

Wood counters no longer on the chopping block

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Peter Leach / National Kitchen and Bath Association

Don't knock wood as a durable and functional kitchen countertop option. While wood might seem problematic in terms of water and stain resistance, it has a long tradition of being used as a countertop in Europe and is enjoying a resurgence in American kitchens.

Jessica Williamson, an associate kitchen and bath designer with Kitchen Views in Newton, Mass., says at least 10 percent of the renovations she oversaw last year specified wooden countertops on kitchen islands. "Wood stays room temperature and brings an instant warmth to an overall design," she says. "Wood countertops also complement other materials such as stone and stainless-steel appliances."

This French-style kitchen features teakwood as the top to the islands that serve as the heart of this home's entertaining space. Designed by Steiner and Houck Inc., in Columbia, Pa., two islands were added to create the kitchen's work flow and refinement.

With dozens of wood countertop options available, choices range from exotic zebrawood and African iroko to quarter-sawn oak, mahogany and hard-rock maple. In Williamson's National Kitchen and Bath award-winning

design of a renovation project in Chatham, Mass., the homeowners chose a reclaimed beechwood counter to top a 6-foot-by-6-foot kitchen island.

The beechwood was reclaimed from old flooring and fabricated into a counter by Craft-Art Wood Countertops, based in Atlanta. Williamson says using reclaimed wood can cost up to 25 percent more than a conventionally fabricated wood countertop, which for some clients, is a price they're willing to pay for environmental sustainability in kitchen design. "Some homeowners want natural products that are more rustic and have a patina. If a piece of repurposed wood countertop has an old nail hole, all the better," she says. "People really relate to wood, and no two fabrications are the same."

Nicks and scratches are just part of having a wood counter, says Williamson, but they also require ongoing maintenance. Application of food-safe mineral oil provides a natural, nontoxic protective coating. Although the term "butcher block" is sometimes used to describe wood countertops, today they are rarely used in homes as a surface on which to cut meat, as they were in butcher shops in bygone days.

"I don't advise anyone to cut on any countertop surface, wood or not. That's what a cutting board is for," she says. "That being said, you need to embrace the fact that a wood countertop is going to take on a character of its own."

Part of a countertop's character comes from one of three ways the wood is fabricated:

- Plank style: Wood planks are joined together to form the width of the countertop. Each board can run the entire length of the countertop and shows off the heart of the grain.
- Edge-grain style: Cut lumber planks are laid on edge and joined together. They can be cut to make countertops up to 4 inches thick.

- End-grain style: Many short (usually 4-inch thick) pieces of wood are stacked side-by-side and joined with cut ends facing up. This produces an extremely tough surface that resembles a checkerboard.

John Boos and Co.'s sales of mostly hard-rock maple countertops are up 30 percent this year, when compared to 2009's sales, says Becky Hewing, national sales manager for the Effingham, Ill., company.

"The experienced weekend do-it-yourselfer can install these countertops over existing cabinetry and easily change the look of the kitchen," she says. "A wood countertop on an island is like having a piece of furniture anchoring your kitchen."

Costs for 1 1/2-inch-thick John Boos and Co.'s hard-rock maple countertops can start at just under \$90 in 1-foot lengths. However, the longer the counter, the more the price goes down per foot.

Wooden countertops are best reserved for non-sink surrounds. But recent developments in mounting sinks under the countertop and in water-repellant finishes make wet kitchen applications possible, Hewing says. While wooden countertops are durable, they are not moisture-resistant and may warp over time if exposed to water on an ongoing basis.

John Boos and Co.'s wooden countertops come shipped from the factory with a food-safe finish, which includes beeswax. A wood countertop that is decorative — without the ongoing maintenance of rubbing the surface with food-safe mineral oil — can be finished with a varnish or polyurethane.

No matter the finish, don't allow liquid to pool on the surface of a wood countertop. This will cause watermarks and expansion that can lead to glue joint failure and warping. Keep countertops clean by simply washing the wood surface with a slightly damp cloth using antibacterial dish soap, or a small amount of bleach or white distilled vinegar in the water. Thoroughly dry the wooden countertop after washing.

"Wood countertops can easily last more than 20 years when you follow manufacturer's care guidelines, and it's a look that doesn't go out of style," Hewing says. "It's also a renewable, repairable surface and if worse comes to worse, you can always sand the top and refinish it."