

Bamboo: The Greener Grass

By Jack Price, This Old House television

Botanically, bamboo is not a wood at all, but rather a grass. Unlike the lawn variety, bamboo is strong, hard and dimensionally stable making it a perfect candidate for flooring. And, because it matures in three years, regenerates without need for replanting and requires minimal fertilization or pesticides, it's also a green building material. After exploring traditional flooring options, the homeowners of *This Old House* TV's Charlestown project took all these factors into account and chose bamboo flooring for the the rental unit's kitchen and the house's main staircase and entryway.

Most commercially available bamboo flooring is harvested from controlled bamboo forests in the Guangzhou Zhujiang province on mainland China, commonly called "The Bamboo Sea." Already used extensively throughout Asia, bamboo flooring is a competitive alternative to rainforest hardwoods. In modern Asian cities, it's not uncommon to see a large concrete building being constructed over bamboo scaffolding.

To make it, hollow, round shoots are sliced into strips and boiled to remove the starch. Then the strips are dried and boiled in a solution of water and boric acid to remove sugars (a termite attractant) and to inhibit fungus and mold growth. The bamboo is then laminated into solid boards, which are milled into standard strip floorboards with tongue and groove on all four sides, so no special installation techniques are required. The flooring comes in two colors: natural blonde and carbonized, an amber color achieved by pressure cooking the bamboo. Because this is not a surface stain, the flooring retains its color even after sanding.

Bamboo flooring installs like standard hardwood. However the strips are not nailable with a standard flooring nailer, so use a pneumatic finish nailer instead. If your flooring is not pre-finished, apply a water-based urethane after sanding. The floor will be extremely durable—about as hard as oak or maple—and because bamboo is so dense refinishing will not be required as often. Finished bamboo floors have a rich texture with thin strips of varying color interrupted by the bamboo nodes.

There are only a few bamboo flooring suppliers in North America, but several companies import it. Prices for bamboo flooring are competitive with domestic hardwoods. But the grass is equally durable, attractive and—as they say—greener, to boot.



This Old House TV's Charlestown house project.