

Choosing Your Wood Floors

There are a lot of options consider when choosing a wood floor – hopefully this overview will make your decision a little easier! With any wood floor there are a lot of variables to consider, so feel free to call our office or stop by in person to have one of our sales associates assist you in making your final selection.

Site-finished (or Unfinished) vs. Prefinished

Site-finished flooring is the traditional method of installation – rough wood planks are installed and then sanded and finished with polyurethane (or another finish system) in your home. Prefinished floors are finished at the mill (in a variety of stains, textures, etc.) so all you have to do is install them. This allows for a much quicker job and immediate use of the floors (the finish needs to cure and dry on site-finished applications before use). To account for imperfections in the subfloor, prefinished floors have a small bevel on the sides – this is the only visible difference between site-finished and prefinished floors. Some homeowners barely notice the bevel while others notice it a lot and prefer the smoother look of site-finished floors. (To learn more, check out our Prefinished vs. Unfinished Guide).

COST: installing prefinished floors tends to be less expensive since the labor charges are significantly lower than with site-finished floors, but sometimes the costs are very close depending on the kind of flooring and options you like.

Solid vs. Engineered

Solid hardwood is the traditional option where the entire floor is made of solid wood; many customers instinctively prefer this because of the value associated with solid floors. However wood is very susceptible to moisture changes, and in some situations your floors can cup or buckle, causing irreparable damage – engineered floors help prevent this. These newer options consist of multiple layers; the top layer is what you see when the floor is laid down (oak, hickory, etc), and the rest of the board is manufactured with a composite of other woods that make the boards less susceptible to moisture changes, and thus more dimensionally stable. This is important in homes with increased moisture concerns (e.g. concrete subfloors, waterfront properties, radiant heat, wide width floors, etc). Engineered floors vary drastically in quality and price – the lower qualities only come prefinished, very thin, and with no option to refinish in the future. The higher qualities can be sanded and finished on-site, and refinished as many times as traditional solid wood. (See our Engineered Guide or go to www.higginswoodfloors.com/engineered to learn more).

COST: lower quality engineered floors can be less expensive than solid floors, but the vast majority of higher quality engineered floors are more expensive. Higgins carries a range of options to work with all homes and budgets.

Grades

Higher grades of wood flooring (often called “Select & Better” or “Clear”) have few to no knots and less color variation resulting in a smoother, cleaner looking floor. Lower grades (often called “Character” or “Rustic”) have more knots and color variation for a more rustic or dynamic floor. The grade does not affect the quality of the floor, so the decision is purely an aesthetic one.

COST: lower grades tend to be a little less expensive than higher grades.

Plain Sawn vs. Rift & Quartered

Plain sawn is the standard way hardwood is cut (right across the log) and is the most common way you’ll see it sold as flooring. Rift & quartered flooring (offered in Red and White Oak) is cut differently to maximize the stability of the wood. Some homeowners love the straight-grain look of rift and quartered oaks, and it can also be used at narrower widths in certain unstable settings (over radiant heat for example) where solid wood wouldn’t be advisable.

COST: rift & quartered will usually be more expensive than plain sawn.

Widths

This refers to the face width of the floor board – wider widths have become very popular in recent years, but the most popular width remains the standard 3-1/4". The narrowest boards are 2-1/4" and the widest can go up to 12" in certain species (keep in mind that the wider the board is the more unstable the floor will be – when you go over 5" widths we recommend switching to engineered options).

COST: the wider the board the more expensive it is. Boards wider than 5" are also more expensive to install as they require adhesive as well as the standard nails to keep them in place.

Sheens

You have a choice in the level of sheen of your floor in both prefinished and site-finished floors. "High Gloss" is the highest sheen available, and "Matte" is the lowest ("Semi-Gloss", "Satin", and "Low-Sheen" are mid- to low-range). In terms of durability the higher gloss finishes are harder, but scratches are much less noticeable on lower gloss floors.

COST: the level of sheen usually has little to no affect on the cost of a floor.

Textures

Many prefinished floors offer a variety of textures (such as wire brushed or hand scraped) as an alternative to the standard smooth-sanded look, and Higgins also offers this service on our site-finished floors. Adding texture to a floor lessens the sheen, can create a more rustic look, and helps hide scratches so your floor looks newer for longer.

COST: floors that have a texture added to them will be more expensive than smooth-sanded floors.

Finishes

Prefinished floors are usually finished using a polyurethane system, which is also the most common system that has been used on site-finished floors until recent years. We also carry prefinished floors that use a European Oil finish for a more matte, natural look. In site-finished floors we offer four distinct options: Oil Base Polyurethane, Oil Modified Waterborne, Waterborne, and European Oil (see our Finish Comparison Chart for more details).

COST: polyurethane is the least expensive option but there are several benefits to the other systems that include better aging and scratch resistance, less odor, and faster drying times.

Species

When picking a wood species the main things you should consider are hardness, appearance, and cost. If you have large dogs or young children, you may want to consider a species that is hard enough to withstand a lot of wear like hickory (see the Janka Hardness Scale for more) or one with a lot of grain pattern like oak, that will help hide scratches. The appearance and structural qualities of wood species vary tremendously; you want pick a look that you love, but that also works for your lifestyle (see our Wood Species Descriptions for more details).

COST: the cost varies tremendously among species; generally, red oak is the most cost effective option, while woods like walnut and imported exotics are the most expensive.

Stain

Staining enables you to change the color of your wood floor so you can match any style. Most prefinished mills carry a wide variety of stain options, and though you are limited to their current offerings, there are plenty to choose from. Higgins has many stain options for site-finished floors, and we can even create custom colors.

COST: stained prefinished floors are usually close in price to natural prefinished floors, whereas staining on-site is an extra day's worth of work so it will always be more expensive than a natural floor.