

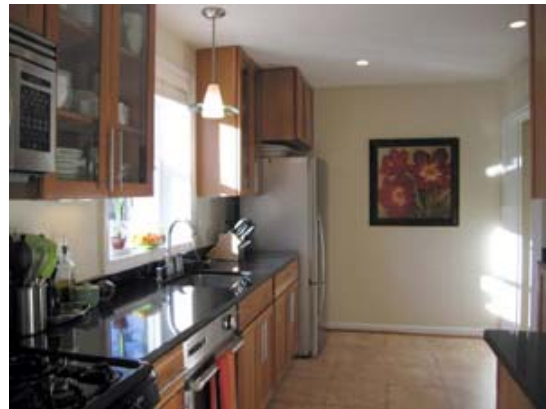
http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/05/12/AR2007051200077_pf.html

Upgrade to Granite? It's Not Written in Stone.

*By Elizabeth Razzi
Sunday, May 13, 2007; F05*

In quite a few neighborhoods, especially the new ones and the pricey ones, granite countertops have become as ubiquitous in kitchens as the teakettle used to be.

Ads for new and resale homes alike usually note if the kitchen has been upgraded with granite. That raises a question for someone planning to put a home up for sale in this competitive marketplace: To draw the best price, should you tear out the old laminate countertops and replace them with shiny new granite? Is that what buyers expect around here?



The choices aren't limited to actual granite. Some people prefer man-made materials made mostly of ground quartz, such as Zodiaq (made by DuPont) and Silestone (made by Cosentino USA). They have much of the sparkle and shine of the real thing but with a uniformity that's tough to find at a quarry. And you can get them in brilliant hues not available with real granite, such as cobalt blue and bright red.

Corian, a solid-surface acrylic material made by DuPont, is another upgrade option. It's less expensive than granite and the quartz-based surfaces, but it doesn't have the same cachet. And though it certainly has its fans, some people heartily dislike the stuff, especially in plain beige.

Local real estate agents and an appraiser offered mixed opinions on whether it's worthwhile for a buyer to invest in a countertop upgrade. Mostly, they said, it depends on two factors. Is that what has been done by most of your neighbors -- and competing sellers? And how up to date and well-maintained is the rest of the house?

"Granite seems to be what's expected in homes costing half a million dollars or higher," said Ken Jenkins, a senior residential appraiser who works around the region. Countertop material is something he takes note of when doing an appraisal, but he warned that the whole kitchen needs to have materials of comparable quality. He said he has seen homes where the owners simply put new granite counters atop banged-up old cabinets -- an approach that adds neither value nor marketability.

Judy Hanrahan, an agent with Re/Max Advantage Realty in Silver Spring, advocates spiffing up the kitchen, but within limits. "You wouldn't have to upgrade to granite just to sell the house if what you have is bright and in good condition." Up-to-date appliances are as important as the countertop and cabinets.

And even though kitchens and bathrooms are the biggest attraction for many buyers, you shouldn't blow all your spiff-up cash on those rooms. "Sometimes you see people go so overboard improving one place and ignoring someplace else in the house that needs to be taken care of," Hanrahan said.

Hans Wydler, an associate broker with Long & Foster's Bethesda office, pointed out that decision-making leading up to a sale should be different than it would be if the owner planned to enjoy the upgrades for a few years. You simply may not get enough return on the investment. "The bigger the money you spend, the riskier the proposition," he said.

And you may not get as big a boost in price from expensive countertops as you would from spending your money on a variety of cheaper upgrades, such as paint and basic landscaping. "Typically, if the house has older countertops, it also has older cabinets, and the new buyer may want to replace the whole thing."

Jennifer Walker, an agent with McEneaney Associates' Old Town office, specializes in Alexandria's Del Ray neighborhood. Although the neighborhood is an eclectic mix of the old and the updated, she noted, "Outdated kitchens do bother people here."

But, again, money is an issue, for seller as well as for buyer. "Prices have gotten so high, people are walking in and expecting everything to be done. They can't afford to do anything else." A less-expensive Corian countertop, or even the least-expensive new laminate top, could be a reasonable compromise, she said. "There are pretty nice laminates now."

If you decide to upgrade your countertops, you will find that the price difference between lowly laminate and the fancier materials has narrowed. At Home Depot, for example, you can find Wilsonart-brand laminate in a broad variety of colors for the installed price of \$31 per square foot. (You'll pay extra to have old countertops removed and for plumbing.) With a fancy beveled or wooden edge, the cost goes up to \$33 or \$36 per square foot, respectively, approaching Corian territory, which starts at \$37 per square foot for simple beige or white.

Prices for quartz-based products such as Silestone are about on a par with basic (but attractive) granites. Silestone prices were \$62 to \$77 per square foot, installed, the day I shopped. Some nice granites in black, white or salt-and-pepper were available at \$69.

Shopping around among the many local granite shops could bring down your cost for real stone. Whereas a limited number of companies make brand-name, solid surfaces such as Corian and the quartz-based materials, you'll find more competition among granite importers.

Bill Millholland, a senior vice president with Case Design/Remodeling in Bethesda, said granite prices have been declining in recent years and in some cases are less expensive than the quartz alternatives. "On the countertop, granite is still king," he said. "Granite is very, very popular."