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This Bethesda kitchen by Anthony Wilder Design/Build features Silestone countertops. Their light, speckled color provides a contrast with the island's red base.

designed to look like natural stone—without the maintenance worries.

Quartz-composite options such as Silestone, Caesarstone, and Cambria are particularly popular.

Because quartz is one of the hardest materials it's largely indestructible. It doesn't dull, and there's not as much worry about chipping or etching. But a hot pot on it might discolor it. You can still do an undermount sink, popular in kitchens featuring natural stone, and add detailed edging just as you would with granite or limestone.

Still, it can be hard to convince some people to go with engineered stone. There isn't any natural veining, the colors don't feel as authentic, and some think the stone looks processed.

Beyond Granite

What's popular in countertops—from “green” options such as recycled glass to durable engineered stone

By Brooke Lea Foster

If you've walked into a kitchen renovated in the past decade, chances are the countertops were shiny granite. But granite's popularity may be waning.

Homeowners are increasingly drawn to a more organic look.

Designers say most of their clients are selecting countertops that fall into one of three categories: natural stone, engineered stone, and “green” options. Here's a guide to what's new and gaining popularity.

Natural Stone

Homeowners drawn to natural-stone countertops like the one-of-a-kind look. No two stone slabs have the same colors or veins running through them. And as the stone gets older, it can take on small cracks and chips that give it character and make it feel even more authentic. While granite is a type of natural stone, designers say homeowners are becoming more interested in alternatives.

Because of its clean, classic look, white Carrara marble is popular for traditional kitchens.

Still, marble can be risky. “If you don't take care of white marble, it stains over time,” says Leslie Roosevelt, an interior designer with Gilday Renovations in Silver Spring. And because it's white, coffee-cup rings and red-wine spills show up more than they do on darker stones. Oil spots and minor scratches can also be a problem.

Many natural-stone counters are vulnerable to staining, and all require upkeep.

Limestone, while offering a rustic look, isn't impervious to wear. A limestone countertop overhang could crack off. Soapstone, a dark stone that looks like chalkboard (it's the material used on high-school science-lab tables) is particularly beautiful—and particularly weak.

Engineered Stone

One of the more interesting developments in countertops is the increasing sophistication of engineered stone, a manmade composite of natural stone and other materials such as concrete and resin. The counters are

“Green” Countertops

As eco-friendly living has become a priority for more homeowners, interest in countertops made from recycled materials has grown.

Concrete is popular, especially in modern kitchens. Because concrete countertops are handmade by artisans, some people think of them as sculptural pieces. You can dye a concrete countertop to look like natural stone, or you can inset items in it, making it a good choice for those who want a more custom look. Some mix in flecks of glass or unusual objects such as seashells.

There are downsides. If concrete counters are not 100 percent level, they can crack. Installation can also be expensive; the installer needs to build a form, which requires expert carpentry, before pouring, finishing, and curing the concrete.

Concrete is also not immune from staining and everyday wear and tear. Although it's sealed to prevent food or stains from seeping in, the countertop will likely develop small cracks or fissures with time.

Another green choice is glass. While designers are big advocates of glass-tile backsplashes, they're torn when it comes to glass countertops. They provide an unexpected brightness. But glass isn't for everyone.

The disadvantage? They scratch. Plus, glass countertops show everything—dust, cooking grease, crumbs.

If you have your heart set on glass, add a glass counter to a breakfast bar or a kitchen island, just don't make it the bulk of the countertop.

Products such as IceStone, Vetrazzo, and EnviroGlas may be good alternatives to glass panels. All three mix recycled glass with cement, concrete, or resin. EnviroGlas

and Vetrazzo actually uses glass chips from discarded bottles and windows to create a stone-like counter in a variety of colors.

Among the newest green options are recycled-paper countertops such as PaperStone or Richlite. Made to look like concrete or stone, these are made of recycled cardboard and polymers. But for many designers, the jury is still out.

Shannon Kadwell of Anthony Wilder Design/Build in Cabin John says clients get

excited about recycled-paper countertops—until they hear the price. They can be even more expensive than natural stone.

Regardless of budget, keep in mind that a countertop should tie a kitchen together, not define it. Be sure to choose textures and tones that take a back seat to your cabinetry and appliances, and pick a countertop material that's as functional as it is stylish.

And if you still love glossy granite, go for it. Granite is here to stay.

Making It Special

A backsplash adds personality to a kitchen. Here are tips on choosing the right tile.

By Brooke Lea Foster

When it comes to designing a kitchen, a backsplash is one area where you can have some design fun. While the cabinets tend to be a practical choice and the countertops a question of utility, a backsplash finishes off a kitchen's look.

"A backsplash is the black dress," says Shannon Kadwell, an interior designer with Anthony Wilder Design/Build in Cabin John. "It should be something you notice when you walk in the room, but it should be able to fit every occasion—and your personality."

Practical Considerations

With lots of tiles and backsplash options, consider which material will fit your needs.

Ceramic and porcelain tiles are impervious to stains, so you don't have to worry about a pot of spaghetti sauce boiling over. Glass tiles also are a safe choice because upkeep is easy—a quick wipe with a sponge and these tiles should look new.

Natural-stone backsplashes, while beautiful, are riskier. Many are porous. They chip. And they're hard to clean. Honed natural stones such as limestone, slate, or marble can spot with grease. Natural-stone backsplashes should be resealed at least once a year.

If you're a passionate home cook, steer clear of tiles with a lot of texture, such as stacked or rough tiles. Grease can find nooks and crannies, and it could take hours to clean.

What's in Style?

Subway tiles—replicas of the classic rectangular white ceramic tiles used in the New York City subway—are still popular.

Homeowners with more contemporary taste might position the tiles vertically rather than horizontally or run smaller vertical subway tiles above the cooktop and cover the rest of the kitchen walls in horizontal classic-size tile.

Stacked tiles, a three-dimensional installation that positions tiles of different depths throughout the backsplash, are becoming more popular despite how hard they can be to clean.

Several designers report that clients are increasingly drawn to glass backsplashes, particularly painted glass. A large piece of glass is sized to your kitchen backsplash, holes are cut out for electrical switches and outlets, and the back of the glass is painted any color you choose.

Backsplashes are also getting bigger. Rather than just tiling from the counter to the cabinet, many homeowners are choosing to go all the way up to the ceiling, which can make cabinetry look as if it's hanging on a tiled or existing stone wall. "It gives the room more height and space," says Kadwell.

Best Tile for My Kitchen?

If your kitchen is small, you might consider a magnetic backsplash, such as corrugated sheet metal or metal tiles.

Mirrored backsplashes, which are gaining in popularity and lend a kitchen a bit of glamour, reflect light around a dark kitchen and make the space feel bigger.

Any tile made from glass tends to feel lighter and brighter, says Kadwell, and can help reflect light around a dark room.

Homeowners with a big kitchen might consider a more basic tile—a colorful mosaic

style could feel busy in a large kitchen. Simple tilework also works best in a kitchen with a lot of windows, where complicated tiles can seem disjointed.

While hundreds of colorful tiles are readily available, many designers shy away from too much color in the backsplash.

How Much Will It Cost?

A backsplash is as expensive as you make it. Tiles can run from as low as \$2 a square foot for a basic ceramic tile to \$100 a square foot for natural stone or hand-glazed.

One way to save money is to mix different types. Maybe you're doing most of your kitchen in an affordable, simple tile—consider investing in several glazed tiles to insert in a random or intentional pattern through the backsplash. Some homeowners splurge on the tile over the cooktop, because it's often a focal point, and spend less on the rest of the walls.

When figuring out how much to allot for your backsplash, think about this: A skillful designer can make less expensive materials look like the highest quality.



anthony wilder design/build, inc.

301.907.0100 | anthonywilder.com