

CHOOSING STONE TOPS FOR YOUR KITCHEN – EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW



Whether it is engineered or natural stone, stone tops are one of the most sought after finishes in the kitchen. But how do you choose from the vast array? What is the difference between natural and engineered stone? And what are the maintenance implications?

Granite is stone that originates from deep in the earth's molten mantle and is made up of minerals like quartz, feldspar and mica. This combination of minerals creates a very hard stone making it ideal for kitchen surfaces. The array of granite we have to choose from has increased tremendously over the years with stone coming from Africa, South America, Asia and Europe. Meaning we have a wider choice of colour and patternation than ever before.

Granite often has changes in colouration and patternation both within a slab and from one slab to another. It also has tiny pits in the surface of the material. This is due to the spaces between the various mineral crystals. These pits, although visible on a sample, are rarely visible on a larger run of the stone. Granite also has natural fissures which can look like cracks. These are not defects in the stone but are a result of the immense heat and pressure placed on the stone while it is being formed. None of these markings affect the function or durability of the stone. A good fabricator will lay out your job in such a way as to maximize the effect of the veining and pattern.

Granite is particularly suited for kitchen surfacing as it is not sensitive to etching by household acids or scratching from knives or pots (although cutting on the granite will not scratch the surface it will blunt your knives). It can also withstand fairly high temperatures; however, it is not advised to place hot objects directly onto the stone. All stone is porous to some degree. With granite the lighter the stone the higher the porosity. This means it can be vulnerable to staining. As such it must be sealed before use.

To maintain the stone over time it should be re-sealed every few years.

Granite should be cleaned with a mild detergent soap and water then dried with a cloth. Prolonged exposure to oils, acids and deeply coloured food or drink can cause a more stubborn stain. These should be cleaned with warm water and a small amount of non-abrasive household cleaner. The residue of the cleaner should then be washed off thoroughly. It is important to avoid exposure to drain cleaners, oven cleaners and paint strippers. These products contain Methylene Chloride and/or other high alkaline chemicals and even the briefest exposure can permanently damage your granite. If any product like this is spilt onto the stone it should be immediately cleaned with warm water and a mild detergent.

Marble is also a natural stone, one which starts out as sediment which is eventually compressed and solidifies into stone. It is a lot softer and more porous than granite and is particularly vulnerable to household acids like vinegar, mustard, tomato sauce and citrus. It also scratches more easily than granite. Because of this it is not the most hardwearing option for kitchen tops. It is, however, a fantastic addition to a kitchen as a pastry slab. Its cool smooth surface is ideal for rolling dough.

All marble surfaces must be sealed. They can be cleaned and maintained the same way as granite. If used in a bathroom a toiletry tray should be used to protect the stone from toiletries containing potentially harmful chemicals. The following cleaners should be avoided: acid based cleaners, bleach, ammonia, general-purpose cleaners, abrasive cleaners, and alkaline cleaners not specifically made for stone and scouring powders.

Engineered stone has become extremely popular as it offers better consistency in

colour and pattern than granite. It is a man-made product comprising of natural materials (crystal quartz, siliceous sands, and crushed granite), resin, pigments and accessory fractions such as coloured glass and mirror chips. It is manufactured in slab form by a process that heats and vibro-compacts the materials, pigments and resins together forming a uniform, impervious surface.

Much like granite engineered stone has a good resistance to scratching; however, you should avoid bringing sharp objects in contact with the stone. It is fairly heat resistant being able to withstand temperatures of up to 100°C. Exposure to heat can cause discolouration or thermal shock which can cause the stone to crack.

Unlike granite engineered stone does not need to be sealed to decrease the porosity. It is fairly resistant to most stains if they are cleaned off quickly but long exposure things like tea, coffee and red wine can cause staining. General cleaning is easy and can be done daily with warm water and a mild detergent. The tougher stains should be cleaned using a non-scratch Scotch-Brite pad (pink NOT green is recommended) and a non-abrasive cleaner. To remove adhered materials such as food, gum, nail polish or dried paint the excess material scraped off using a Stanley blade or plastic putty knife at a 45° angle. The mark or residual dirt should then be removed with a damp cloth. Products containing oils and powders can leave a residue on the stone. As with granite any cleaning products containing Methylene Chloride should be avoided.

Granite, marble and engineered stone are only available in slabs which must be purchased as a whole. It is vital you select a good fabricator to assist you with the selection, fabrication and fitting of your slabs. Where possible get a referral to a fabricator from a kitchen company or the supplier of the stone to ensure the fabricator is reputable. The quote from the fabricator should include the cost of delivery, visiting side to take measurements and templates, cutting and polishing the slab and final installation and sealing.

A good fabricator will know how to get the maximum out of a slab and how best to cut and fit it. He will also know how to make the joints in the stone almost unnoticeable and how to cut the stone on site. It is impossible to join the stone without a visible joint but a good fabricator with good machinery will know to keep the joint neat, tidy and unobtrusive. The fabricator will have to do some cut outs on site. This should not be done in the kitchen as the fine dust gets into the working mechanisms of the kitchen hardware (particularly drawer runners) and can stop them working effectively. In engineered stone it is particularly important that the fabricator know how to do these cut outs properly. The cutting should not be done as one continuous cut. Rather, holes should be drilled at the four corners of the cut out then the cutting should link the drill holes. This protects the corners of the stone and stops the potential for cracking.

If you have opted for stone tops it will increase the time line of your kitchen installation due to the fact that templates can only be made once the cupboards are fitted. You can expect a kitchen installation including stone tops to take up to four weeks. It is important that the kitchen have a good support structure to take the weight of stone tops. Correct fitting of the plastic support legs under the carcasses is vital. The kitchen company must also ensure that the legs have enough load bearing capacity to handle the weight of the stone. Once installed you will be advised not to use the tops for forty eight hours. This allows the tops to settle and the sealant to be absorbed.

Whichever your choice adding stone tops to your kitchen will transform it and increase the value of the kitchen making it modern and hygienic. Just ensure your stone comes from a reputable supplier and that your fabricator comes recommended and offers a guarantee on his installation.

With thanks to

