


all about

Cork flooring

It's cushiony underfoot, easy to care for, and far more versatile than you might think. Here's what you need to know about choosing and using this resilient natural floor material in your home **BY JOSH GASKOF**

The bark of the cork oak tree has been used to seal champagne bottles since the 1600s, but it was a pretty new idea to use it as flooring in 1937, when it was installed at Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater. Visit the iconic house today, and you'll see much of that cork still in service, a testament to its durability. The material was prized for its warm natural look, noise-dampening ability, and ergonomic comfort—and still is. “Many adults with back issues who can't stand on hardwood or tile for very long love cork,” says Joel Hirshberg, co-owner of Iowa-based Green Building Supply, who has been selling the flooring for 21 years.

It's also a sustainable choice. Cork is harvested by carefully peeling off the outer layer of a mature *Quercus suber*; the harvest doesn't damage the evergreen tree, which regrows its bark roughly every nine years. Cork is made into two types of flooring: glue-down tiles and click-together planks. In 2019, waterproof cork planks hit the market, making cork floating floors viable anywhere in the house, even bathrooms and laundry rooms. Cork flooring now comes in a wide variety of looks, too, from classic speckled designs to a range of colors to finishes that mimic wood and stone. But while today's cork works with all kinds of interiors, its inherent characteristics remain its strongest sell. “I installed a floating cork floor over vinyl tile in my living room, dining room, kitchen, mudroom, and den,” says Texas interior designer Amity Worrel, who has worked with cork for more than two decades. “When I drop things they do not break, they bounce. And when my kids run through the house at breakneck speed, their footfalls do not interrupt my Zoom calls,” she says. Up ahead:  how to use cork flooring in rooms of your own.



VITALS

What does it cost?

About \$5 to \$10 per square foot. Pro installation adds \$2 to \$3 per square foot for a floating floor and about \$6 to \$10 for glue-down.

How long does it last?

Both glue-down and floating cork can last 40 years or more if they're carefully maintained—otherwise expect 15 to 20 years.

DIY or hire it out?

Floating cork clicks together without fasteners or adhesive, making installation a DIY-friendly job. Glue-down cork requires a perfectly flat subfloor and quick-setting adhesive, so in most cases, installation is best left to a pro.

How much maintenance?

Cork requires the same routine care as a wood floor: vacuuming, damp mopping, and protection from sliding chair legs and grit-covered footwear. Most cork flooring needs recoating with polyurethane every 3 to 10 years, depending on how much use it gets.

Where to buy it?

A flooring store, green-building supplier, or manufacturer's website will have the best selection and service.

What's the warranty?

It will range from 15 years to "lifetime," or as long as you own the house. There should be one for the cork and one for the finish.

A checkerboard floor is a kitchen classic; these glue-down cork tiles make it back-friendly, too. *SHOWN: Duro Design's Barriga Natural and Baltico Stormy White, about \$8 per sq. ft.*

Is cork flooring right for you?

Here are some pluses and minuses to consider

PROS

+ RESILIENT AND COMFORTABLE A cubic inch of cork bark holds about 200 million air cells—so even a quarter-inch of cork in a floating floor offers ample cushioning for your feet and back.

+ WARM AND QUIET UNDERFOOT Its air cells make cork a natural thermal and acoustic insulator. Cork flooring is an especially good choice in colder climates.

+ MOLD, INSECT, AND FIRE RESISTANT Cork contains an antimicrobial wax called suberin that also repels moisture, mold, bugs, and even fire.

+ DAMAGED SPOTS CAN BE REPLACED If tiles or planks get gouged, the affected pieces can be removed and new ones swapped in.

+ ECO-FRIENDLY CHOICE In addition to regrowing their bark roughly every nine years, cork oaks can live for 200 years or more. Cork forests absorb millions of tons of carbon each year.

CONS

x FADES IN DIRECT SUN Unless it's a wood-look product with a PET (plastic) top layer, cork flooring—including products printed to look like stone or colored with stain—will lighten with exposure to ultraviolet light. The UV protectants in a clear coat provide some buffer, but not as much as UV-blocking windows or window film. Without these precautions, it's best to avoid cork in areas that get a lot of direct sunlight.

x PRONE TO SCRATCHING Like other natural flooring such as wood and linoleum, cork can get abraded over time, especially if you have pets. If that's a concern, avoid it in high-traffic areas, or be prepared to refresh the top coat regularly.

x HARD TO TELL WHEN IT'S TIME TO RECOAT The visual complexity of many cork floors can make it difficult to see when the finish is wearing away and a new coat of polyurethane is needed. Poor maintenance will shorten its life span.



The structural layer inside waterproof floating cork planks is impermeable to moisture. *SIMILAR TO SHOWN: Wood Inspire in Quartz Oak, about \$5 per sq. ft.; amorimwise.us*

GAME CHANGER

Waterproof floating floors

ITS NATURAL WAX makes cork inherently water resistant. But the high-density fiberboard (HDF) layer that typically stiffens floating floor planks and forms their click-and-lock fastening system can absorb moisture that seeps into the seams between the planks. That's what makes waterproof click-together cork such a big deal: It replaces the standard HDF structural layer with one made from cork that's been impregnated with high-density polyethylene (HDPE) plastic. "Although it's derived from petroleum, it is free of chemicals like formaldehyde or PVC, and is a favorite among people with allergies and chemical sensitivities," says Hirshberg, who has seen a 300 percent spike in cork flooring sales since waterproof planks were introduced. The HDPE makes floating cork floors a great choice for full baths and laundry rooms. In the wettest locations, Hirshberg recommends following manufacturer instructions for gluing down the waterproof planks rather than floating them; that way, if water does work its way down between planks, it's unlikely to lead to mold growth or rot underneath.

CORK TWO WAYS

Their costs are similar, but the two types of cork flooring are manufactured and installed differently

click-and-lock floating planks



BEST FOR: DIY installation, including over existing flooring such as vinyl or tile

→ These planks click together and have an HDF or HDPE core that's typically sandwiched between layers of agglomerated cork, which is ground-up cork pressed together with adhesives. They come in a range of looks: Many products have cork veneers, often stained or photo-printed with a realistic wood or stone image. Boards can be laid horizontally, vertically, or diagonally, allowing for certain patterns like herringbone. Floating cork usually has beveled edges and almost always comes with a long-lasting polyurethane-based factory finish. Planks are often 36 inches long and 7½ or 12 inches wide, although some products with wood or stone looks come in tiles and squares.

glue-down tiles



BEST FOR: a showpiece pattern or an authentic mid-century look

→ These tiles get adhered to the subfloor and have been made the same way for 75 years: Agglomerated cork is pressed into blocks, sliced into sheets, and cut into tiles. They're either homogeneous—meaning the material looks the same throughout—or heterogeneous, which means they have a veneer layer that may be stained or printed. Most are ¾ of an inch thick and are prefinished with polyurethane (a few old-school products come unfinished or coated with wax). What sets them apart from floating cork is that they're available in a wide range of colors, sizes, and shapes, such as triangles and pentagons, allowing for endless mosaic patterns, like stars and geometrics.

>> SHOP SMARTER

Marks of quality to keep in mind

> **Cork from the Mediterranean** is more resilient than cork from Asia, which comes from a different tree species, *Quercus variabilis*.

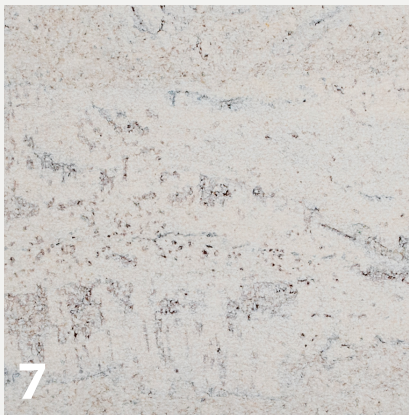
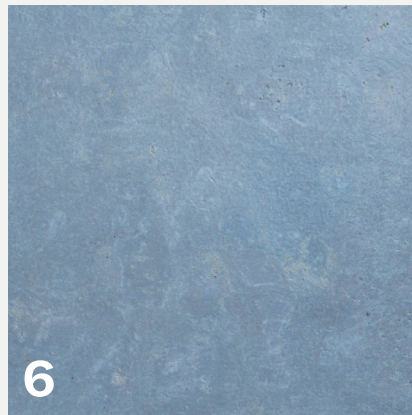
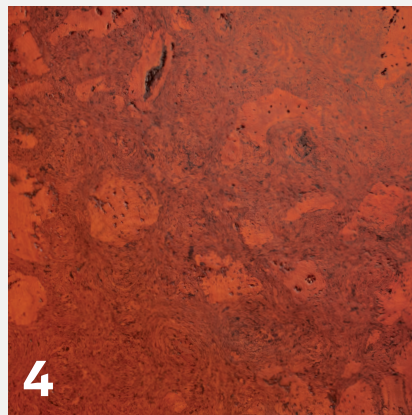
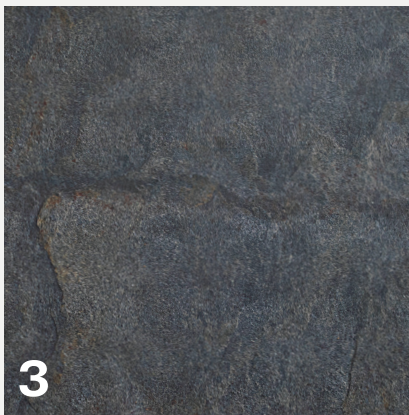
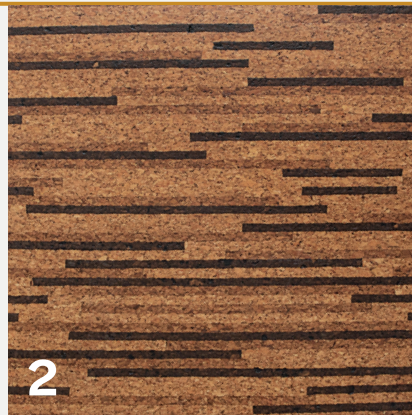
> To ensure cork flooring **has no formaldehyde and won't release VOCs**, look for independent certifications such as GreenGuard Gold and Global GreenTag.

> Most cork flooring with a veneer top has a wear layer 2mm to 3mm thick. Check the spec sheets and **choose products with the thickest wear layer:** They will be more resilient and durable.

SEE IF IT HAS A RATING

Some cork products are labeled according to one of two classification systems for resilient flooring. This means the manufacturer tested and rated the flooring's resistance to abrasion, impact, staining, fire, and moisture. When in doubt, order a higher level for your project; this ensures a more durable floor and finish, says Gonçalo Marques of Amorim Cork Flooring, the world's largest producer of cork products.

RATING	RECOMMENDED FOR	HOUSEHOLD USES
21 or AC1	Moderate residential use	Bedrooms and closets
22 or AC2	General residential use	Living and dining rooms
23 or AC3	Heavy residential use	Hallways and entryways
31 or AC3	Moderate commercial use (hotels & small offices)	Kitchens and other high-traffic areas
32 or AC4	General commercial use (large offices & cafés)	Any hardworking room in the house
33 or AC5	Heavy commercial use (government buildings & department stores)	Spaces that get a lot of abuse, such as home gyms



A range of looks

Cork flooring comes in a wide variety of colors and patterns

1. DRAMATIC VEINING Made from offcuts produced by the wine cork industry, this click flooring has a bold marbled pattern. *Shown: Marmo Creme 12x36x7/16-inch plank, about \$7 per sq. ft.; novafloorings.com*

2. STAGGERED STRIPES Because this glue-down tile is made from homogeneous, or “through-color,” cork, it can be sanded and refinished. *Shown: Tigress 12x24x3/16-inch tile, about \$7 per sq. ft.; apccork.com*

3. FAUX STONE This slate-look click flooring’s AC5 rating means it will hold up to heavy traffic at home. *Shown: Serenity Collection 17²³/₃₂x24¹³/₃₂x7/16-inch rectangle in Hearth Slate, about \$8.50 per sq. ft.; wecork.com*

4. HARVEST HUE Order this 3/16-inch-thick glue-down flooring in any size or shape; its earthy orange color is an instant warm-up. *Shown: Nugget tile in Tangerine, about \$10 per sq. ft.; corkfloor.com*

5. CLASSIC CORK With veneer cut from a full sheet of bark—no agglomerated pieces—this click plank’s square edges create a seamless look once installed. *Shown: Avant Garde Collection 11⁷/₈x35⁹/₁₆x7/16-inch plank in Canyon, about \$9 per sq. ft.; wecork.com*

6. VERSATILE SHADE Available in dozens of shapes, this glue-down cork’s soothing blue color is a natural for subtle patterns. *Shown: Nugget 3/16-inch-thick tile in Powder Blue, about \$9 per sq. ft.; corkfloor.com*

7. TILE EFFECT It may look like limestone, but this click flooring has a springy feel underfoot. *Shown: Cork Essence 48¹/₃₂x7⁹/₃₂x3/8-inch plank in Flock Moonlight, about \$6 per sq. ft.; wicanders.us*

8. WOOD LOOK This narrow, waterproof click plank comes embossed with realistic graining and knots. *Shown: Wood Inspire 48¹⁵/₆₄x7³¹/₆₄x9/32-inch plank in Spruce-wood, about \$6 per sq. ft.; amorimwise.us*



Floating floor planks click together with the help of a hammer and a tapping block made from flooring scrap.

Care and maintenance

PROTECT > While most dents eventually disappear on their own, cork is prone to scratching. To prevent abrasion, consider implementing a leave-your-shoes-at-the-door policy, add felt buttons to the bottoms of furniture legs, and set door sweeps just above floor level.

CLEAN > Vacuum as often as daily to remove grit that can otherwise get ground into the finish and scuff it. Once a week, use a just-damp mop and an oil-free wood-floor cleaner, such as Bona's.

RECOAT > Most types of cork flooring should be recoated with water-based polyurethane every 3 to 10 years, depending on the abuse it takes. One exception: Wood-look cork with a PET finish can't be recoated. Assess the condition of the finish annually. To recoat, prep the floor according to manufacturer instructions—often with a light screening to rough up the finish without sanding into the cork itself—then apply three coats of polyurethane. This process can be tackled by any handy homeowner.

MUST-KNOW INSTALLATION INFO

With any type of cork, order at least 10 percent more than is needed to allow for any cutting mistakes and to ensure there's a good supply of replacement tiles or planks for the future. Acclimate glue-down cork tiles and floating-floor planks for three days before installation—and, as with other natural flooring products such as wood and bamboo, avoid laying them during humid weather. Test a concrete subfloor with a moisture meter; depending on the manufacturer's installation guidelines, you may need to apply a moisture sealer. If you're installing glue-down tiles, make sure that product is compatible with your adhesive.

- **FLOATING CORK FLOORS** have a strong, rigid middle layer, so they can be installed over an existing floor or subfloor; using a foam underlayment in between helps soften any imperfections. Start in a corner and work from left to right or right to left; use an aluminum straightedge—not the walls—to keep your rows straight. A hammer or mallet and a tapping block will assist in clicking the planks together without damaging the flooring. To allow the floor to expand due to changes in temperature and humidity, leave a ½-inch gap along the perimeter. If you remove existing baseboards, they will cover the gap when they are reinstalled; otherwise, cover the gap with ¾-inch quarter round.
- **GLUE-DOWN TILES** require a perfectly smooth subfloor; otherwise, dips and bumps will transfer to the finished floor surface. To fix an uneven wood subfloor, typically underlayment plywood is nailed down over it; with concrete, floor-leveling compound may be used. Both the subfloor and the back of the tiles are painted with a quick-setting contact cement before tiles are placed. This type of adhesive is unforgiving: As soon as the surfaces meet, that tile's placement is permanent. Some manufacturers now offer heavy-duty double-sided tape to simplify the job. This is still a project for the most meticulous DIYers—especially when piecing together intricate patterns.

Repair TIPS

Deep scratches or divots in cork without a veneer or printed surface can be filled with color-matched wood putty found at hardware stores—and all cork can be spot-replaced. For floating floors, start by removing the baseboard or quarter round at the end of the room where the last row of cork was laid, then carefully unlink planks until you free the damaged piece. Glue-down tiles can be spot-replaced by scraping up the damaged tile and gluing down a new one. ■