

Wood floors

Weighing up which type is right for your home

Over the past decade, the British love affair with carpet has been dented by a dalliance with wood. Solid and engineered wood and laminate flooring are popular choices for those with dust allergies, children or pets and people who just want a sleek finish.

And well-laid wood can work wonders when it comes to selling your home. Daniel Procter, from Gibbs Gillespie Estate Agents in Harrow, told us that his tenants let out a sigh of relief when they see a good-quality, well-fitted wooden floor in a hall: 'It suggests the house has a good quality finish.'

But cheap or poorly laid flooring, particularly laminate, can cause problems (see 'The ups and downs of wood', right) and can be off-putting to prospective buyers.

So to make sure that your new floor gives your home the 'wow' factor, we've looked at the major decisions you face when buying wood and laminate flooring, including prices you may pay (costs are a general guideline based on national chains).

While this report focuses only on how to buy flooring, visit our website, www.which.co.uk/fittingfloors if you want advice on how to fit laminate yourself.

Well-laid wood floors can work wonders when it comes to selling your home



TYPES OF FLOORING



Laminate

What is it? It is a compressed fibreboard plank, covered by a photographic image of wood, stone or tile and a protective overlay.

How much? The cheapest kinds are smooth and unrealistic. Prices start at £3 a sq metre. Bevelled edges, a more varied set of photos and registered embossing of features such as knots give higher-priced versions of brands such as QuickStep (£6-£17 a sq metre) and Pergo (£14-£30 a sq metre) a more natural look and texture.

Where to lay it? Living areas, studies and playrooms. Some products include a waterproof core, and manufacturers claim

they are suitable for bathrooms and kitchens. Check the guarantee carefully before buying to ensure you won't breach the stringent conditions.

Pros It's cheap and hardwearing. Click-lock designs are simple to install. A wide variety of imitations of natural materials is available.

Cons Even the best laminate won't look or feel exactly like the real thing. The joins wear over time, and once the surface is damaged it's hard to fix. It's easily swollen by moisture, and the damage can't be repaired. Poorly laid laminate is a turn-off for house-buyers.



Engineered wood

What is it? Each floorboard consists of three or four layers of wood, glued together at right angles to create a plank around 14mm thick. It has a real wood veneer of around 4mm thick on top, which means it can be sanded back and treated to restore the original finish if it becomes scuffed, worn or damaged.

How much? Prices range from £11 a sq metre at Ikea to more than £70 a sq metre for expensive woods such as olive, maple, teak and walnut from national flooring chain Floors2go.

Where to lay it? Anywhere it won't be exposed to water or a

humid atmosphere. It is time-consuming, fiddly and noisy to lay wood on stairs, and in some places it is hard to achieve a good finish – for instance, around toilet pans and pedestals.

Pros The way it is constructed makes it more stable than a piece of solid wood – that is, less prone to changes caused by a room's temperature or humidity. It is more attractive than laminate and cheaper than comparable solid wood planks.

Cons There are very few cons, but tongue and groove is harder to install than click-lock. It can be a lot dearer than laminate.



THE UPS AND DOWNS OF WOOD

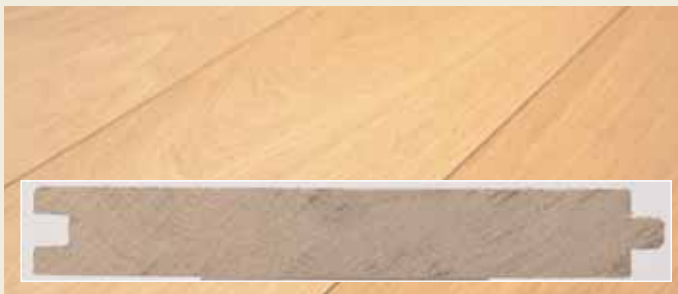
Mohan Mahesan *IT consultant*

The Mahesan family have had mixed experiences with the hard floor coverings they chose for their home.

'I laid laminate in two rooms upstairs and was pleased with the result,' Mohan explains. 'I like hard flooring because it doesn't absorb dust like carpet, but my wife finds it a bit cold underfoot.'

Unfortunately, the laminate they had laid in the kitchen was not a great success. Gaps appeared between the boards, and the floor was damaged by a leak that left them with a visible bubble in one area.

Elsewhere on the ground floor the family has chosen birch engineered wood. Although it cost three times more than the laminate, they are very pleased. 'There's no comparison – the wood looks wonderful,' Mohan says.



Solid wood

What is it? Each board is made from a single piece of wood, typically 18-20mm thick. All types of wood have a hardness score, which indicates how easily they can be damaged, dented or worn by everyday wear and tear. It is usually fitted using tongue and groove. Solid wood flooring can be sanded back to restore the finish – the number of times is determined by how deep the tongue is set from the top of the board.

How much? Prices vary, depending on the cost of raw wood, from £15 a sq metre for Parawood to £82 a sq metre for IPE tropical hardwood.

Where to lay it? Anywhere with a relatively constant atmosphere, particularly in hallways and living areas where you can show it off.

Pros It looks fabulous and, provided it's installed correctly, is an appealing feature if you decide to sell or rent out your home.

Cons Solid wood swells in damp conditions and shrinks in dry ones. It's the toughest to install because it has to be glued or nailed down, and fitting the individual boards together can be difficult because they change shape once they've been manufactured. Highest price for entry-level products.

Jargon buster

Learning the language of laminate and wood flooring

1



ESSENTIALS

(1) Damp-proof membrane (DPM) This plastic sheeting is essential when laying laminate or wooden boards over a concrete or sand and cement floor. It prevents moisture moving up into the boards, causing them to warp. Prices start at 59p a sq metre up to around £1 a sq metre in DIY stores. Heavy-duty DPM by Visqueen is a professional-grade choice.

2



(2) Leveller board This is fixed to the floor with nails to create an even surface to lay the floor on. It provides sound insulation and increases the floor's durability. It can either be a thick, recycled paper board costing around £2-£3 a sq metre, which provides good sound insulation, or multi-purpose wood boards, such as hardboard or plywood, costing from £1 a sq metre.

3



(3) Underlay This is used to cushion the boards, increasing their durability and providing sound insulation. There are several different grades, which range from thin sheets of closed-cell polythene foam, costing from £1 a sq metre, to top-of-the-range felt underlay with a silver foil layer, costing around £6 a sq metre.

4



FEATURES

(4) Bevelled edges The edges of some laminates turn downwards to create a more realistic boarded appearance. It also helps to avoid damage caused by moisture-induced swelling at the edges of laminate boards.

5



(5) Click-lock planks These have shaped edges that require a certain sequence of actions to fit them together, but once they are in place they can't move apart.

6



(6) Expansion gap Wood flooring expands in a humid room and contracts in a dry atmosphere. You'll need to leave a 10-12mm gap around the edge of your floor.

7



(7) Registered embossing Creates a more realistic texture, where the laminate shows a feature such as a knot or strong grain in a wooden plank.

8



(8) Scotia Another name for the beading that you put around the edge of a floor to cover the expansion gap.

9



(9) Tongue and groove This describes the way that planks fix together. A tongue that projects from the side of one plank fits into the groove of the adjacent plank.

Insider information

Professional floor fitter Martin Howe answers your key questions

Q What should I look for when buying laminate?

A When you have decided what finish you want (see final question), it pays to buy the best quality you can afford.



Martin Howe

little wastage there is. Professional fitters can keep this down to just 2 per cent.

There's usually around 2 sq metres of coverage in a pack. Measure your room and round up to the nearest sq metre. Compare this with

the coverage stated on the pack, then calculate the number of packs you'll need. Add an extra pack for luck (or to cope with the inevitable wastage if you're laying it yourself) – if you buy too much, retailers usually take back unopened packs.

Avoid laminate with a chipboard base because it expands and contracts a lot, and don't buy any damaged packages where water vapour might have swollen the boards.

Look for a fibreboard base with a plain-coloured bottom, usually a green or brown, which gives added protection against moisture.

Remember that if the material looks cheap in the package it's not going to look any better on your floor, no matter how much effort you make to finish the job properly.

Q What should I consider when buying real wood?

A Engineered wood floors are often quite similar, but it's worth choosing one that clicks together rather than tongue-and-groove boards, which are harder to fit.

Remember that wood is a natural material and that the planks will vary, so ensure that you like both the heavily and lightly grained versions of your chosen wood

and find its knots appealing.

It's worth seeing how well the planks fit together on in-store display panels. Look at the quality of the finish and compare the products offered by different manufacturers.

Q How do I work out how much flooring I need?

A The great thing about plank floor coverings is how

Q What else will I need?

A You need a damp-proof membrane if you're laying over a sand and cement or concrete floor and the best underlay (above) you can afford: thicker foams or felt are best. Check whether the manufacturer recommends a certain underlay and whether this affects the guarantee.

Q What finish should I go for?

A This is very much a matter of taste. Bring samples home to check how they look in your room.

Laminate usually has a slight sheen. Wood can come oiled, lacquered or unfinished. Lacquer is a hard varnish that protects the wood and adds a shiny finish. Oil, which also protects the wood, is a more natural finish that gathers a lustre as it wears. From left to right, the three finishes below are lacquered, oiled and unfinished



Caring for floors

How to keep your floor in great condition

■ **Cleaning** Brush or vacuum it to prevent the discolouration caused by a build-up of dirt and grime.

■ **Damp, not wet** Wash it with the floor cleaner recommended by the manufacturer, but don't put too much fluid on it.

■ **No soaking** Clean up any spills immediately. If water soaks into a laminate's core it will swell, causing the edges of the board to rise up.

■ **Protection** Be careful not to damage the surface by dragging heavy pieces of furniture across it. Use

felt protector pads on the feet of furniture to reduce damage.

■ **Cover-up** Use a doormat to protect floors from grit and grime in rooms that are subject to extra-heavy wear and tear.

■ **High heels off** To protect real wood floors from indentations, ask people wearing high heels to remove their shoes.

■ **Beware the sun** The colour of wood flooring can change when it is exposed to sunlight, so avoid placing rugs on floors in front of windows.

Getting the job done

How to get the best out of your floor fitter

■ **Local links** To find a fitter, check Which? Local (www.which-local.co.uk) for recommended fitters in your area, or ask the retailer for a recommendation.

■ **Get an estimate** If you're paying a professional, you'll usually first be visited by an estimator, who will work out how much you need and how long it will take. This estimate usually assumes that the subfloor on which the new floor will be laid is in good condition. This is not always the case – if floors are uneven or floorboards are missing or squeaking, the time and price can go up.

■ **Saving time** If you simply want a fitter to walk into your house and finish the job in the minimum time, you need to point out to the estimator rooms that have been knocked together or hidden chimney hearths.

■ **Preparation** Remove all old floor coverings and furniture and check that all floorboards are fixed. Ensure that the floor is clean and dry, that all nails are knocked in and that you have run any pipes or cables before you begin. To get the best finish, remove skirting boards and put them back after the floor has been laid.



Our next 'How to buy' guide will be in October, when we'll look at buying and fitting carpets