

Wood Flooring & the Environmentally Conscious Buyer

Environmentally conscious buyers hesitate when thinking about adding a wood floor to their home. We've all seen images of despoiled forests and most consumers aren't eager to add to the problem. The good news is that you don't have to.

There are many wood choices that come from very environmental-friendly sources. And with a little careful planning you can make sure your wood floor is as good for the environment as it is for your home's interior design. The secret, of course, is to know where to look and what to look for.

Back in the day when forests were plentiful and wood was "king" of the building materials, many midsize buildings were constructed from superior old-growth lumber. As these buildings become obsolete and are replaced the lumber in them is "reclaimed" for other uses. Reclaimed lumber can offer many advantages for today's wood floor.

Well aged, old-growth lumber gives you a very durable floor, with exceptional grain pattern and color qualities. And the marks, or defects, in the wood from its previous use can add a distinctive character to both traditional and contemporary floor styles. From an environmental standpoint this flooring material spares our forests and eases the strain on our landfills.

Selective cutting is a way of harvesting trees without destroying the forest. Older trees are "thinned out" to be milled leaving the younger trees to take their place. Every tree reaches a point in its life cycle where it begins to stagnate and die. At that point, it no longer off gases oxygen into the environment. The prudent management of sustainable forests harvests these specimens at or near that juncture in their lifetime. Properly managed, a sustained yield forest can be difficult for the untrained eye to tell from a forest that hasn't been logged. This method is common among American hardwood loggers who need to maintain their business on limited land holdings.

Agriculture also contributes to the stable of green wood flooring choices. Fruit-bearing trees that have aged beyond their productive lives are eventually cut down to make room for younger trees. Many species periodically tapped for their sap or bark eventually stop producing viable yields and need to be cut to provide space for new trees.

So how do you know if your flooring material is environmentally friendly? The first, and most reliable method, is to use a distributor you can trust. A

top-grade wood flooring distributor can tell you the history of the wood you're buying and steer you towards those woods that are produced in an environmentally sensitive manner. Since our company's inception, we have assertively purchased products only from mills and suppliers whom we feel practice sustained yield growth conservation logging techniques and other ecologically "responsible" forestry, milling and manufacturing management systems. We've done this not as a marketing ploy or other profit oriented guise, rather as a partner with our planet and a survival tool for our business' future.

The second method is to look for wood that has been certified as being "green" much the way produce is certified as being "organic". Four primary organizations certify wood as having been produced in an environmentally sensitive manner: The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI), the Canadian Standards Association (CSA) and the American Tree Farm System (ATFS). Each of these organizations varies in the standards they apply to certification so you'll want to do a little research. As a savvy consumer you'll also want to question your supplier on whether the wood you're buying is indeed certified. While the certification logo may be on display, in fact, only a few of their flooring products might qualify.

A unique feature of FSC certified goods currently is their reliance on a 3rd party verification through an auditing system to insure the accuracy of their authentication. The added costs for these efforts, particularly when a full chain of custody is enforced through every reseller, distributor and contractor handling the goods, inevitably causes significantly higher prices for comparable products not FSC certified.

Growing interest in buildings that are better for the environment, healthier for occupants and more cost-efficient to operate is helping to drive the popularity of green building rating systems such as LEED and Green Globes. Many similarities can be found when comparing LEED with Green Globes. They both evolved from the same source – the Building Research Establishment's Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM). Both systems also have significant differences. Targeted to the top 25% of the market, LEED involves a more complex and time consuming process, but is well-entrenched and enjoys strong brand recognition. Designed for widespread appeal, Green Globes is web-based and easy to use—even for those with limited environmental design experience—and is gaining ground thanks in part to growing mainstream interest.

One fundamental difference between LEED and Green Globes is the manner in which they treat wood. The most significant issue is the fact that LEED only recognizes timber certified by the FSC, while Green Globes is more

inclusive, recognizing timber certified through FSC as well as the ATFS, CSA and the SFI. There are more than 390 million acres of certified forest in North America, but less than 1/6 of that amount is certified by FSC.

It should be noted that for all practical purposes all indigenous North American Hardwood Species are well managed and have been so for some time. Virtually all hardwoods utilized for flooring come from sustained growth forests where sustainable supplies far exceed market demands. As such, very few wood flooring manufacturers are willing to add the additional burden of costs associated with FSC certification to their already lopsided fiscal comparison to off shore originating wood flooring products.

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