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Tile Buying Guide

A video showing how to choose the right tile for your space.

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Tile is available in endless combinations of size, texture and color, offering something for everyone and every style. Plus tile is durable and easy to care for, so it's ideal for high-traffic areas. Our Tile Buying Guide helps you explore the options.

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Types of Tile

A kitchen with gray and white marble wall tile and a brushed nickel faucet.

Learn more about the different types of tile and recommended applications for each type.

Porcelain

Manufacturers fire porcelain tile at a high temperature, making a dense, durable tile that resists moisture.

Applications: wall, floor, shower floor

Ceramic

Tilemakers use clay and other minerals to make this tile. Then, they fire it in a kiln and treat it with a glazed color. Glazing allows for brighter color and a glasslike surface.

Applications: wall, shower, shower floor

Natural Stone

Tile made of natural stone offers durability and the beauty of color variation. For stain and water resistance, seal this tile before use. Seal the tile if you plan to use it for shower floors.

Applications: wall, floor, shower floor

Cement

Manufacturers pour cement-bodied tile into molds and then fire it or let it dry naturally. For a custom look add color to the mortar. This tile requires sealing after installation for moisture and stain resistance.

Applications: wall, floor

Quarry Tile

Quarry tile is an unglazed ceramic tile. Its color comes from pigments present in the clay. Seal quarry tile for stain resistance.

Applications: wall, floor

Satillo

Satillo, or Mexican tile, dries in the sun rather than in a kiln, which gives the tile a unique look and finish. This process makes the tile a little softer and less durable than other tile choices, so be sure to use a sealer when using it indoors.

Applications: wall, floor

Terra Cotta

Terra cotta tile contains the same material as clay garden pots. This tile is very absorbent, and you should seal it for indoor use.

Applications: wall, floor

Terrazzo

Terrazzo is a composite tile made of stone or marble chips molded in cement for a textured surface.

Applications: wall, floor

Glass

Glass tile consists of pieces of glass in various colors formed into uniform shapes. It’s available as both mosaic collections with a mesh backing and as individual tile. Glass tile doesn’t work well for shower floors.

Applications: wall

Brick Veneer

Thinner than brick, veneer is a good choice for walls and accent areas. Patterns are available in several earth tones.

Applications: wall

Brick

Typically used in outdoor areas, brick is a sturdy solution that comes in several earth tones that complement rustic décor. Brick is versatile in terms of pattern and placement. Treat brick floors with a stain-resistant sealer.

Applications: wall, shower

Shop Tile

Shop Tile Tools

Shop Grout & Mortar

Tile Sizes

Mosaic tile backsplash in a modern kitchen.

Floor tile is usually 1/2 inch to 3/4 inch thick, manufactured in squares measuring 4 inches by 4 inches up to 24 inches by 24 inches. Other shapes are available, such as rectangular or subway tile, octagonal and hexagonal shapes.

Wall tile is thinner and comes in squares from 3 inches by 3 inches up to 6 inches by 6 inches.

Mosaic tile is 2 inches or smaller and can be installed individually. However, mosaic tile that's premounted on mesh sheets is easier to install for the DIYer.

Tile Ratings

Wood-look tile on a living room floor.

Tile hardness ratings determine if the tile is suitable for the area where you plan to install it. Entryways need a hard, abrasion-resistant, moisture-proof tile. Baths require a moisture-proof, nonslip material (slip-resistant tile is treated with an abrasive material for safety). Some tile is rated for indoor or outdoor use only; others can be used in either application. If your home includes ramps for universal design and you plan on tiling a ramp to keep the flooring consistent with the rest of your home, explore slip-resistant tile.

Some tile is harder than others, and it's rated by a series of standardized tests. These tests evaluate a tile's relative hardness (the Mohs scale), its ability to stand up to wear and the percentage of water absorbed.

The Porcelain Enamel Institute hardness ratings are:

Class I: No foot traffic. This tile is for wall-only applications.

Class II: Light traffic. Interior residential and commercial wall applications. This is for areas where little abrasion occurs such as bathrooms.

Class III: Light to moderate traffic. Use this in residential settings with normal foot traffic. They're also ideal for countertops and walls.

Class IV: Moderate to heavy traffic. This tile is acceptable for all home use in addition to medium commercial or light institutional use.

Class V: Heavy to extra-heavy traffic. Approved tile for all residential applications, heavy commercial work and institutional foot traffic.

Porosity

Tile on a shower wall and shower floor.

Porosity ratings are important. Porosity is the ratio of voids — or air holes — to solids in a tile. This affects the percentage of water a tile absorbs. The denser the tile, the less water it absorbs because it has fewer air holes to fill with water.

A tile’s porosity is critical — especially when choosing tile for kitchens and baths, since these areas need moisture-proof tile. For example, travertine and slate are both porous surfaces, so you should think carefully about using them in a kitchen or bathroom because they could stain. If you do use them, you’ll need to ensure there’s a seal on the tile.

You shouldn’t use porous tile outdoors, where cold weather produces freeze/thaw cycles. The classifications for the porosity of tile are impervious (least absorbent), vitreous, semivitreous and nonvitreous (most absorbent).

Firing

Wood-look tile on a kitchen floor.

The firing process affects the hardness of tile. Usually, the longer and hotter the firing, the harder the tile will be. The raw tile material, called bisque, is either single fired or double fired.

For single-fired tile, the glaze is applied to the raw material and baked once in a kiln.

Double-fired tile is thicker. The tile is baked a second time after additional color or decoration are added.

Tile Installation and Costs

A man installing white floor tile.

Here are some factors to consider when it comes to tile installation and how much it can cost.

Tile Type

Some tile types can be more expensive to install than others. For example, marble usually costs more to install than ceramic.

Size of the Project

Contractors usually quote based on square footage. For example, a 10-foot-by-10-foot bathroom floor is 100 square feet. If a contractor charges $15 per square foot, a 100-square-foot room would cost $1,500 in installation costs.

Installation Time

The size of the tile can also affect the installation costs. Installing smaller tile, like subway tile, requires more time than larger 12-inch-by-12-inch or 16-inch-by-24-inch pieces.

Custom Considerations

If you’re mixing tile types or require special cuts, that can also affect time and overall cost. For example, if a contractor is cutting large pieces into a herringbone pattern, those special cuts would be custom and can affect pricing.

Other Factors

Always purchase an additional 10% of your tile to account for breakage.

Get multiple quotes from contractors when searching for an installer.

Recognize that labor costs can vary depending on geographic location.