



The Kitchen & Bath Insider[®]

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Countertop Intelligence

Archeologists have found, even before recorded history, that people have had an area in their home devoted to food preparation. Traditionally referred to as "THE KITCHEN", over the millennium this specialized subdivision of the household has developed from a simple work surface to the exciting kitchens of today. And, one of the most exciting parts of a new kitchen is the countertop.

The countertop, and its vertical counterpart, the backsplash, can add to your kitchen's distinctive style, but choosing a material for the surface is not as easy as it was a thousand years ago. There are so many types of countertops available today that it can be very confusing when you decide to get a new one.

Although certainly a factor, your kitchen's work surface should not be chosen solely for its aesthetic value. When you're ready for a new counter, find a contractor who will take the time to review your specific needs. What types of foods do you prepare? How much do you cook? Do you have kids? The answers to these questions will help determine the appropriate counter material for you.

The laminate counter, referred to by many as "Formica", is the most economical of all the choices and, with proper care, can last twenty years. Easy to clean, with good stain resistance it does have limitations: you can't cut on it and it will scorch if you place anything hot on the surface. Once a laminate top is damaged it is difficult or impossible to repair. In addition to Formica, there are several other manufacturers of laminates such as Wilson-Art, Pionite, Nevermar, etc.

Laminate counters come in three varieties: post-form; self-edge and beveled edged. The post-form top can have a rounded front and integral backsplash. If a post-form top has an "L-shape" there has to be a 45-degree seam in the corner. The self-edge counter has a 90-degree front and a dark line is exposed where the front meets the top. If this is objectionable the edge can be covered with various materials. The beveled-edge counter has an angled front so that the dark lines are not exposed. The edge can be made in a contrasting color to add additional interest to the top.

If you're concerned about cuts and scratches, a solid-surface counter may be what you need. With man-made solid-surface countertops such as Corian and Gibraltar the color goes all the way through the material. If a solid-surface counter is scratched or stained it can be sanded and polished to make it look new again. Seams are invisible when done properly, (in most colors). Undermount sinks can be installed in a solid-surface counter, which is a feature not available with a laminate top. Of course, all these benefits don't come cheaply. The cost of solid-surface counters is two to three times more than a laminate top.

Granite and marble are the most popular stones used for countertops and are considered by many the most beautiful surface available. Stone can be the most expensive counter material, but prices vary considerably depending on where the stone is quarried and how it is finished. Stones are porous and should be sealed with a penetrating sealer. When selecting a stone top don't make your decision from a small sample. Each stone is different and it is important to visit the stone yard to select the actual slab that you want in your kitchen.

Engineered stone such as Silestone and Zodiac are relatively new to the market. They are made of quartz and offer the beauty of granite with some structural advantages. Harder, non-porous, and more scratch resistant than natural stone their patterns are very consistent without the variations found in nature.

In addition to the materials mentioned, tile, wood, solid-surface veneers, concrete and stainless steel are also used for countertops and the pro's and con's of these materials will be discussed in a future column.

As with all decisions in upgrading your home, don't rush in making your selection for the countertop. Thoroughly investigate all the possibilities with your contractor and select a surface that is suited to your needs, as well as visually pleasing.