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Counter Points

MISTY M. LEES

SUSTAINABLE KITCHEN COUNTER OPTIONS YOU CAN REALLY USE.



The Trautenberg residence in Westport, Connecticut, features recycled glass tiles by Oceanside Glasstile in a pattern designed by the homeowners. Photo by Christopher Ray

Countertop options

CERAMIC TILE Tile comes in limitless colors and designs and can even be custom made, with prices to fit any budget. The baked-on glaze stands up to hot cookware and sharp knives, making tile a perennial favorite for kitchens. The grout between tiles, however, deteriorates quickly if not sealed and kept clean and dry. To hide the inevitable discoloration to plain white grout, add a colorant, stain, or enhancer to it.

If you're a patient do-it-yourselfer with the right tools, you can install ceramic tile, but count on some breakage and buy extras up front. Many deconstruction resalers and salvage yards carry partial boxes and remnants—a real deal for the bargain hound.

GLASS TILES Recycled glass from bottles, windshields, and other sources produces brilliantly colored, durable tiles that are similar to ceramic, but the price is generally more expensive. Sandhill, Bedrock, and Oceanside Glasstile have all come up with vivid hues and unique patterns in recycled glass tiles. (Check with the manufacturer about the percentage of recycled content in the color or style you choose.) Like ceramic, glass tiles are easy to keep clean, but the grout is not. Also, tile surfaces are slightly uneven, so cups can tip and dinnerware shatter—a minor hindrance.

COMPOSITES Looking for a solid surface that can be cut to fit your space, but don't want to purchase traditional acrylics? Consider the new composite countertops, which combine recycled content with binders such as plastic compounds or cement.

Three of Avonite's surfaces (Cozumel, Kaleidoscope, and Maraschino) include post-industrial waste, and while its polyester base isn't "natural," it does keep scraps from the waste stream. Vetrazzo, a mineral-based surface, contains no resins or polymers and is made with at least 80 percent recycled-content post-consumer/post-industrial glass. Richlite makes a line of countertops from sustainably forested paper products and hemp and KlipTech uses recycled paper. These pulp-containing countertops, contrary to what you might think, are amazingly water resistant,

An attractive and functional kitchen counter makes cutting, chopping, eating, drying your dishes, and maybe even paying your bills easier, and it can be an inviting focal point for the most-used room in your house.

Whether you're looking to replace an existing countertop or build new, you have myriad choices. Traditionally, synthetic material is the most popular, but it certainly isn't the best for the environment. The big-name brands are manufactured primarily from polyesters and acrylics, and while they offer a range of color choices at reasonable cost—some laminates are as little as \$10 per square foot and can be installed by a homeowner—the environment pays the price. These petrochemical-based products are usually nonrenewable, rarely recycled or reclaimed, and most don't decompose well in landfills.

Thankfully, eco-friendly alternatives abound. Natural stone, wood, and ceramic tile have long been popular in kitchens, but your green options don't stop there because manufacturers have devised ways to use post-consumer and industrial waste in countertops. Recycled wine bottles, windshields, paper, stone chips, or recycled plastic pieces add color and style to the newest blends.


- **DON'T** choose countertops made of petrochemical-based polyesters and acrylics for your kitchen.

+ **DO** check out more sustainable alternatives: recycled glass and ceramic tiles, composites, wood, and stone.

and the resin used as binder should create little or no outgassing. (KlipTech recently introduced a cashew nut oil- and water-based resin-as-binding-agent that's organic and renewable.) Although it isn't technically a "composite," ShetkaStone uses a nontoxic binding process to create a hard surface from 100 percent recycled paper; no plastic polyresin or cement is needed. Each brand has other unique characteristics, so ask about specific installation methods, stain and scratch resistance, composition, and required maintenance.

STONE Natural stone such as granite, slate, and soapstone provide luxury and rock-solid durability, either in tiles or as a one-piece slab. Demand for granite countertops is so high that it's recently dropped in price.

If your cabinets are old or weak, a heavy topper is not the best choice unless you can bolster or replace the structure. And while stone has a gorgeous luster, it can scratch or stain easily and requires regular sealing. It's an all-natural choice, but perhaps its biggest drawback is that it's a nonrenewable, quarried resource, and it's often transported from across the country or overseas. Choose local stone instead of imported.

WOOD Cooks have relied on their chopping blocks since the dawn of time. Today's sleek wooden surfaces are nothing like the warped and gouged chunk your grandmother had, and they're best used away from wet locations such as your sink, as they can warp. Even the hardest species can be marred by scorching, food stains, and knives. If you don't mind a bit of character brought on from use, wood's glowing warmth is unsurpassed. Choose wood that's harvested from a certified sustainable forest (see FSC.org), and use only food-grade oils as sealers. 

So many choices

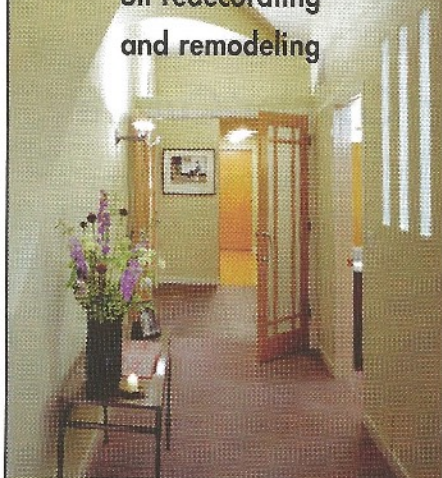
It's easy to be seduced by a particular countertop material because the color is vibrant, the touch is warm, or the surface has a lovely glow. Yet the kitchen is a high-traffic area, so it's best to put practical needs first. Consider these questions before you construct or replace your countertops:

- How much do you want to spend for materials and installation? Do you have the know-how, tools, and patience to do it yourself?
- What abuses should the countertop be able to tolerate—burns, scratches, or standing water? Crayon marks? Red wine? Are you a casual one-day-a-week cook or a busy chef who entertains?
- Do you want the counter to be completely maintenance free or are you willing to do regular oiling or sealing? And how should it be cleaned?
- Will the material fit the unique dimensions of your kitchen? Are there strange angles or curves, tight corners, or non-uniform heights and depths that must be accommodated?
- Will the installation require adhesives, create dust, or outgas VOCs? Is there a better alternative, or will you need to vacate the premises for a few days?
- Every type of countertop and every installation process is distinct; consult with a contractor or knowledgeable salesperson before making the big purchase.
- Looking for a low-budget fix? Loathe the dust and landfill caused by rip-out-and-toss methods? If your surface is smooth, you could install tile over your existing counter or substrate. The new topper will raise the profile slightly, so measure carefully beforehand to make certain your appliances will still fit under your upper cabinets.
- Don't want to replace your entire countertop because of slight damage? Wood, stone, solid surfaces, and composites can usually be repaired or refinished; tiles can be replaced.

If you can't match the replacements, use more than one type of surface in your kitchen. Remove a section and install a contrasting piece or a different material. Build in a separate chopping block, granite pastry-dough station, or tile backsplash. By not removing what's still in good condition, you keep dollars in your pocket and trash from the waste stream.

DON'T MISS

the July/August issue of
Natural Home & Garden
with a special focus
on redecorating
and remodeling



Ukrainian Zen

In Chicago, a dilapidated brownstone gets a makeover that blends historic with modern Asian.

5 Steps to a Perfect Palette

Create a color palette for your home and bring it to life on walls, floors, and furnishings. Plus, a guide to healthy paints—and how to make your own!

A Home Office That Works

A pioneering green builder takes on his own home office remodel—and shares what he learned in the process. Plus, practical resources for making a jump from the corporate cubicle world to the freedom of working at home.

Plus . . .

- Best products for remodeling
- A harvest exchange party
- Top 10 eco-architects
- Solar tubes and skylights

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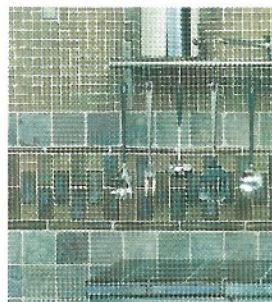
FSC-certified maple



Vetrazzo



ShetkaStone



Oceanside Glasstile



Avonite "Kaleidoscope"

Counter Culture

COUNTERTOP	PROS	CONS	PRICE
Ceramic tile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy to install; can do it yourself • Can be installed over old surfaces • Economical • Unlimited color and style choices; even grout can be tinted • Is heat and stain resistant • Low cost if you choose salvaged tile and install yourself. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grout stains common; frequent sealing helps • Dishes and glasses can break if dropped on it. • Irregular surface 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$125 per square foot, installed, for handmade or custom tiles
Composite	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be cut to fit any location • New brands contain recycled paper, plastic, or hemp. • Easy to clean • Almost no maintenance; stain resistant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May be prone to scratches, but can be professionally refinished • Many contain synthetic plastics • Formaldehyde may be used in manufacturing process. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$40-\$150 per square foot, installed
Glass tile (recycled)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Same as ceramic tile. More limited selection of colors and styles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Same as ceramic tile 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More expensive than ceramic tile; \$25-\$65 per square foot, uninstalled
Stone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heat resistant • Durable and long lasting • Cool temperature favored for rolling pastries • Can be purchased as tiles or solid surface 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some types prone to stains and scratches and may need professional polish. • Nonrenewable resource • Regular sealing needed • Breaks and scratches dishes easily 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$50-\$200 per square foot, installed
Wood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be repaired or refinished with sanding • Easy on knives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Burns, stains, scratches easily • Standing water can warp or stain. • Difficult to thoroughly sanitize 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$50-\$150 per square foot, installed



INSTALLATION TIPS

You may choose to do your own tile or wood counter. Leave the rest to the pros, and follow these tips:

- Sealants, grouts, adhesives, and fixatives are all commonly used in countertop applications. Your contractor should be able to advise you of the types and amounts needed, and may be able to suggest more environmentally friendly or low-VOC substitutes where appropriate. Use only food-safe (FDA-approved) sealants on porous surfaces.
- If you're sensitive to any of the substances used in installation, book a hotel room for a few days or stay with a friend. Open your home's windows to let most toxic fumes and smells escape.
- Whenever possible, cut countertop materials outside your home. The dust can be irritating, even caustic—not to mention tough to clean up!
- Thoroughly clean and sanitize your new counter before using.

RESOURCES

AVONITE
 (800) 354-9858
 AvoniteSurfaces.com
reclaimed materials/polyester composite (limited colors)

BLAZESTONE TILE BY BEDROCK
 (206) 283-7625
 BedrockIndustries.com
100% recycled glass tiles

VETRAZZO BY COUNTER PRODUCTION
 (510) 843-6916
 CounterProduction.com
recycled glass/cast concrete solid surface

ENVIRONMENTAL BUILDING SUPPLIES
 (503) 222-3881
 EcoHus.com
FSC-certified maple countertops

PAPERSTONE BY KLIPTECH
 (253) 677-1355
 KlipTech.com
minimum 50% recycled paper/water-based phenolic compound

OCEANSIDE GLASSTILE
 (866) 648-8453
 Glasstile.com
recycled glass tiles (percentage varies)

RICHLITE
 (888) 383-5533
 Richlit.com/countertop
recycled paper or hemp/plastic resin composite

SANDHILL INDUSTRIES
 (208) 345-6508
 SandhillIntl.com
100% recycled glass tiles

SHETKASTONE
 (507) 357-4177
 ShetkaStone.com
100% recycled-fiber surface

TULIKIVI
 (212) 896-3897
 Tulikivi.com
soapstone countertops