

Getting Stoned with Countertops

by Delia Montgomery

No doubt about it, stone is highly favored in the earth-friendly construction market. It's not only natural; stone is nearly indestructible and absolutely beautiful. Multi-functional stone can be utilized in home exterior, interior and garden.

As a kitchen, bath or anywhere countertop, stone is an excellent choice. In fact, stone countertop manufacturing is one of the fastest growing segments of the housing industry. So if you're in the market, here are some tips about using stone as a countertop.

Start with domestic sources to shop for stone counter options. Unless, of course, you want your countertop to look like an import from a foreign land. You may be tempted when you find pink imported marble cheaper than domestic limestone, which you could probably dig from your own back yard. Kidding aside, my suggestions are based on the most environmental and convenient materials for those who prefer sustainable lifestyles in natural homes.

Especially if you're after a flawless look, pay attention to the stone's silica content. A high quantity means acid stain resistance from common culprits like wine or lemon juice. Good materials are granite, quartzite, schist, slate, soapstone and volcanic stone. Still very popular, but acid sensitive stones, are limestone and marble. Great for those who prefer the character of innocent stains; like fond reminders of parties or incidents. Expect some stones to become more customized by their tenants than others.

Granite is a best seller for good reasons. It has low porosity that resists stains. Quartz-based granites are hard enough to endure lifetimes of knife-chopping, dish-dropping, and hot pots without looking their age. Blocks are sliced into slabs with several final processing options such as polishing, honing or distressing. Granite is heavy, but the weight is supported by standard kitchen cabinets. Black granite is typically found in Africa, while white and gray granite is quarried in the United States and Canada. Pink stone is found in India and Saudi Arabia, blue in Brazil and Russia, and green granite in Brazil, Guatemala and Italy.

Slate is a fine-grained stone that's acid and water resistant due to its mica content. Like marble, slate can scratch and stain, but it's relatively immune to heat. It's tough and right at home near the kitchen sink. It can be processed to shine like a mirror and doesn't require a sealer. Colors are beautiful in green, purple, gray and black.

Soapstone is gaining popularity, probably because it is impervious to chemicals and temperature changes. Think science lab. Scratches are easily sanded out. It can be sealed to prevent stains, but that's entirely optional. An alternative is to apply mineral oil during the first year. Results are a rich, soft black and there's no maintenance after that.



Soapstone Countertop

Concrete countertops really don't look like sidewalks. Actually, they are favored by artists. Craftsmen in other parts of the world started the fashion long ago. It is the perfect recycling medium for materials like glass, metal or wood. Like art, no two concrete countertops are alike.

There are endless ways to customize a concrete countertop that should last a lifetime. The durability, however, depends on how the concrete mixture is prepared, so you want experienced help. And be warned for hairline cracking. Although it does depend on the method of construction, conditions during the cure, and finishing techniques. Most homeowners believe a few cracks give a rustic appearance, adding character. It's good to know, however, that steel rebar and wire mesh can hold the structural integrity of the slabs and that prevents some of the cracking.

Don't rush anyone, including yourself. It takes 3 to 4 weeks to set a 20-pound per square foot slab for installation. Any professional who knows how to install marble or granite can do concrete slabs as well.

Designers and architects favor concrete for the warmth it adds to modern or traditional environments. A simple and practical feature is developed when the countertop is constructed around an under-mount sink. Crumbs can be swept directly into the basin rather than over a rim. Fashion appeal, natural and practical; what a match!



Concrete Countertop

Counter Stone Facts

Stone countertops usually have one of two finishes: polished finishes are slick, shiny, and usually darken the color of the stone; honed surfaces tend to have a soft matte finish and a more natural, low-tech look.

The first step in treating most stains on stone countertops is to apply a *poultice*. Make a paste of flour or cornstarch and a 3% hydrogen peroxide solution. Spread it on the stain, cover it with plastic wrap, and let it sit for a few hours; then wash it off.

Keep using trivets and cutting boards. Character marks will still happen.



Recycled Fly Ash and Concrete Tiles

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