

hard or soft?

Trying to choose between carpet and timber? Both flooring options have eco-friendly aspects.

When it comes to flooring, most of us fall squarely into one camp or the other: we're either in love with our timber floors or couldn't imagine life without carpet. While we aim to choose flooring that suits our lifestyle, home décor and personal preferences, today, more of us are looking at the eco-friendly aspects of the materials we choose to live with.

To protect your health and minimise harm to the environment, the Government-sponsored Smarter Homes website (www.smarterhomes.org.nz) recommends looking for flooring materials that are durable, do not emit volatile organic compounds (VOCs), can be recycled, and are made from sustainably sourced natural materials or from recycled materials. So how do carpet and timber stack up as flooring options?

Carpet – covering your bases

Carpet adds a whole range of benefits to your living environment. It reduces noise through sound absorption; provides warmth, comfort and insulation; is slip resistant, hardwearing and easy to clean; and offers design versatility thanks to the extensive colour, pile and pattern choices available.

As a natural thermal insulator and a low conductor of heat, carpet can make a measurable impact on energy savings. It's been estimated that wool carpet, in particular, will reduce a household's energy costs in both heating and cooling by 8% to 12%.

Wool carpet offers additional advantages in that it's inherently flame retardant and hard to ignite. As well as being a renewable resource, wool is biodegradable.

Among the myths associated with carpet is that it collects dust and allergens making it bad for asthmatics and allergy sufferers. But, with regular vacuuming, carpet can create a healthy living environment. Carpet fibres also trap dust, pollen and pet dander, reducing their continued circulation in the air until they're removed by vacuuming.

According to Wools of New Zealand, wool absorbs common contaminants such as formaldehyde, nitrogen dioxide and sulphur dioxide, and will not re-emit them into the air, even when heated. It has been claimed that wool carpets can continually purify indoor air for up to 30 years.

While carpet isn't as hard wearing as solid timber or other hard flooring options, high-quality carpets are certainly made to last. Be sure to select the right carpet for your specific requirement. For example, choose a shorter-pile, more tightly woven carpet for high-traffic areas such as entranceways and halls. Modular carpet squares are ideal for kids' bedrooms and rumpus rooms. If there's a stain, you can simply pull up that square and have it cleaned or replace it altogether with minimal fuss and cost.



When choosing a carpet that's kind to both the planet and your living environment, look for those with Environmental Choice New Zealand (ECNZ) certification and evidence of environmental management standards and systems, such as ISO 14001 or Enviro-mark®, and Zero Waste, EBEX 21, or The Natural Step.

Timber – a growing concern

Natural, available in a wide range of colours, and visually attractive, timber floors have been a popular choice for everything from villas to modern townhouses and holiday homes. They're a practical option that requires minimal care to continue looking great, and the durability of solid timber flooring means it will still be in your home long after you're gone.

Timber can be polyurethaned, stained, waxed and painted to create a range of different looks from modern to traditional, and the knots, colour variations and imperfections add a particular charm. Being hard wearing, timber is ideal for heavily trafficked areas such as entranceways and stairs.

The difficulty in choosing timber comes with knowing whether what you're buying is from a renewable and environmentally sound source. Put simply, for timber to be sustainable, a tree must be planted for every one that's harvested, and the forest must maintain its ecological integrity and continue to benefit the local people long term.

Kwila, or merbau, has been a very popular tropical timber for decking and flooring. But global demand for this cheap hardwood has led to the destruction of natural habitats and the exploitation of local communities in South-East Asia where it grows. According to Greenpeace, virtually all kwila on the market is from illegal sources in Indonesia and Papua New Guinea. Indonesian forests are being logged faster than any other forested nation, and more than three quarters of the country's timber production is thought to be illicit. Few flooring manufacturers know the precise source of the kwila they sell and cannot show it was legally sourced.

The best way to choose sustainable timber and avoid contributing to global deforestation is to look for Good Wood products made from Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) or verified-legal wood. Look for the FSC logo on the packaging.

Full FSC certification guarantees that the timber comes from properly managed forests, and that it was harvested legally, sustainably and with respect for the rights of the local people. An independent, non-profit organisation, the FSC is one of the most reputable certification bodies in the world, and is supported by WWF, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and the Environmental Investigation Agency.

Alternatively, buy locally made where possible. Our indigenous timbers, such as beech, rimu and tawa, now come from privately owned, sustainably managed forests. These must be managed to the highest standards and according to individual plans set out by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry.

Choose plantation timbers or ecotimber, such as vitex, which is harvested from community-based eco-forestry operations. Also, look for second-hand timber, as recycled materials have the least impact on the environment.

Bamboo is another great renewable timber option that's not only very attractive, but is also extremely stable and hardwearing, making it ideal for flooring. It grows to full maturity in just five years (versus the 30-50 years of traditional hardwoods) and, once cut, it rejuvenates quickly. And don't worry about the impact on pandas – they eat a different species to the bamboo used for flooring.

And if you still can't decide whether carpet or timber is the best flooring option for your home, why not combine the two and enjoy the best of both worlds? **H**



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