

Hot new flooring shoots to fame

This bamboo 'is not what the pandas eat'

BY JOANNE LOVERING

Think of bamboo, and images of the sultry Far East come to mind. For a growing number of Toronto homeowners, however, mention bamboo, and they envision their dining room floors.

"Bamboo floors are elegant, exotic and easy-care," says Ian Jackson, manager of K&M Bamboo Products Inc. in Markham. The material has a tensile strength stronger than steel, is a conversation starter and is a designer's delight.

Bamboo floors were featured this year in Winnipeg's Parade of Homes. They are being offered as an upgrade at some downtown condominium projects including 1 King West, several custom builders around town are installing them, the Crowne Plaza Hotel at the Don Valley Parkway and Eglinton Avenue recently used them in several renovated suites. Even Bell Canada's head office on Bay Street features bamboo as flooring.

Talk of the warmth and beauty of bamboo flooring misses the main point, Mr. Jackson says. Bamboo flooring's crowning glory is that it is exceptionally environmentally friendly.

"It is environmentally sustainable, completely renewable," he says. Bamboo is not a tree, but a fast-growing grass, so harvesting it is like cutting your lawn. It does not destroy the plant, but makes it shorter, then it continues to grow — about 40 feet in three years. K&M's product is grown in China in small, government-controlled forests.

"It is monster stuff — about one-foot in diameter, thick strong stuff — not what the pandas eat," Mr. Jackson says. "You can get a large amount of product out of a small area."

Unlike traditional hardwoods, which are harvested every 40 to 60 years, bamboo is the world's fastest growing plant and is cut every three to five years, Mr. Jackson says.

It is then cut into strips that are roughly 3/4-inch high by one-inch



Bamboo strip flooring is hardwearing and environmentally friendly.

wide and as long as six feet. It is treated against insects with boric acid and lime, then kiln-dried. The strips are then laminated together.

One method is to laminate them together strip over strip (horizontally) so you see long, one-inch wide stripes on the floor. Another method laminates the strips side by side (vertically) to show 1/2-inch stripes. The wood can be left its natural blonde colour or carbonized, a toasting process that creates a richer colour. The three-foot or six-foot long by 3/8-inch wide planks are then laid on the floor like hardwood.

The product has been recognized by Environment Canada with the EcoLogo. For this designation, it had to meet several environmental criteria as well as performance requirements.

"K&M Bamboo is at the forefront of environmental leadership in the building materials sector," says Kevin Gallagher, vice-president, of Environment Canada's Environmental Choice Program. "They are continually looking for ways to improve their products from an envi-

ronmental perspective."

Environmental features Mr. Gallagher points to include the fact that the floor is finished with water-based finishes formulated with very low levels of volatile organic compounds. Also, none of the finishes contains heavy metals or ingredients containing suspected carcinogens or mutagens.

Inherent in the quality of bamboo is the fact that it does not expand or contract much when exposed to moisture, so it is appropriate for use in basements, Mr. Jackson says.

"We are now getting a lot of calls — a lot of acceptance," says Michael Yiu, co-owner of K&M. "Some other bamboo companies have come and gone over the years, but we're still here — and I think now we've gained acceptance."

The cost of bamboo flooring is roughly the cost of maple flooring — about \$7 to \$9 a square foot fully installed.

K&M's products are sold in stores under the brand name of Silkroad Bamboo.

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