If you don't have this back-up available, you may have to replace a complete floor. Flooring ranges are often discontinued, or a new batch may show a visible shading difference. A bit of forethought will enable you to handle any mishap with a confident smile, knowing you have what you need in storage.

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Chapter 5

How To Fit Laminate Flooring Tones And Textures Into Your Design

Installing laminate flooring comes with enough options to make your head spin. Getting a feel for the mountains of real wood flooring samples, woodgrain gobbledygook, texture and tone diversity, and interior design doctrine can be daunting. What do you need to be on the lookout for design-wise when making a laminate flooring decision?

Don't assume that choosing a design when installing laminate flooring will be a simple process. Make sure that you have enough time when visiting suppliers. Real wood of every kind has been mimicked and replicated. Some laminate flooring installations are treated to reflect real wood textures. Plank edges may be square or beveled to match the looks of real wood more closely. There are wide planks, slim planks, long planks, and short planks, each offering installation with a distinct decorating effect.

Some flooring planks are single-strip, double strip or even triple strip. Some are matte, while others are finished with a brilliant shine. The new glueless click together designs can be hinged or flat. If this is your first flooring attempt, the flat version may be easier to handle during installation, as the hinged options can be slightly tricky around cupboards and doorways.

As if the creative collections of real wood lookalikes aren't enough, the planks now come in a vast array of stunningly realistic ceramic tiling and stone tiling designs. As in the wood range, there are colorful palettes to choose from.



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Installing laminate flooring tiles will tempt you with styling ranges from rustic to contemporary.

Examine each sample closely. Never rely solely on a photograph. Feel the texture. Walk on a flooring sample if possible. Do a few clicks yourself to see if the joints lock together tightly and with ease. Don't wait until you have a whole roomful of planks, to find out that the clicking has you cursing within the first half hour of your installation attempt!

Get advice from a decor expert about the coloring you opt for when installing laminate flooring. Your choice will have a huge effect on your interior design. Contrasts work well, such as choosing a lighter shade floor if your furniture is heavy and dark. Take color swatches of your furnishings with you to the flooring supplier, if you have these available. Match the moldings you choose closely to the flooring, in order to ensure a smooth transition from room to room. A baseboard that is fastened to the wall doesn't need to be in the same shade. Create a striking effect by using a contrasting color. Installing laminate flooring in a darker color will create the illusion of a smaller room, while lighter hues tend to expand an area.

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Chapter 6

How To Plan Your Laminate Flooring Installation

Never jump into a home remodeling project without proper planning. The success of a do it yourself effort often depends on the care you take during the planning stage. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

Drawing: Your planning needs to include a simple drawing of the room or rooms where you will be installing laminate flooring. Indicate where the entrances are located, as well as all cabinets or cupboards.

Measurements: Take careful measurements of the rooms and if possible ask your spouse or a friend to double check these. Allow for cabinets and cupboards, or appliances.

Transition: Make notes about the transition from these rooms to adjoining rooms, say from tile to carpet for example. You will need to keep the transitions in mind when choosing moldings.

Light Source: When installing laminate flooring, the direction in which natural light flows has a direct bearing on the installation process. Make a careful note of light sources, as they will either accentuate or soften the joints, depending on the direction of the installation.

Sub-Floor: You will need to know what the sub-floor of the room in which you will be installing the laminate flooring, consists of. It will also be helpful if you have an idea of the condition of the floor. You will need to take steps to make sure that it is absolutely even and smooth, before installing the new flooring.

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Moldings: Get a good idea of the moldings you will need in doorways, or around toe-kicks, tubs or basins. Every manufacturer stocks a line of decorative, color-coordinated moldings with specific purposes. For instance, if the flooring will be extending to stairs, you will need to use a stair nosing.

Expectations: Ask yourself what you expect in terms of durability, before you make a flooring decision. If you have kids and pets, you will have to be more careful with your choice. The warranty of the flooring should give you an indication of the wearability. Just remember that most warranties don't cover scratches. Check with the supplier to ensure that you opt for a proven scratch-resistant product. Don't buy an entry level, budget product and expect it to look great for 30 years! Be realistic.

Quotes: Remember to ask detailed questions about what is included in the quotes you are given. If installation is included, make sure that it also comes with removal of existing flooring if this will be the case, and preparation of the sub-floor. You will also need to ascertain who will be responsible for the removal of your furniture.

Underlayment: Also determine if the underlayment is included and what the quality of the padding is. Buy the best you can afford.

Tools: A flooring installation doesn't require expensive tools. Nevertheless, make sure that you have all the tools you will need during the installation, at hand.

Warranty: Double check that you comply with what is stipulated in the warranty conditions as far as installation and maintenance is concerned. If you deviate from the directions, you may void your warranty.

Get every detail of the quote and instructions in writing, while at the supplier.

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Chapter 7

Invest In The Back-Up Of A Reputable Brand

It is sensible to choose a well-known manufacturer when installing laminate flooring. The websites of these experts are usually excellently developed and can be a rich source of reliable, accurate flooring information. The websites often include installation videos or courses, instructions and other forms of interaction with clients. The lists of frequently asked questions are helpful if you are a novice.

Top brands also have reputations to protect and are likely to react speedily if you experience a problem while installing laminate flooring. Telephonic support is often available. Buying from a well-known manufacturer with a long history can also be reassuring as far as warranty terms are concerned. A warranty is useless if a new company goes bust after a year or two.

Some of the most well-known brand names are:

Pergo Laminate Flooring
Armstrong Hardwood Laminate Flooring
Trafficmaster Flooring
Harmonics Flooring
Wilsonart Flooring
Quick Step Flooring
Mohawk Flooring
Mannington Flooring
Kronotex Flooring



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Chapter 8

How To Avoid Warranty Pitfalls

An amateur laminate flooring contractor will soon find that, while the product may be more affordable than a real hardwood floor, it remains a substantial home remodeling expense. You need to be sure that you get the best long-term value for your money, especially if you are servicing a home improvement loan or a home equity loan in the process.

Therefore any laminate flooring installer needs to take the warranty into account when looking at the pricing of the flooring planks. Provided that it is backed by a reputable company with a solid history, a long warranty period is usually an indication of the quality of a flooring product.

Go through the details of what is included under the warranty. The standard warranty usually covers fading, staining and wearability. Scratches are often excluded.

A sensible do it yourself installer will find out if the warranty covers accidental moisture damage. If not, he or she will make sure that this is added to the home insurance policy. The Formica flooring 'Formica' range apparently is up to coping with any type of water damage. Make sure that the particular line is approved for use in bathrooms and kitchens, otherwise such an installation won't be covered under the warranty.

It is vital that you take every precaution to make sure that the laminate flooring installation instructions are followed to the letter. Any deviation may void the warranty. Check and double check with your supplier what is required in terms of underlayment, sealing, tools, moldings and maintenance. If you use the wrong

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cleaning tools or solutions, you can be in big trouble. Many manufacturers specifically state that you shouldn't use waxes or polish on the floors. Don't disregard these guidelines. They are there to protect you, as well as your flooring.

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Chapter 9

How To Choose Environmentally And Health Friendly Flooring

Generally speaking, laminate flooring installations are more environmentally friendly than real hardwood flooring, due to the long time it takes to replace trees. However, there are other aspects an amateur laminate flooring contractor needs to keep in mind when choosing laminate flooring.

Look for a laminate flooring installation manufactured to be low in possible toxic substances. This usually refers to the lacquer used in the finish. Cheaper brands can unfortunately be high in formaldehyde, which may be unacceptable to you. There have been reports of consumers complaining about reactions to fumes from the flooring. Ask the relevant questions while at your supplier. Do your homework to ensure that you purchase a safe product.

Cheap or discount laminate flooring installations may come with less expensive, but more potent finishes. Don't allow a sales person to side-step the issue. Demand to know what the toxicity level of the particular flooring product is. If he or she doesn't know, ask them to contact the manufacturer. Professional laminate flooring contractors know to ask for a range that has been off-gassed in the factory.

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Chapter 10

How To Interpret The AC Rating?

One of the most important factors a do it yourself flooring installer will discover, is the importance of matching the quality of the laminate flooring installation to the area in which it will be used. A higher traffic room calls for a more robust range. One indication of the suitability of a particular line for a specific area is its Abrasion Class Rating, or AC Rating. This symbol makes it easy to understand the characteristics and wearability of a particular flooring product.

If it is a residential flooring solution, the AC Rating will be indicated with a house symbol. In the case of a commercial product, the pictograph will show a building. In addition, next to this symbol, will be a picture of people, the number indicating the traffic intensity the flooring has been manufactured for. In the case of a do it yourself novice, the availability of the AC Rating simplifies the selection process significantly.

The AC RATING was developed by The European Producers of Laminate Flooring (EPLF). It is a clear and easily understandable indication of a laminate flooring installation's ability to withstand stress, wear, impact, burns, stains, scratches, etc. Swelling of the core is also examined. The tests done on the flooring also ascertain to what degree it can resist damage done by furniture feet or casters. Once the tests have been done, the results are used to determine for which areas the particular flooring product will be suitable. The rating gives concrete proof of the wearability of a particular range.

AC1 indicates suitability for use in residential bedrooms and guest rooms with moderate traffic. AC2 lines thrive happily on the activity in living rooms and dining rooms. AC3 is robust enough for heavy traffic in any residential space. Test

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AC4 flooring in commercial settings such as a small office or restaurant where the traffic is moderate. AC5 is used on tough-as-nails lines, which make it suitable for heavy traffic areas in public buildings and department stores.

For residential purposes it isn't necessarily helpful to opt for too high an AC rating. The higher the rating, the rougher the texture of the flooring will be. If you opt for higher AC status, your poor feet and socks will soon complain about the rough treatment... Most of the residential ranges such as Pergo Flooring come with an AC Rating of 3, which is quite adequate.

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Chapter 11

Learn How To Look At The Locking Mechanism Of Laminate Flooring

The new, glueless click-together laminate flooring tiles or planks are sought after by do it yourself novices. But even here, you will discover differences. Be sure to test the mechanism before you decide on a particular brand. Run your hand over the joint that is formed. It must be perfectly smooth. If one side is higher than the other, look for another brand.

Some manufacturers make use of a hinged concept that can sometimes be tricky around doors and cabinets. Some rookies may be more comfortable by opting for a flat clicking process. Look for a range where a certain amount of pressure will be needed. If the planks snap together with too much ease, the joints won't fit tightly together, creating a moisture penetration risk, as well as an unprofessional finish.



As long as you investigate reliable and reputable companies, such as Pergo Laminate Flooring or Armstrong Flooring, the locking mechanism should function effectively.

Pergo Flooring sports a dual-locking click installation system, complete with edge sealant. This is one of the most popular ranges on the market. Mohawk Flooring features the patented Instaclic glueless system. The tongue and groove boards snap together at an angle, or can slide together.

Armstrong Flooring's ArmaLock Installation System is claimed to be one of the

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most durable locking systems in the industry. The company guarantees the joints not to unlock for 20 to 30 years. Mannington Flooring uses the MLock profile system for easy installation. The sealant used on all the planks ensure excellent moisture resistance.

The TrafficMaster Allure Flooring plank has a GripStrip that is simply laid onto the next plank and then pressed together. If you opt for swiftlock Kronotex Flooring, you can choose between the Click Lock and Clic 2 Clic designs.

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Chapter 12

What Is Underlayment And Why Do You Need It?

Never skimp on the underlayment of the laminate flooring tile or plank. This padded material usually consists of cork, felt or foam. Buy the best quality you can afford. Sufficient padding under the laminate flooring installation not only dampens sound (which can be hollow due to the floating floor concept), but helps to create an extra bit of warmth, and is more comfortable under your feet, especially in areas where you stand for long periods.

Many manufacturers now pre-attach the underlayment to the laminate flooring tile or plank. This is a convenient option, but may be slightly less effective according to the experts. In the case of Alloc Laminate Flooring, the Alloc Silent System is used. The company claims that this padding has a higher degree of efficiency than other comparable underlayments. This system can even be ordered to come with under-floor heating! Keep in mind that you don't use underlayment on stairs.

You will also need a plastic moisture or vapor barrier film. This layer is positioned between the laminate flooring tile or plank and the underlayment, and adds moisture protection. The film is normally a polyethylene material. The main culprit causing damage to laminate floors is moisture. This leads to swelling of the core and buckling or blistering of the flooring planks.

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Chapter 13

Tools Of The Laminate Trade

One of the main benefits of laminate flooring is that it is such a simple process that the tools needed are fairly basic. The specific tools will depend on the preparation work you have to do as far as the sub-floor is concerned.

The sub-floor has to be cleaned and evened out. You will need a carpenter's level to make sure that it is as smooth as possible. You may have to use a pry bar or screwdriver to remove old moldings.

If you want to remove a wood floor, you will need something like a chisel to use as a wedge, as well as a heavy hammer. A floor scraper may be necessary, and you may need to do some sanding to remove peaked joints and other imperfections. If you have a clearance problem in doorways, you will also have to use a jamb saw. You may also want to mix leveling compound. In this case you will need a trowel.

Other basics you will require, include a tape measure, utility knife, plastic putty knife, circular saw with a carbide-tipped blade, a saber saw for curves, a drill, a compass trace, a marker, screwdriver, caulking gun for sealing, power miter saw, tapping block (use gently to avoid chipping), rubber hammer, coping saw, flexi-curve form, pull bar, and spacers.

Discuss your needs with the flooring supplier. You may not need all of the above. If you prefer, you may purchase dedicated laminate flooring tools, such as those by Crain. They manufacture a laminate cutter that works speedily without blades and dust - one of the banes of a laminate flooring installation. This tool can cut

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planks of up to 8" wide and 40" thick. Crain Ratchet Spacers can be used to reposition several rows of planks. They also have a Strap Clamp and Strap Extension. Crain Variable Spacers are also popular, as are their U-shaped plastic spacers. The Crain plastic tapping block has a groove for laminate tongues.

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Chapter 14

How To Maintain The Good Looks Of Your Laminate Floor

When buying the materials you need for your laminate flooring installation, make sure you get detailed maintenance instructions from your supplier. It is vital that you treat your flooring according to these guidelines in order not to void your warranty.

One of the main benefits of laminate flooring tiles or planks is that it gives busy folks a truly low-maintenance decor option. You will need little more than a damp mop and a brushless vacuum to keep the floor in tip-top shape.

Most manufacturers have dedicated laminate flooring cleaners for tough spots. Oil, paint or rubber heel marks may be removed with an acetone nail polish, if your supplier concurs.

Never use abrasive cleaners, scouring pads, wax or polish. If you use a cloth to wipe away spots, make sure that it is color fast.

Also use common sense and buy felt pads to place under furniture feet. Keep pet claws trimmed. Use non-slip area rugs liberally, especially in doorways, as grit and grime may lead to scratches. Most manufacturers have cover sticks that can be used to magically work a disappearance act on these.

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From the looks of it, the buzz about installing laminate flooring is more than just home remodeling hype. These floors can give any interior space, from living rooms to bathrooms, an amazing face-lift.

And in the process of installing laminate flooring, do it yourself fans will have loads of family fun.



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Postscript

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