



U4 ★ TORONTO STAR ★ THURSDAY, MAY 7, 2009

HOME IMPROVEMENT

INTERIOR DESIGN

This green flooring is a real corker

Vesatile product is finding favour for its beauty, buoyancy and low conductivity

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TORONTO STAR

Al Persofsky had a lot of space to cover in his family's 4,500-square-foot, three-bedroom condo. So, he decided to install cork flooring in the open concept living room, dining room and hallway.

"We had carpeting installed in our bedroom sitting area about four years ago and already it's crap," says the retired teacher, who shares his home with wife Renah and teenage son Benjamin.

Persofsky found the website for the Cork House in Oakville, a retail outlet and showroom for Jelinek Cork, while researching flooring options three years ago. A visit there convinced his family about cork's unique properties, including its buoyancy and softness and the wide selection of products. They elected to have Jelinek Cork install glue-down cork tiles throughout the spacious condo in the Bloor St. W. and Avenue Rd. area, selecting a light brown cork in a pattern with random black tiles.

"It's beautiful. We've had so many compliments. Cork is so comfortable on the feet," says Persofsky.

Cork's popularity is growing, as more consumers are discovering the "green properties" of the renewable, recyclable resource.

It grows on the outer bark of the cork oak tree (*Quercus suber*), which flourishes in the Mediterranean region, with Portugal supplying 50 per cent of the world's market. Bark is stripped without damaging the tree and new cork grows in its place in about nine to 12 years, making it a renewable, recyclable resource. Cork can be harvested until the tree is about 200 years old.

Elyse Gelman's customers are al-



A dark walnut herringbone pattern, above, and a mosaic pattern are two popular cork flooring options at Interiors Only Inc. in Bloor West Village.

so amazed at the variety of cork flooring available at Interiors Only Inc. in Toronto's Bloor West Village. Her store — which carries other floor, wall and window products in addition to cork flooring — offers 60 to 80 colours and cork tile patterns from various suppliers from Portugal.

Consumers are looking for products that are eco-friendly, says Gelman.

"I've had customers come in whose parents had cork flooring for 35 years. It's 55 per cent air — nothing grows on cork, including moulds. We do a lot of bedrooms for people who have asthma. It's a very clean product," says Gelman, who has sold cork flooring for 25 of the 28 years she has owned and operated her store at 2316 Bloor St. W.

Cork flooring has been in use for about 100 years and was first popularized in North America by U.S. architect Frank Lloyd Wright, who used it in several buildings, including his famous Fallingwater house

in southwestern Pennsylvania, where it can still be seen. When versatile vinyl and linoleum flooring came on the scene, cork fell out of favour.

After hardwood became fashionable about 10 years ago, says Gelman, homeowners started exploring other options to carpeting and linoleum, including cork.

Gelman notes that glue-down cork tiles work well in bathrooms and kitchens — anywhere there is a lot of water in use, since cork is non-porous and liquids will "just sit" on top of the tiles.

Mothers of young children appreciate cork flooring in the kitchen, since its buoyancy cushions falls, instead of little ones landing on a hard surface.

"If you drop something it probably won't break if it's glass," she says.

Anyone who doubts cork's versatility will be struck by the myriad of uses for cork on display at the Cork House in Oakville. These include

THE TREE THAT KEEPS GIVING

- Cork bark can be "stripped" off, allowing new bark to grow in its place — every tree is a source of raw material.
- There is enough cork in the regulated Mediterranean cork forest to last for another 100 years without needing to plant another cork tree.
- Cork is 100 per cent reusable and recyclable.
- Use a light broom or a slightly damp mop to clean cork floors. Avoid harsh detergents. Frequent exposure to sunlight will fade cork, so use window coverings. Felt protectors on furniture feet will cushion impact.

Source: jelinek.com and corkflooringguide.com and corkflooring.biz.

— Janice Bradbeer

flooring over a vapour barrier in basements, due to ground moisture. Liquids on these floors won't sit on top, although glue-down tiles can be used in homes with in-floor heating.

"Once they hear the story of cork and all its amazing characteristics, they are blown away," says Fay Stallan, of customers who visit the Cork House. Stallan is vice-president of business development for the Jelinek Cork Group, which has its headquarters and factory in another part of Oakville.

Cork doesn't rot, has low conductivity and is resistant to wear.

"As cork is known to reduce sound transmission, it is a very popular choice for condos," says Stallan.

Law adds that cork wall and ceiling tiles are desirable for music rooms.

The company offers a range of shades from black to white. Tiles can be stained any colour and then protected with polyurethane or left natural with a polyurethane coat.

Although Jelinek Cork customized Persofsky's floors for his large condo, Law offers a comparison: the cost of floating tiles and installation to cover a 1,000-square-foot area, would run around \$9,000.

And lest consumers assume that cork is only for renovating the homes of the wealthy, cork flooring is comparably priced to wood tiles.

Law says prices for glue-down and floating tiles "can easily be compared to high-end hardwood, both in price and durability."

JCG's 12-inch-by-12-inch tiles start at \$3.35 unfinished and \$3.85 prefinished, while their floating floor tiles, all prefinished, start at about \$4.35 a square foot or \$13.05 for a three-square-foot tile.

Gelman says glue-down cork tiles in her store run from \$3 up to \$14 a square foot, while floating flooring is \$5 to \$10 a square foot. Installation is extra but many homeowners opt to do it themselves, since installation isn't difficult, she says.

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