

## Home decor

## Grading system rates wood floors

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Some people knock on wood; others prefer to walk on it.

Wood floors are available from more than 50 species of trees, both domestic and exotic, in a wide range of colors, hardness and prices.

One way to judge the quality of unfinished hardwood flooring is through the grading system created by the Wood Flooring Manufacturers Association. Its grades are based primarily on color, grain and markings. The best — and most expensive — grades of wood are labeled “clear” and “select.”

But these days, not everyone is aiming for perfection. “People are going more toward the natural-looking characteristics of wood,” said Sprigg Lynn of Universal Floors in Washington, D.C. “Years ago people wanted very clear. Now they like to see a knot. They like to see a variation or texture.”

Wood flooring can be finished onsite or purchased already finished. Prefinishing generally increases the cost of materials, though it can save on labor. However, such flooring is not graded, so you may want to bring home a test carton — not just the retail sample — to make sure you like the way it looks.

“It’s better to make a 100-square-foot mistake than a 1,500-square-foot mistake,” said Paul Stringer, director of marketing for Somerset, a Kentucky company that sells both types.

Here’s a look at what you can get for your money. Prices are per square foot and do not include installation.

**The bargain:** If you have a tight budget and you’re aiming for a rustic look, consider flooring made of lower-grade, 2¼-inch strips of domestic red oak, which is sold unfinished for as little as \$1 a square foot by iFloor (ifloor.com). At that price, you get a “cabin” grade wood,

with a lot of imperfections and boards of various lengths. You will have to finish it yourself.

**The basics:** For about \$5 a square foot, you can buy the standard choice for U.S. homeowners and builders: high-grade red oak. Half of the market here is domestic red oak, said Anita Howard, a spokeswoman for the National Wood Flooring Association.

**The upgrade:** A budget of up to \$10 per square foot opens up a range of options, including wider planks and exotic or more costly domestic woods, such as American walnut. One option in this price range is Mullican’s 3-inch-wide strips of walnut in a natural finish ([www.mullicanf flooring.com](http://www.mullicanf flooring.com)).

**The splurge:** Those with the most generous budgets have their pick of the highest grades of exotic and domestic woods, custom designs and hand-scraped wood for a well-worn historic look.