

Consumer[®] Reports

Kitchen, Bath, and Laundry: 8 Ways to Save

Whether you're remodeling your entire kitchen and bath or simply replacing an appliance or fixture, you'll find a raft of sweetheart deals as retailers, manufacturers, and even contractors offer more for less in a tough market.

Tougher energy rules also help you take a bite out of rising utility bills as washers, toilets, and other home fixtures get more frugal. What's more, the best we tested often did far better than models that cost hundreds and even thousands more.

This year, the Consumer Reports National Research Center also asked 8,000 readers nationwide what worked—and what didn't—when they remodeled their kitchens. While most readers were highly satisfied, nearly half had some regrets about the pros or products they chose. Here's how to save money and aggravation before you shop:

Check up on pros. Simply asking friends and neighbors for referrals isn't enough. Some 41 percent of readers who hired a contractor reported a problem with their project, including shoddy installation (13 percent), late starts (13.5 percent), sloppy workers (11 percent), and poor coordination (12 percent). Ask past customers about work quality and promptness before hiring. Only 38 percent of readers took the time to

look at past jobs, and just 21 percent checked with groups such as the Better Business Bureau.

Don't go with the lowest bid. Readers who did had to spend more after the job was completed to bring the work up to snuff.

Say no to pro appliances. Our latest tests again show that faux pro-style ranges perform well and include plenty of stainless steel for a fraction of the \$4,000- plus you'll spend on brands such as Viking and Wolf. And when we asked online subscribers who own a pro-style range about their experiences, nearly half reported repairs, which tended to be expensive.

Skip built-in refrigerators, which are big on price and small on space. If you like the look, buy a cabinet-depth model for thousands less.

Save green with green. Some 84 percent of readers who answered our survey opted for energy-efficient appliances, 43 percent picked water-frugal appliances, and 38 percent used fluorescent lights. Our latest tests also found several low-priced, top-loading washers that meet

the new U.S. Department of Energy rules requiring 21 percent less energy use while cleaning clothes capably. And an increasing number of toilets now meet the new California standard, using just 1.3 gallons per flush instead of the usual 1.6 gallons.

Choose a more efficient design: A top-or bottom-freezer fridge is more efficient than a side-by-side, which is among the least-efficient designs.

Choose quartz or laminate for value. Quartz countertops performed comparably to granite in our battery of kitchen-abuse tests. Yet at about \$50 to \$100 per square foot, it can cost half as much and never needs sealing. Laminate offers an array of color and patterns, held up nearly as well, and costs just \$10 to \$30 for the same countertop.

Skip the exotic stuff. Butcher block, concrete, marble, limestone, and—newest of all—paper composite all proved relatively fragile in our everyday wear-and-tear regimen.

COUNTERTOPS

Whether your kitchen is a workplace, a showplace, or both, our latest tests show that you needn't spend top dollar for a countertop that's strong and stylish.

Besides the usual granite and solid surface, you'll find better-looking quartz and low-priced laminate, as expanded choices and realism boost sales. You'll also find paper and other renewable materials, as brands push greener choices. But our tests suggest you're likely to prefer less-oteric options for everyday wear.

WHAT'S AVAILABLE

Here are the most popular countertop choices from top to bottom, based on how well they withstood stains, heat, cuts, abrasion, and impacts:

Quartz (engineered stone). A blend of stone chips, resins, and pigments, today's quartz imitates granite and marble more realistically and is priced similarly. While it won't resist impacts as well as granite, it fends off stains far better without needing to be sealed. Price: \$50 to \$100 per square foot, installed.

Natural stone. Granite and marble, which offer an array of colors and stand up well to heat are most popular. But marble falls far behind for cuts, scrapes, and impact resistance. Both materials need regular resealing for stain resistance. And what you see at the store may not be what you get on the truck (we suggest shopping at a stone yard). Limestone, slate, soapstone, and sandstone are softer than granite and far more fragile. Like all stone, they're expensive partly because they're heavy and hard to install. Price: \$45 to \$200 per square foot, installed.

Ceramic tile. You get almost limitless colors and patterns, and good heat and cut resistance. It's inexpensive, relatively easy to install and repair, and mixes well with other materials. It also works well on a backsplash or island top, or set into the counter near the range as a built-in trivet. Grout can be tinted to match or contrast, but joints tend to trap crumbs and soak up stains. Little impact resistance is another sore point. Price: \$10 to \$30 per square foot, installed.

Laminate. Sold under the Formica and Wilsonart names, among others, laminate is light, low-priced, easy to install, and comes in hundreds of colors and patterns. Most have a colored top layer over a dark

core, which shows at the edges, but options include prefabricated, seamless versions—called postformed—for countertops and backsplashes. Stain, heat, and impact resistance are other strong points, though solid colors and shiny finishes readily show scratches and nicks. Damaged areas can't be repaired. And water can seep through seams or between the countertop and backsplash, weakening the material beneath or causing lifting. Price: \$10 to \$30 per square foot, installed.

Solid surfacing. Made of polyester or acrylic resins combined with mineral fillers, these countertops imitate concrete, marble, quartz, and other types of stone—

Shop smart

Choose your countertop by matching the look you want with your countertop needs and, of course, your budget.

essentially an imitation of an imitation. They also come in various thicknesses and can be joined almost invisibly into one apparently seamless expanse, sculpted to integrate the sink and backsplash, and routed to accept contrasting inlays. Major brands include Avonite, DuPont Corian, Formica Surell, Nevamar Fountainhead, and Wilsonart Gibraltar. Heat and impact resistance are other pluses, as is the capacity to accept buffing out and repair of scratches and nicks. But prolonged heat can cause discoloration. Tougher, more authentic-looking quartz costs about the same. Price: \$35 to \$100 per square foot, installed.

Paper composite. We tested a version from Richlite, which says its paper-and-resin countertops are green in part because the paper comes from renewable resources. While the Richlite did well at resisting stains and heat, it was only

fair when it came to cuts and abrasions. What's more, it doesn't use recycled paper, and its resin is petroleum-based and nonrenewable. Price: \$50 to \$100 per square foot, installed.

Concrete. This exclusive material can be tinted any color and include stone chips. But quality can vary, since concrete countertops are typically custom-formed by local fabricators. Concrete also cuts and chips easily and must be sealed. Topical sealers resist stains, but were damaged by hot pots in our tests; the reverse held for penetrating sealers. Price: about \$80 to \$120 per square foot, installed.

Stainless steel. This option lets you integrate counters with stainless appliances. Major brands include John Boos and Elkay as well as local fabricators. Heat and stain resistance are a plus. But stainless tends to dent and scratch easily while showing fingerprints. Price: \$100 to \$150 per square foot, installed.

Butcher block. Maple is most common for these hardwood countertops, though you'll also find red oak and teak. They're useful for chopping and slicing, and relatively easy to install and repair, though damage from heat, cuts, scrapes, and impacts make for high maintenance. Butcher block must be treated regularly with mineral oil or beeswax, or sealed with a varnish used for food-prep surfaces. And because fluctuations in humidity affect wood, it's a poor choice for over a dishwasher or near a sink. Price: \$30 to \$65 per square foot, installed.

HOW TO CHOOSE

Begin by matching the look you want with your countertop needs and budget. Then follow these tips:

Start with the sink. Waterproof materials, such as stone, quartz, solid surfacing,

stainless steel, and concrete, are essential for undermount sinks. Except for quartz and stone, each of those materials can be used for the sink and the counter to achieve a seamless look.

Think big. Tiny samples make it hard to visualize how the finished counter will look. Check counter-company Web sites for brochures that help you match counters to cabinets. For stone, buy from a stone yard, since the color, veining, and pattern can vary significantly between and even within slabs.

Pick the right finish. Laminates with textured finishes hide imperfections better than those with flat finishes in our tests. And granite with proprietary sealers, such as those sold by Stonemark, performed no better than standard granite. Stainless offers brushed and random-grain finishes, which tend to hide scratches, but if fingerprints are an issue, consider fake-stainless laminate instead. While varnished butcher block was extremely stain-resistant, it was unimpressive at fending off other damage; an oil finish was better at resisting heat in our tests, but stains spread and were impossible to remove.

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