

COUNTERTOPS

HIGH DESIGN AT LOWER PRICES

Falling prices for granite and other tony materials mean that you can now get a custom-look countertop for about what you'd pay for solid surfacing like Corian. You'll also see new products as high-end options hit the mainstream.

Retailers such as Home Depot and Lowe's now offer granite and resin-based engineered stone for as little as \$50 per square foot. Indeed, last year as prices dropped, granite sales climbed 12 percent and engineered stone, 25 percent. But even these luxury materials may not be distinctive enough for some design-conscious homeowners. Concrete, which is made to order, is one way to get a custom look. Another trend, stainless steel, appeals to homeowners who want to integrate their counters with pro-style appliances.

How do these latest two countertop options compare with more familiar materials? We subjected them, along with six traditional leading materials, to heat,



CURVES Among the latest countertop options, concrete can be shaped and tinted to your specifications.

spills, impacts, and further kitchen abuse. Here are the details.

Stainless steel: tough to a point. Common spills like mustard and ketchup were easily removed with plain water. Our stainless-steel surface also resisted the

burns and marks that a hot pot inflicted on some other materials. But scratches stood out after a few knife strokes, as did dents from dropped objects. Drain cleaners and hard-water-deposit removers can discolor it. And like stainless-steel appliances, stainless counters show fingerprints.

Concrete counters: fancy but fragile. Concrete cuts and chips easily. Other performance varies depending on the sealer. Topical sealers, which form a film on the surface, made our counter nearly stainproof. But a hot pot can damage it. The reverse held for penetrating sealers; one sample was etched by mustard and ketchup.

HOW TO CHOOSE

See First Things First, below, to match the look you want with how you'll use the counter. Then follow these tips:

Start with the sink. Most counters work with most sinks. But if you want an undermount sink, you'll need a waterproof

material like solid surfacing, engineered stone, granite, or concrete. If you want a seamless sink made from the same material as the counter, you're limited to solid surfacing, stainless steel, and concrete.

Think about seams. The counter you choose could depend on whether you can live with visible joins. With solid surfacing, pieces are fused to get rid of seams. Stainless seams can be welded, ground, and buffed away. But think twice about other materials if seams are an issue.

Laminates typically require seams on the front edge and between the backsplash and counter. Post forming melds the backsplash, counter, and front edge into one laminate-wrapped unit, avoiding seams. But this option offers fewer color choices.

Use edges with discretion. Custom edges like bullnoses, ogees, and bevels can give low-priced counters added flair. But edges can cost up to \$50 per linear foot—a concern if your budget is tight.

Consider the finish. Granite and engineered stone are sold polished or honed. Stainless offers brushed and random-grain finishes. Matte or textured finishes are better at hiding scratches, but if fingerprints are an issue, choose faux-stainless laminate over the real stuff.

Combine more than one type. Using two or more materials can trim costs while adding functionality and variety.



DOING IT RIGHT INSTALLATION TIPS

In our latest Annual Questionnaire, roughly one in eight readers who recently remodeled a kitchen reported at least one problem with a new counter. Their gripes included subpar workmanship. Here are some ways to ensure a quality job:

Install the base cabinets first. Then measure for the countertop. With base cabinets in place, specs for the countertop that goes over them can be as precise as possible.

Have the fabricator do all measuring and make any templates. That includes all cutouts for sinks and cooktops. Doing so makes any errors the pro's responsibility.

Check references and past work. This is especially important with concrete fabricators, since they usually create counters from scratch. Get references from a year or two earlier so you can ask the homeowners how their countertops have held up.

Sealing is critical for stone, concrete, grout, and wood. All these materials require stain protection. For concrete, choose a topical or penetrating sealer based on use.

CR Quick Recommendations

Countertops are one product where beauty and practicality can coexist. Our top-performing materials are engineered stone and granite, though granite needs regular sealing. If you want to spend less, you'll find laminate both economical and versatile. Our gauntlet of spills, searing pots, knives, and dropped weights also shows that most of these materials are far from perfect.

While all countertops are priced by the square foot, what you pay can vary widely among and within materials. You'll also find many different brands and models for engineered stone, laminate, and solid surfacing,

though we found no significant performance differences among them—the reason we score only the materials, not the brands.

Our **Ratings**, below, rank countertop materials by overall score and put the most emphasis on resistance to stains, heat, and cuts, since those are the prime hazards in many kitchens.

See First Things First, on the facing page, for an overview of which countertops work best for different needs. Then check the test results below to see which material has the specific strengths you want for the new kitchen you're planning.

Ratings countertops

Excellent Very good Good Fair Poor

In performance order.

Material	Price (per sq. ft.)	Overall score	Test results				
			Stains	Heat	Cutting	Abrasion	Impact
Engineered stone	\$50-85	85	●	●	●	●	○
Granite	50-100	80	○	●	●	●	●
Ceramic tile	10-80	75	○	●	○	○	○
Stainless steel	120-160	70	●	●	○	○	○
Laminate	15-28	65	○	○	○	○	○
Solid surfacing	40-85	60	○	○	○	○	○
Concrete	80-120	55	○	○	○	○	○
Wood (butcher block)	36-60	50	○	○	○	○	○

Guide to the Ratings

Overall score summarizes performance in all tests. **Stains** denotes resistance to 20 common household products. **Heat** gauges how well materials resisted damage and discoloration from a 400° F pot filled with oil. **Cutting** reflects resistance to damage from a weighted chef's knife using slicing and chopping motions. **Abrasion** is resistance to damage from a weighted sanding block. **Impact** denotes the ability to withstand blunt and pointed weights dropped from up to 2 feet. **Price** is the typical range per square foot, installed.

First things first Match the countertop material to the way you'll use it.

Even the most robust countertop has an Achilles' heel or two. Many can handle some mishaps far better than others. And a few are

mostly for show. Here's a snapshot of eight leading materials, listed from toughest to wimpiest overall, based on our extensive testing:



ENGINEERED STONE

Best for most kitchens. More choice than granite. Needn't be sealed.

But its uniform look isn't for everyone. Edges can chip.

Examples Cambria, Silestone, Zodiaq.

Price \$50 to \$85 per sq. ft., installed.



GRANITE

Best for toughness with the appeal of real stone.

But it must be sealed periodically. Color and grain may not match store samples.

Examples sold at local fabricators.

Price \$50 to \$100 per sq. ft., installed.



CERAMIC TILE

Best for use near stoves and sinks. Lots of colors. Easy to install.

But it chips easily under impact. Grout may stain, though tinted grout helps.

Examples American Olean, Dal-Tile.

Price \$10 to \$80 per sq. ft., installed.



STAINLESS STEEL

Best for a pro look. Heat and stain resistance are a plus.

But it dents and scratches easily. Shows fingerprints.

Examples John Boos, Elkay, local fabricators.

Price \$120 to \$160 per sq. ft., installed.



LAMINATE

Best for good low-priced performance. Mimics high-end counter materials.

But it's easily cut and abraded. Non-repairable. Most show seams.

Examples Formica, Nevamar, Wilsonart.

Price \$15 to \$28 per sq. ft., installed.



SOLID SURFACING

Best for versatility. Lots of colors. No seams. Easy repairs for small nicks.

But it cuts and abrades easily. Cost can equal granite.

Examples Corian, Gibraltar, Staron.

Price \$40 to \$85 per sq. ft., installed.



CONCRETE

Best for exclusivity. It can be tinted any color and can include marble chips.

But it's pricey and damage-prone. It's custom-formed, so quality can vary.

Examples Cheng Design, fabricators.

Price \$80 to \$120 per sq. ft., installed.



WOOD

Best for counters dedicated to food preparation. Easy to install and repair.

But it cuts, scrapes, and dings easily, requiring frequent refinishing.

Examples John Boos, local fabricators.

Price \$36 to \$60 per sq. ft., installed.