

The Laminate Flooring Buyers' Guide **Introduction**

America's love affair with laminate flooring began in 1994 with the introduction of Pergo...and it's still going strong today. As with any successful product, other manufacturers – old and new – soon began producing their own version of laminate flooring, or mimicking the original. Currently, there are so many products offered by so many manufacturers that deciding on a brand is practically a Mission Impossible. But fear not, laminate floor-seeking agents, we are here to assist you. We will guide you through the maze and help you locate your target. We will help you dodge the hype and focus on the important considerations while in search of your ideal laminate flooring.

The Price Factor

One of the first things that consumers consider when purchasing any product is price. Price, however, is not necessarily an indicator of value. Sure, you can find brand names of laminate flooring on the Internet for less than a dollar a square foot, but be careful! You just might be buying seconds or discontinued products, or you may have to buy a truckload to get such a low price.

In the case of discontinued products, if you ever have to replace a small section of flooring in the future, chances are there won't be any more of that style available. Having to replace the entire floor when all you may need is one box would only show that the original flooring was not such a good deal after all. While you are shopping, keep in mind the old adage, "If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is."

Prices of good quality, first run laminate flooring will generally range from about \$1.50 to \$3.00 a square foot, but they can cost more than \$6.00 a square foot. The reason for the wide range is simple: not everyone can afford the best. So, manufacturers of top quality laminate flooring offer a variety of choices to fit most consumers' budgets.

The best advice we can offer is to set a budget and shop accordingly.

Design Choices

Although laminate flooring's range of prices is considerably wide, it pales in comparison to the range of design choices. If you're looking for a wood design, for example, you'll find replicas of virtually every species under the sun, and you'll find them displayed in a variety of ways. There are single-strip, two-strip and three-strip designs with square edges, beveled edges and micro-beveled edges. You'll find them with different surface treatments and finishes, and you'll find them made primarily for no-glue, click together installations – though a rare glue together product may still exist. But wood designs are not the only choices available.

Laminate flooring is also available in a variety of ceramic tile and stone designs. Like the wood designs, the selection offers plenty of colors and patterns to choose from, and the installation method will most likely be the no-glue, click together type.

Regardless of your design preference, it is highly advisable that you actually see the product before making your purchase. Photographs of laminate flooring designs can look fantastic in a full-color, glossy brochure or on a website. But surface photos will not give you a true representation of the product – nor will they give you a look at the quality of the construction. The only way to see that is with a sample, and manufacturers will be happy to send them on request.

Product “AC” ratings

If you choose laminate flooring manufactured in Europe, most likely you will find that it has an “AC” rating. These ratings are part of a standard developed by the Association of European Producers of Laminate Flooring (EPLF). The ratings range from AC1 to AC5, with an AC1 indicating the lowest durability level. Flooring with an AC1 rating would be suitable for a low traffic, residential area, like a bedroom. At the other end of the spectrum, AC5 rated flooring would be suited for a heavy traffic, commercial applications.

To give you an idea of some actual ratings, Pergo’s Vintage Home Special, Witex’s Basis, and all of Stepco’s product lines carry an AC3 rating. This means that all of them are suitable for heavy residential or moderate commercial use. The Laura Ashley line of laminate flooring by Witex is rated AC4, meaning it is suitable for general commercial use.

It is important to note that any rating higher than AC3 is overkill for residential use. It will be reflected in the pricing and will probably put you well over budget..

While we’re on the subject of ratings, consumers need to be aware that the new European standards have revised the test method for abrasion resistance, and that results in lower numbers than the old method. The method, known as the Taber test, is still performed the same way, but the abrasive paper used on the test equipment is now replaced more frequently. This makes the test more demanding and thus produces the lower numbers.

There are manufacturers promoting their laminates based primarily on high abrasion resistance numbers, but they were probably rated under the old, less aggressive test method. So be careful not to buy laminate flooring based on an extremely high abrasion resistance number. It may actually be less resistant to abrasion than material with a lower number tested to the new EN13329 standard.

Warranties

Certainly, one of the most important things to consider when purchasing laminate flooring is its warranty. A good rule of thumb would be not to purchase laminate flooring with less than a 15-year residential warranty. But you also don’t want to be misled by a high number of years. Make sure the warranty period provides protection against premature wear, staining and fading. The better warranties will also offer protection against accidental moisture damage. For example, if a refrigerator water line

would break.

Choosing a Brand

The last, but certainly not the least important factor to consider is the reputation of the manufacturer. Visit their websites and the websites of flooring distributors where customer feedback may be posted. In recent years, customer feedback has become a valuable tool in evaluating unfamiliar products. If you have never purchased laminate flooring, you might find customer evaluation very helpful in choosing a brand.

If you are like most consumers, you want the best quality product for the lowest price. A good way to accomplish that is by remembering the law of supply and demand. Any brand that is a household name will be the one that people will first look for when they go shopping. Consequently, because of the brand's popularity, the manufacturer can charge top dollar – and get it! As we stated earlier, price is not an indicator of value. There are lesser known brands of good quality laminate flooring available for a lot less money.

So set your budget, select the right material for your application, do your research carefully, and you'll be a successful laminate floor-seeking agent.