

CHOOSE THE RIGHT GRADE

Few things can be more frustrating for you, the customer, than having a beautiful new wood floor installed that doesn't look like what you expected. In fact, problems concerning the appearance of different grades of flooring are among the most numerous complaints that flooring contractors have to deal with. That's why it's important to understand — long before you choose your floor — what to expect from different grades of flooring.

Because the characteristics of wood species and types of wood flooring vary so much, there are no standard grades for all wood floors. Some wood flooring grades are determined by industry associations, such as the National Oak Flooring Manufacturers Association, the Maple Flooring Manufacturers Association and Canadian Lumbermen's Association. Much of the unfinished solid wood flooring from the United States and Canada follows the grading rules from one of those associations.

Individual manufacturers also can create their own (or "proprietary") grades. Most manufacturers of engineered and prefinished flooring follow their own grading rules. At present, no association standards exist for engineered wood floors.

One important point: Most wood flooring grades deal with the aesthetics of the floor, not the serviceability. All grades will perform equally well; it's their facial appearances that vary. In this sense, flooring of a higher grade is not necessarily "better." Rather, it is a matter of personal taste.

Another key point is that most grading rules also dictate the average length of the boards involved. Higher grades of flooring usually have longer boards, so be prepared for many shorter boards if you order a lower grade of wood flooring.

A good example of how grades work are the rules for one of the most common wood floors installed — solid, unfinished red or white oak. Most of those floors follow the grades developed by NOFMA. Under those grading rules, there are four levels of oak flooring — Clear, Select, No. 1 Common and No. 2 Common. Clear NOFMA oak is very uniform in color, with very few small character marks. Its average board length is 3½ feet. Select oak has more color variation and more natural character marks such as small knots. The average board length for Select oak is 3 feet. No. 1 Common has a much more varied appearance, with mineral streaks, greater color variation, and more character marks, and average board length is 2½ feet. The last grade, No. 2 Common, has a "rustic" appearance, with just about any natural character mark, including large knots and very dark boards.

Another factor that can affect the appearance of your floor is the way the flooring was cut from the log itself. Plainsawn flooring will show great variation in grain patterns on the surface of the floor. Rift or quartersawn floor-

ing will have a relatively uniform grain pattern.

Grading works differently for engineered wood floors. Most manufacturers of engineered product do not create "grades" per se. Instead, they create product or brand names. The products are categorized according to veneer, finish and milling.

While most solid wood flooring products have average length requirements, most engineered floors do not. Generally, manufacturers' product names reflect three levels or more of quality — ranging from a premium level down to what is generically referred to as cabin grade. At the top level, or premium, the flooring has almost no milling defects and minimal character marks such as knots, mineral streaks or pin worm holes. The next grade, typically a character grade, allows more natural character marks and some minor milling defects that may cause overwood, small finish skips and shorter average lengths. Wood with character marks such as mineral streaks may be used for darker-colored floors. Cabin-grade floors allow unlimited character marks and milling defects.

Because the industry does not have established grades for engineered floors, many purchasers make their decisions about product quality based on the value and the warranty offered. The scope of the warranties decrease accordingly with the quality of the flooring. Oftentimes, cabin-grade floors offer no warranty.

Because wood is a natural material, no two boards are ever going to be the same. Thus, a floor of one grade or brand name may appear slightly different than another floor of the same name. For an accurate representation of what different grades will look like, it is vital that you see a large sample of the floor before you place your order. That should ensure that your expectations don't clash with the reality of your installed floor.

