FALL HOME IMPROVEMENT

Hardwood floors can be less expensive than cheaper alternatives, and healthier, too

(MS) -- Homeowners love everything about hardwood floors except the cost. Yet, according to industry experts, if homeowners consider other factors beyond initial purchase price and installation, they will find that hardwoods are actually less expensive overall than sheet vinyl, linoleum, carpet, and other alternatives.

In fact, once you figure in maintenance, useful life expectancy and disposal of old materials, hardwoods are a more economical choice than other popular flooring materials. And here's a bonus: they're earth-friendly and naturally abundant, too. One of the original "green" building materials, today's hardwood forests grow far more wood than is harvested from them every year, says the American Hardwood Information Center at www.hardwoodinfo.com. At current volumes, that ensures American hardwoods will be around for generations to come.

What Hardwood Floors Really Cost

Sue Tartaglio, interior designer at Burt Hill, an architecture firm in southwestern Pennsylvania, recently developed a life-cycle cost comparison of a dozen frequently used synthetic and natural flooring products. Her study, based on maintenance and life-cycle costs published by flooring manufacturers and conversations with their representatives, shows that in facilities with a lifetime use of more than 15 years --such as the average home -- hardwood flooring has significantly lower life-cycle costs than other flooring materials despite higher upfront costs.

According to Tartaglio's study, the average installed costs for common types of flooring range from $1.45 per square foot for vinyl composition tile to $12 per square foot for bamboo and hardwood. Costs for linoleum, cork, rubber, sheet vinyl, carpet, and ceramic tile fall in between.

Since the comparison considers useable product life, replacement, cleaning, and labor costs over 15 years, products with some of the lowest initial costs wind up having the highest total life-cycle costs. In fact, among the dozen flooring materials compared, hardwood, rubber and bamboo flooring have the lowest total cost at 15 years.

Replacement and Renewability

Besides its warmth, beauty and authenticity, American hardwoods come out ahead in two significant ways: replacement cost and renewability.

Hardwood floors can last 25, 30, even 50 years -- or more. Broadloom and tile carpeting, on the other hand, because of its four- to six-year life span, needs to be replaced three times more frequently over a 15-year life span than a hardwood floor. After 15 or 20 years of use, hardwood flooring can gain a fresh, new appearance with refinishing for roughly half the cost of replacing carpet or other flooring options.

A well-managed and renewable resource, American hardwoods grow abundantly in North American forests. In fact, nearly twice as much hardwood grows each year as is harvested in the U.S., and the volume of hardwoods today is 90 percent larger than it was 50 years ago.

After Its Useful Life is Over

In choosing an environmentally friendly flooring material, consumers should consider what happens to old building materials after their useful life. Many end up in landfills, where they can sit for literally hundreds of years. Hardwood floors, however, are reuseable, recyclable and biodegradable.

Indoor Air Quality and Well-Being

In addition to being more economical over the long run, hardwoods add a natural warmth and character, and are a natural choice for a healthy home. Hardwoods are easily cleaned with non-toxic products, and do not trap allergens like mold spores, bacteria and dust mites often embedded in other flooring products. For this reason, they are recommended for chemically sensitive individuals, or those who suffer from allergies or asthma. Simple regular maintenance such as dust mopping, sweeping and vacuuming keeps the environment allergen-free. Hardwood flooring adds considerably to a home's resale value, too.

Its variety of protective surface finishes, from oil and water-based urethane to acrylic impregnated woods, not only enhance color, texture and grain pattern, but add exceptional durability and moisture resistance. And hardwoods is a versatile, sustainable option in more locations than ever: in places with rigorous maintenance and health requirements such as hospitals and health care facilities, to retail, commercial, and institutional settings.

As consumers focus more on using natural, earth-friendly materials in their homes, American hardwoods are the natural choice: for value, for health, and for sustainability.

For more ideas on hardwood flooring and other ways to use American hardwoods in your home, visit the American Hardwood Information Center at www.hardwoodinfo.com.

Photo courtesy of Tripp Smith.

The deep gloss of a walnut floor grounds the lighter cabinets in this butter yellow and sky blue kitchen, showcasing the beauty of the wood.

How much is that new kitchen going to cost you?

(MS) -- If you're like any of the more than 7 million new owners of existing homes sold last year, you're probably looking at taking on remodeling projects that will update both style and functionality. And the kitchen is probably at the top of your "to do" list.

According to a survey conducted in 2006 by Remodeling magazine, the average, minor kitchen remodeling job will cost about $18,000 while a major kitchen remodeling project may cost up to $107,000! If you're planning a kitchen remodel in the near future, here are some ideas that can save you money in the process, or leave you with extra money for the "must haves" on your project list.

Cabinets are generally the most expensive part of the remodeling project. Custom-built cabinets offer an unlimited number of options, but are also the most expensive. Semi-custom cabinets offer a good alternative. With the number of styles, material and hardware available today, you can have a custom look without a custom price tag. Also, refinishing your existing cabinets can provide an updated look without the cost of replacement.

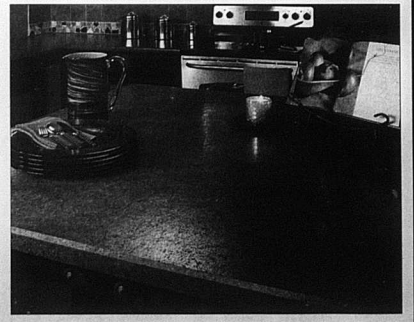
Consider one of the new luxury, laminate countertops rather than solid surfacing or granite. You could have money left over for the stainless steel appliances you want. And you will be pleasantly surprised with the look and quality of modern laminates. Wilsonart(R) HDTM High DefinitionTM Laminate for countertops has the rich look and feel of natural or engineered stone at up to one-quarter of the cost. Pair it with one of the new bevel or ogee edges now available and you'll be showing off your style and your good sense. Today's laminate is extremely durable and easy to clean which is a real advantage for today's busy families.

If you want the look of stainless appliances, but aren't ready to pay the price, consider ordering basic appliances with front "trim kits". You can apply a metal or laminate look-alike panel to the fronts of refrigerators and dishwashers, and you've got the look for less.

Making trade offs in options is one cost-saving step. Another way to maximize your budget is to consider doing some of the work yourself to save on labor costs - which typically are about 20 percent of the project cost.

Depending on your abilities and the time you have available, you can save by removing existing cabinetry and countertops at the beginning of the project and painting the room yourself at the end of the project. It's usually a good idea to leave electrical, plumbing and installation work to the experts.

A little planning before your project starts and maybe a little elbow grease of your own can get you that new kitchen that fits your lifestyle as well as your budget.



Change the look of your kitchen for less. Budget-friendly options like modern laminates have the look and feel of natural engineered stone.

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FALL HOME IMPROVEMENT

De-stress! Make home improvements a part of healthy living

(MS) -- Sprucing up a house is an American tradition, but before beginning that next home-improvement project, ask yourself if it will enhance your family's life and lifestyle. Upgrades that incorporate elements of exercise, social interaction and stress relief add value not just to a home, but also to the family that lives there.

According to a recent national survey conducted by Harris Interactive for Sundance Spas, most Americans know they should relax after a stressful day. In fact, nine in 10 adults (94 percent) say it is at least "somewhat important" that they relax after a stressful day, and more than half (54 percent) say it is "very important" for them to do so.

So, what are some simple ways Americans can relax? Practical home-improvement tips aimed at stress-free living include:

* **Get out in the garden:** Planting a tree, picking fresh vegetables or creating a decorative flower bed is an easy way for the average 165 pound person to burn about 300 calories per hour. Not only does this improve the aesthetics of a home, but it's a relaxing, down-to-earth exercise too!

* **Set up a sports spot:** Add an area where family, friends and neighbors can play an impromptu game of basketball, volleyball or racquet sports. Backyard putting greens are also becoming popular for recreational golfers with yards of any size. Invest in a central spot where physical activity can flourish for young and old alike.

* **Huddle up in a hot tub:** Survey results showed more than half of American adults (59 percent) find relief in a warm-water soak. Easy to install and maintain, self-contained hot tubs are a home-improvement staple that provides a great place to relax and rejuvenate the mind, body and soul. Slip into the bubbling water anytime.

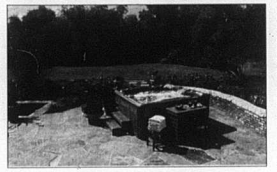
"Studies have found hydrotherapy can play a major role in stress relief," said Dr. David Swanson, Psy.D, a Los Angeles-based psychologist specializing in treatment for those needing help with stress reduction and management. "Hydrotherapy is one of the oldest forms of medical treatment dating back to Hippocrates. Just 15 minutes of soaking a day can bring about relief. And, the best part is that you can enjoy a hot tub alone or with your spouse and friends."

New portable hot tubs, like the J-465 from Jacuzzi Hot Tubs or the CameoTM model from Sundance Spas (a Consumer's Digest magazine Best Buy) have a stereo with a docking station for iPod portable music players, ergonomic seating and an aromatherapy option.

Soothing music combined with relaxing scents have been proven to help with relaxation. And, unlike a simple bath, hot tubs provide significant therapeutic benefits through hydrotherapy -- the combination of warm water, buoyancy and the massaging action of powerful jets. In addition to reducing stress, relaxing tired and sore muscles and relieving minor aches and pains from exercise, hydrotherapy can help ease arthritis pain and induce a restful sleep.

"Some stress is necessary, but when we take on too much of it, stress can interfere with the body's immune system and leave you feeling drained," adds Swanson. "The key to staying healthy is to be proactive."

For more information on home improvements that aid in stress relief, go to www.sundancespas.com or www.jacuzzihottubs.com.



Simple backyard improvements can enhance the overall wellness of your family. Tend to your garden, then relax in a hot tub like this award-winning Cameo model from Sundance Spas.

A 15-minute soak in a hot tub relaxes and refreshes. New models from Jacuzzi Hot Tubs include stereo systems with docking stations for iPod media players to relieve stress through music.

Take it outside! Increase your outdoor living space with easy projects

(MS) -- According to Brad Staggs, multi-show star of HGTV and the DIY Network, outdoor living spaces represent a continuing trend that shows no signs of slowing down. "It seems that more and more homeowners want to extend their lives and their homes into their yards and onto their properties. You can see this trend reflected in the growth of the outdoor accessories market as well; functional and decorative items for the outdoors are as popular as ever."

Here are a few ideas for expanding a home beyond it's four walls into the great outdoors:

Front porches. Nothing says "welcome!" like a deep, inviting front porch. It's a place to sit and watch the children play or maybe catch a sweet cross-breeze at dusk. Porches can increase curb appeal by adding depth and architectural character to any style of home.

Decks. Always a popular choice for adding living space to a backyard, decks are fast becoming one of the top renovation projects for homeowners. Whether you're adding a new deck, revamping an existing structure or perhaps adding on, choose colorful, personal touches to make it your own. Several Web sites offer deck plans for all skill levels.

Gazebos. Create a simple, shady spot to look out over your garden or curl up with a good book. Gazebos can be intricate and fancy or simple and timeless. Choose the gazebo design based on your home style and the overall feel of your backyard.

Screened porch. Everyone loves hanging out on the screened porch in the early evening, enjoying those last precious minutes of daylight before the sun sets. Staggs is in the middle of a screened-in porch project on his own home, and he plans to use pressure-treated Southern Pine framing for the structure. "It just makes sense to me; the preservative protects the wood from insects, moisture and decay, it's a strong environmental choice ... and it just looks good."

If you're feeling brave, try a few of these larger projects:

Pond house. The 2006 Southern Living Idea House in Tallahassee featured a pond house, a simple wooden structure built right next to a pretty little pond. Half screened-in and half-open, the house provided loads of space for gathering, sharing lemonade and enjoying the gorgeous view.

Barn. If you have land and lots of farm "toys," consider building a simple 20 x 20 barn. It will add immense character to your property, in addition to providing a great place to store large items out of the weather. You can add your own architectural details, paint it red, and add a tin roof ... the sky's the limit!

For the children, a simple treehouse offers a secret hiding place away from parents and siblings. Pressure-treated wood ensures the treehouse will be strong and durable and will withstand numerous pirate attacks and secret club meetings.

Once you decide on a project, do your homework when it comes to choosing building products. The market is flooded with options right now, but which one is right for you? For strength, durability, beauty and the best environmental choice, choose pressure-treated Southern Pine. Every project listed above can be completed using pressure-treated Southern Pine, and you won't break the bank in the process. The preservative in the wood works to prevent moisture and insect infiltration, and it can be stained and painted for a true custom touch.

According to Staggs, "It's always a good idea to use treated lumber in projects that will be exposed to ground contact or outdoor elements on a consistent basis. In fact, check your local building codes: some require the use of treated lumber - which actually works out well for you, the homeowner!"

The Southern Pine Awareness Network (SPAN) is a one-stop shop for home-improvement ideas, project plans and inspirational photos. They've provided Southern Pine to porch renovations for HGTV, treehouse projects for DIY and much more. Check them out at: www.spanpine.com.

Use ceiling fans all year long

(MS) -- Ceiling fans can prove invaluable at circulating the indoor air during the warm weather. Whether they're used alone or in conjunction with air conditioners, ceiling fans keep homeowners comfortable.

But ceiling fan use should not end once the calendar marks the change of seasons. Fans can improve year-round comfort and energy efficiency, moving warm air around the home. They're not just a pretty design accent. Most fans feature a switch that allows you to change the spin direction of the blades. During the summer you want the blades to spin counter-clockwise. In the winter, adjust the spin to clockwise to better circulate the warmer air.

A ceiling fan can be effective, but only if you choose a fan that is the right size for a room. Otherwise you will be spending money and expending energy needlessly. Today's fans feature quiet operation, energy efficiency and many blade sizes. Fifty-two-inch fans are good for rooms approximately 15 feet by 15 feet or 12 feet by 12 feet. The air in larger rooms can be circulated by a 52-inch fan however, 56- and 60-inch fans are better suited in a room of that size. Choose a 34- to 42-inch ceiling fan for smaller rooms, such as bedrooms.

Other considerations in ceiling fans are style and ease of use. Don't compromise function for style, meaning look for solid blades that are pitched correctly to maximize circulation of air. Some fans come with remote control operation so that they can be turned on or off easily even when the fan is hanging from a high ceiling or other place that is difficult to reach. Dimmer switches and other accessories can help you customize fan usage even more.

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