



How To Buy Tile and Live Happily Ever After

By Bob Hendren

Buying tile should be a good experience. There is an endless selection of colors and styles, it has become more affordable over the last 30 years and tile can be the longest lasting, easiest to maintain surface in your home or business. Here are a few easy tips.

1. What's important to you? Do you want your area to be a visual knockout, impervious to wear, easy to clean, inexpensive... or all of the above? Start with what's most important and put the other attributes in descending order. Almost all floor tile today is durable. Even the lowest quality floor tiles will usually hold up longer than anyone wants to look at them. Some of the most expensive tiles are strictly decorative and just made for walls that aren't subject to abuse: It's important to use these tiles only in areas that don't need the durability and ease of maintenance that standard grades of tile offer. The more common differences are appearance, ease of cleaning, slip resistance and the availability of multiple sizes, matching or coordinating trim. Most highly slip resistant tiles would be hard to clean in a kitchen but could be easily hosed off on a patio. If the tiles are to be used outdoors, stay with porcelain tiles to avoid damage from freeze-thaw cycles. Tiles with under 3% water absorption are often labeled as frost resistant, but porcelain tiles have less than .5% absorption and are the only sure bet for winters in the Northwest. Although appearance might not be judged as crucial to some people, tile can hold up forever and it's not easy to replace. It's much cheaper in the long run to pick a tile you will enjoy for as long as you are in the house than to save a few dollars on something you will want to replace in a few years. The long life cycle and chemical-free maintenance of tile also make it a great choice from an ecological standpoint, so keep looking until you find a tile you really like.

2. Don't just shop for tile; shop for a good source that will give you honest advice and good service. Ask people you know who have had work done how happy they were and find a dependable dealer or designer with a history of good service. They should also be able to understand what your priorities are and be able to communicate effectively with you to help you find the best product. I learned years ago that no amount of research could get me to where I knew more about something than someone who had several years experience and excelled in their field. Unfortunately it can be difficult to sort out all of the claims and contradictions you get when you talk to several people. The first thing I look for today is history; if someone has a history of being competent and trustworthy, I give a lot more weight to their advice.

3. Don't buy from a chip. If you can see the tiles installed that's great, but at least ask to see pictures of what you are considering installed to get an idea what they really look like. Although it's always very important to see the tiles laid out in the area you are going to tile before starting installation, it's even more crucial if you have never seen an installation of the tile you select. Most tiles vary from piece to piece, some dramatically. The thing that makes a tile look great is how all of the tiles blend together. I've seen, and unfortunately bought tile, where one piece looked great but the finished installation was

I've seen, and unfortunately bought tile, where one piece looked great but the finished installation was not at all special. In contrast many of the great looking tiles I've seen looked pretty normal until you saw them installed. Seeing a piece of a tile, or even a whole tile can't give you a complete idea of what a room full of tiles will look like. Sometimes web sites show sections of the tile installed and help you get a feel for how it looks installed.

4. Pick a few products you like and take them home. Colors look different in different surroundings and in different light. A well lit showroom is helpful for evaluating different tiles, but the only light that matters is where that tile will be seen. Keep the samples for more than a day and look at them in daytime and at night because the colors will be different.

5. Don't let work begin until you see the actual shipment in your home and have a chance to lay out several pieces. No matter how carefully you have made your decision, there are still variables that you can't foresee. Tile and stone vary from run to run and many products are blends of color and pattern that have to be seen laid out to really see what they look like installed. Nothing matters at this point except what you like; it's you who will live with it. People often say it's inconvenient to pick everything up and take it back if you don't like what you see, but once it's installed there are no good options. It's a slow dirty job that is much more inconvenient to tear everything out and start over.

Professional Installation

Prices vary wildly for professional installation. As a material supplier, we have every incentive to sell expensive material. You might think we would recommend expensive tile and save money on the installation, but the truth is that if you have to meet a budget figure you'd be better off economizing on the tile than on the labor. No two installers do exactly the same job. A good tile setter can make plain tile look as good as it can look and it will be problem free for years. A poor tile setter can ruin the best tile in very little time and there is nothing that can be done to fix what they destroy. Some installations can look good but be poorly prepared and not hold up over time. In wet areas poor installations can allow moisture to pass to the framing and create serious damage before there are any visible signs of trouble. A good job with fuller and harder grout joints, smooth even edges and uniform height will usually be easier to maintain as well.

A good installation requires skill, good setting materials and time. Two skilled installers might bid quite differently on a job depending on the quality of materials they used and how much time and care they spent doing the work. While you can't evaluate an installer entirely by cost, someone doing precise work with good material will spend more time than someone rushing to get done in the least amount of time and the careful person will seldom be the low bidder. Oftentimes a good tile setter can also explain options for laying the tile that can improve the aesthetics of the job or be more practical for your particular installation.

Costs for setting materials also vary considerably. With setting material there usually is a clear cost/value relationship. Today's large format porcelain tiles are difficult to bond to and building design keeps looking for ways to scale back costs, which often lead to less rigid floors. Higher grade thinsets give much higher bond strengths and allow for more movement than base-grade products. Unfortunately we sell far more base-grade products than premium products because installers are trying to keep costs down and that's a shame. Grout has also had some exciting developments in recent years. The newer, more advanced grout is more expensive on a percentage basis from the earlier products, but the additional cost per square foot is minimal. If an extra fifty cents a square foot for an installation that is much more likely to last through the years, look better and be easier to maintain sounds worthwhile to you, ask the contractors bidding your job what specific materials they use. If they use nothing but the cheapest materials, quality is probably not their foremost concern. Installation is critical with tile and stone: In over thirty years I've never seen a homeowner who wished they had used a less expensive contractor.



My background: I got into the tile business almost by accident in the '70's. I owned a fireplace store and sold brick and stone installations as part of that business. I saw a great looking tile installation and decided that would go along well with what we did. As I started researching tile, I discovered that I loved the way it looked and after installing a couple of store displays, I found it was the easiest material to maintain that I had ever seen. I became a tile-only contractor in the '80s and then came to The Cronin Company in 1989 as the ceramic tile product manager. I still love tile and stone and continue to get excited as new technology continues to make tile better looking, more durable and more reasonably priced. I can't claim to be unbiased; I love tile, but I do know these simple tips would prevent nearly every problem I've ever seen

The Cronin Company

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