

Photo, Paul Chmielowiec

# COUNTERTOPS 101

An introduction to popular choices  
to consider for your next reno By Lois Gordon

Soapstone

**Y**ou've made most of the big decisions as they relate to your new kitchen or bath. The layout has been determined, the style of the cabinet doors, the finish and the colours are looking good. All the bells and whistles have been carefully considered – now for the countertop. The problem is that there are just too many to choose from. Laminates, solid surface, stone, tile, wood ... where do you even begin?

Let's take a look at some of the more popular options and perhaps it will help to narrow your search.

Solid surface countertops – with names like Corian® and Staron® – are made from acrylic, a non-porous, flexible material with the strength of stone. One major advantage to products like these is the option of having an integrated sink, a unique feature that you cannot get with other countertops. With this seamless, all-in-one design, there are no edges to collect dirt and bacteria.

The colour range is impressive and the look of the product teams well with contemporary and traditional decors. Because it is easy to clean and maintain, it is often the number one choice for commercial applications.



Blanco Maple by Silestone® available through Latitude™



Granite countertop available through Uniform Custom Countertops



Zodiaq® is a quartz countertop available at Latitude™



Chatham™, the elegance of natural quartz by Cambria®

Engineered quartz, sold under names like CaesarStone®, Zodiaq®, Cambria®, Silestone®, and Hanstone® is a man-made product containing a large portion of natural stone crystal (quartz) with small amounts of resin and pigment, resulting in slabs of consistent colour and texture. Its popularity is soaring because it is completely non-porous. Since it cannot absorb germs, it is an excellent surface for food preparation, and is ideal for bathroom countertops, too.

It is difficult, though, to match the appeal of quarried stone. What consumers must understand, however, is that natural stone is not perfect. Milos Bezouska, president and owner of Uniform Custom Countertops, cautions consumers, “That is the beauty of the product. It may have fissures or lines; it’s not indestructible.

It’s tough to beat the natural beauty of stone, but if you want something perfect, use Corian®, or something manmade.”

Granite, being less porous than marble and typically darker in colour, is a better choice in a high-use area like a kitchen. Some maintenance is required: both stones should be sealed occasionally to reduce the chance of staining. The fun part is choosing from the breathtaking selection of natural stone slabs available.

People are also discovering the fabulously rugged look of soapstone. The inherent properties of soapstone keep it stain-free so it’s a good choice for many applications, including backsplashes. Soapstone’s dense composition prevents the absorption of moisture, resulting in safe bacterial conditions, as well. It does

not need sealing, though you may want to enhance the colour by wiping it with mineral oil from time to time. If scratches occur, they can be easily removed with a sanding block.

Recently, environment-friendly products like Paper Stone® have been introduced. Made of 100 per cent recycled paper, the raw material is compressed to form a dense product which is completely waterproof. According to Bezouska, Paper Stone® has the look of Corian®, but with a more limited colour palette. Ice Stone®, which bears a resemblance to quartz, uses recycled glass to produce a sparkly, contemporary look for countertops.

Even recycled concrete, sometimes blended with glass or porcelain, has made it onto the scene. In the near future, expect to see more “green” products in



Oxford™, the elegance of natural quartz by Cambria®



Soapstone countertop available through N&G Soapstone



Corian® integrated sink available through Latitude™



CaesarStone, distributed by Ciot Tecnica

the marketplace as manufacturers meet consumers' demands to help reduce their carbon footprint.

If your new kitchen or bath is a DIY (do-it-yourself) project, your best options are laminate and tiles. Laminates come in a variety of colours. You will no doubt recognize trade names such as Formica® and Wilsonart®. Neutrals, like white or beige tones, offer a clean, bright look. But textured tones of green, terra cotta, and blue add dramatic contrast to wood or painted cupboards. For contemporary spaces, consider hammered or brushed metallics for a high-tech look.

Manufacturers of laminates have also developed natural-stone look-alikes, which give the appearance of granite and slate for a fraction of the cost. With high-gloss finishes and contoured edge profiles, you actually have to touch it to know

it's not real. For handy people, installing a laminate countertop is a fairly simple and cost-effective way to give a tired kitchen a facelift.

For old-world or country charm, a ceramic tile countertop is another great idea. It's as durable as it is impressive.

It's easy to get carried away with design ideas when you see the variety of tiles, patterns and coordinating trims available. Be sure to seal the grout to reduce staining from food, red wines, oils, perfume, and make-up.

Mike Hetherman, CKD, an award-winning designer, has this advice for homeowners. "Your countertop should be a functional workhorse, because it is the most-used surface in the house." And when it comes to design and colour, don't let trends dictate your choices. Says Hetherman, "Make sure what you pick

belongs esthetically to the 'whole look'. It's about creating a beautiful room."

New products are coming into the marketplace all the time, from North America and around the world. Talk to your kitchen/bathroom specialist or interior designer about the hundreds of possibilities. It's mind-boggling at first, but with the myriad of products available, you are sure to find the ideal countertop to suit your home and lifestyle.

*Lois Gordon is a professional Interior Design Consultant and Freelance Writer  
ljgordon@on.aibn.com*

**SOURCES**

- 4willis.com
- cambriacanada.com
- ciot.com
- latitudeonline.ca
- leezadistribution.com
- soapstoneontario.com
- uniformcustom.com