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Talkin' Wood

By Todd Hall



Making the case for engineered flooring

I read articles comparing various aspects of solid and engineered wood floors with great interest, paying close attention as the market for engineered products slowly advances on solids. Engineered wood flooring, as a concept and as a practical flooring product, are a favorite subject of mine – probably better described as a passion.

However, with the increase in media coverage, I can't help but notice a lack of focus on a principal aspect of engineered wood flooring that sets it off, and – in my opinion – above that of solids: sustainability. I don't take this subject lightly as I have lived my life on both sides of the solids versus engineered issue.

My father was a logger in the 50s and 60s who started a west coast hardwood sawmill in the 70s. As a consequence, from youth until my thirties, I ate, breathed and lived solids. Our house was filled with hardwoods and I spent my fair share of time pulling green chain, stacking lumber and running planers.

Yet now, as I approach fifty, my house is filled with engineered floors. Why the transition? Education, concern for the environment, having children and great improvements in technology are the reasons.

Yield and sustainability. While appreciating the growing coverage and sales of engineered wood flooring, I keep feeling that the important issues of sustainability and yield have not received enough print.

When it comes to valuable natural resources such as many of the hardwood species we treasure, engineered wood flooring truly is king. Only the top wear layer is exotic hardwood. The bulk of the floor – the core layers – consist of faster growing, readily available species

such as hevea (rubberwood) or poplar. Depending on the species, whether it's sliced or sawn, and whether it has a thick or thin wearlayer, an engineered wood floor may use between one-fifth and one-twentieth of the hardwood required for 3/4-inch solids.

With new manufacturing techniques and amazing new finishes, engineered floors have lifespans approaching those of solids – perhaps longer if you take into account stability issues. And in regard to 3/4-inch solids, with the new ultra-hard finishes, along with less intrusive refinishing techniques, my great-grandchildren will never need or see the lower 80 percent of that solid strip flooring. It's a waste of an important natural resource.

Choice of materials. The engineering process also gives us a choice not offered in solids, as with my wife's cork-floored office: a 9/16-inch-thick floated floor consisting of a thick top layer of cork, a middle HDF core and a thinner cork base layer. Sure, cork has been available for eons, but the engineered plank process has greatly increased the marketability of the product. Then there's bamboo flooring, the ultimate in green flooring, which is now commonly available due to the engineering process.

Choice of installation methods. Of course a great advantage of engineered wood flooring is its ability to be floated, glued or stapled down. This opens up markets and lowers costs.

Lifespans and reinstallation. One negative aspect that has accompanied floating floors is that people don't view floated floors as quite the permanent floors that they do with solids. With good care, a well-manufactured engineered wood floor with a decent wear layer can last decades. And unlike solids, floated floors can be easily

moved when a change is desired.

A few years ago, I took a 10-year-old floated hevea floor (glued tongue and groove), removed it by cutting it up into large panels and reinstalled it in a master bedroom and bath. With a light sanding and a two-part finish, that floor looked like new. Now with the popularity of glueless click flooring, reinstallation becomes even easier.

I realize that this won't make me popular with the solid wood flooring industry, but it breaks my heart to see someone install a solid oak, walnut, African cherry, merbau or purple heart floor. Call me an environmentalist, but I see one floor where there could be five or more. I see five or more trees cut where only one would do. For me, engineered wood flooring is helping to ensure my great-grandchildren will be able to enjoy the same beautiful woods that we do today. **FCW**

Todd Hall is vice president and product development director of Cal-Flor Accessory Systems, part of a 45-year-old company specializing in products and technologies supporting the hard surface flooring industry. He may be reached at (888) 277-3567.



Cross section of engineered wood flooring.