



Eco-Friendly Kitchen

Retrofitting an Older Home



by Julie A. McDonnell

When updating an older home and looking to the kitchen, you can easily make your remodel eco-friendly without buying everything new. If you do decide to make purchases, you will be surprised at the variety of earth-friendly materials that are available at prices comparable to traditional products. Within each area to be retrofitted: flooring, cabinetry, countertops, walls, windows, lighting, and appliances, you can make green choices and still have the kitchen of your dreams.

Cabinets and Countertops

Keeping the cabinets you have is the most environmentally friendly option. Resurfacing, replacing doors and drawer fronts, adding new (or reused) hardware, or painting are viable options in many cases and less expensive than getting all new cabinets.

If you do decide to go with all new cabinetry, it is still possible to make your cabinets more eco-friendly. Custom-cabinet makers can utilize salvaged or certified wood. If particle board boxes are used, make sure they are formaldehyde-free.

Countertops go a long way to making the kitchen look new again. There are a variety of eco-friendly countertop options available: recycled glass in concrete (IceStone), which is strong like granite and heat resistant like stone. PaperStone is made of compressed recycled paper and bound together with a cashew-based (non-petroleum) resin. There are tiles made of recycled aluminum and even natural linoleum countertops which become more durable over time as the linseed oil (in the linoleum) oxidizes.

Paint

Most paints and stains contain toxic chemicals linked to respiratory ailments and ozone layer destruction, so buyers should look for low- or zero-solvent options. Go beyond and ask the Minnesota Department of Health questions about air toxins and other ingredients of concern in paint.

Flooring

Many older homes have beautiful hardwood flooring which has been covered up by vinyl or linoleum. It is worth a try to pull up that old flooring and find out if the floors underneath are indeed high quality (after sanding and refinishing, of course).

Flooring, including sheet vinyl, vinyl or asphalt floor tiles, and any associated paper-like backing, mastic, adhesive or glue, may contain asbestos. In the past, asbestos fibers were added during the production of flooring materials to strengthen the flooring and to increase its durability. Options for dealing with asbestos floors include covering it up with new floor or removal. Using a licensed asbestos contractor is recommended if it is to be removed.

If the existing floor is not going to suit your needs, durable and long-lasting flooring such as solid cork, natural linoleum, or certified wood are environmentally conscious options. Installing products that last decades is green; they won't have to be dealt with as waste any time soon.

If you're planning to knock down walls or replace old windows, opt for daylighting the area as much as possible. Natural light makes everyone feel good, especially in the northern climate with little sunshine during the long winter months. There are many choices of high efficiency windows available on the market today.

Final Touches

Super energy efficient appliances and lights, and water saving fixtures further add to the eco-friendliness of the space. Use of salvaged or recycled items and donation of any of your old items after remodeling are other actions to lessen the impact to the earth.

The addition of plants to add green and help cleanse indoor air, planting a vegetable and herb garden outside the back door, recycling, composting, elimination of anti-bacterial soap, use of cloth napkins and rags (rather than paper towels), buying organic and locally-grown food, use of cloth grocery bags, and drinking tap water (even if you filter it) are all things that we can do in our own kitchens to benefit the planet.

Julie McDonnell is the owner of ECO (a supplier of environmentally friendly materials), a green consultant, a member of the City of Duluth Environmental Advisory Council, and a proud supporter of Sustainable Twin Ports.

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