

Now for the floor show

Our impressive lineup includes some exotic numbers • By Chris Mills

No need to tell you how important the floors are when it comes to both building and renovating. It's wise to stay one step ahead of the mainstream and know what's out there. How best to impress in the foyer? How about leather? Bamboo would do it, too. You can even get stone from a European castle.

It depends on all kinds of factors, but it's important to present an image of selection to your customers. You don't need 1,000 samples in your showroom, but you should have access to variety. Here are some trends to give you a leg up.

Long live leather

Stephen Manchee first spotted leather tiles in Italy some 25 years ago. As president of Stouffville-based Blackstock Leather, he now imports them from the U.S. and installs them around the world: New York, Hong Kong, Australia and Europe. "It's different," says Manchee. "It's warm to the touch. It's very sensual and durable."

One of the most extravagant contracts was for a \$40,000 residential library installation, and one of the most exotic was for an estate in Turkey where the rich, aromatic tiles were inlaid into hardwood.



Ultimate indulgence: Blackstock Leather tiles lend a sumptuous look and feel to rooms around the world, including this one at Toronto's Graydon Hall (left) and one in a 4,000-sq.-ft. Manhattan loft.

Even some walls in downtown Toronto banks are covered with Blackstock leather tiles that come in a choice of 14 colours and 12 sizes. Prices start at about \$49 a sq. ft., minus builder discounts. Check out the Silk Road collection at www.blackstockleather.com. For more information, call 800-663-6657.

Kitchens love cork

Eco-builders will appreciate this. Cork has been making tentative steps into the North American market recently, thanks to an infusion of tiles from Europe, where they've been using it as flooring since 1868. Taken from the exterior of trees in Portugal and Spain, it grows back in about nine years.

Wicander of Sweden discovered the unique qualities of cork flooring, which include comfort, warmth, insulation, hygiene, durability—it won't rot—excellent



indentation recovery and easy cleaning. Wicander cork tile is now imported into Canada by Torlys—Leaders in Specialty Flooring. This company also deals in Steps Uniclic glueless laminate flooring featuring a 25-year warranty. Wood Classics engineered hardwood and vinyl flooring from Solarbrite.

"We've had [cork tile] for at least five years, but it's such a small percent of the flooring market—less than 3%—that we think it's poised to grow, partly because it's renewable, hygienic and all-natural," says John Koebma, vice-president of marketing for Torlys. "You never have to destroy a tree. It's 50% air, so the insulation properties are tremendous. Kitchens love us because cork has air pockets, a sponginess that saves dishes and glasses."

Cork tile will also soon be introduced with the Uniclic style of tongue-and-groove installation. It's priced about the same as a high-grade hardwood. For more details, call 800-461-2573.

The allure of bamboo

This is a great alternative to offer environmentally conscious clients as this grass is renewable and grows fast. It's lightweight,



Bamboo chic: Environmentally friendly flooring is lightweight and harder than wood.



Faking it: The Mannington collection of laminate mimics includes many impressive looks that are durable, easy care and economically priced. Left to right: *Burmese Slate NatureForm Tile*, *Wisconsin Walnut NatureForm Plank* and *Peruvian Stone NatureForm Tile*.

extremely pliable and harder than wood. "It's harder than oak," says Ian Jackson, general manager at K&M Bamboo Products Inc. in Markham. "And it's environmentally friendly. It only takes three to five years to grow a harvestable crop." Bamboo does not expand and contract like conventional hardwood flooring so it is more stable and moisture resistant. The laminate adhesives that K&M uses to bind its Silkroad® certified. Planks come in 36" and 72" lengths. To see more, visit www.silkroadflooring.com or call K&M at 905-947-1688.

Ceramics resurface

The ProSource of GTA West in Mississauga is essentially a members-only club that caters exclusively to builders, architects, designers and renovators. It's open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, to offer and demonstrate materials. It has about 20,000 choices of flooring, a 5,500-sq.-ft. showroom and a selection of middle-to-upper-end materials that cover the gamut.

"If you're talking about trends, it's ceramic," says general manager Robert Tipping, who started in flooring 30 years ago as a 15-year-old apprentice in England. "If you'd told me two years ago during the laminate boom that ceramic tile would come back, I'd have laughed. But it has. It's come full cycle. It's even taken a bit of a bite out of the sheet vinyl market."

Tipping says that hardwoods are still considered an upgrade, but a sign of the times

is that hardwood once had 10% to 15% of the showroom space. It now gets fully 30%.

"We've just come through an era of prosperity; some would say we're still in it. So people are still looking for some pizzazz to spice up their home."

Pizzazz is what you'll find in a British import called Karndean Luxury Flooring that's made inroads in the U.S. but has just shown up in Canada. It's an inlaid laminate flooring that looks as if a craftsman spent days at a jig-saw, then on his knees creating intricate patterns in a hardwood floor. However, it's a pre-cut kit that assembles and glues down like a jig-saw puzzle. Priced like a good hardwood. See it all at www.pswholesale.com or call 877-565-7373 for more information.

Laminates fake it beautifully

Laminates have become more resilient, sophisticated and wildly varied since they first appeared in North America from Europe about five years ago. What home buyers like is laminate's ability to mimic the look of hardwood, stone and tile while retaining toughness and a reasonable price.

Among the players is Mannington, which has introduced a tongue-and-groove system that does not require glue. Micro-bevel edges create a surface texture and visual dimension for an authentic appearance of traditional wood and plank. Mannington collections—CORE, NatureForm, Exotic and Historic—mimic many wood looks: oak, maple, ash, walnut, hickory, pecan and cherry, distressed

heart pine, natural chestnut and weather barn oak, Australian cypress, Norwegian birch and Brazilian cherry.

The company recently introduced floors with sound-dampening chambers, which makes its selection quieter than conventional laminates.

The NatureForm Tile collection, featuring Austrian Slate, Burmese Slate, Peruvian Stone and Sedona Stone, was introduced this summer. Again, texture is the key. You'll find some interesting examples at www.mannington.com.

Hardwood gets tougher

Two suppliers from Quebec, Boa-Franc Inc. and Prevero, have made great strides in hardwood flooring by creating a finish that adds a durability that wood alone cannot replicate.

Boa-Franc Inc. offers MIRAGE Classic, which is solid 3/4"-inch prefinished hardwood flooring. MIRAGE Engineered is a 3/8" over-plywood engineered prefinished hardwood floor especially designed for either nailing down or gluing over concrete floors and below grade. They have just added Brazilian Cherry (also called Jatoba), Santos Mahogany (also called Cabreuva) and Walnut.

The key to its success is the ALUMIX Advanced Finishing System, an aluminum oxide-based polyurethane: no waxing, no volatile organic compounds, no dust and a 25-year warranty to boot (aluminum oxide is considered the fourth hardest substance known to mankind). They have been at it