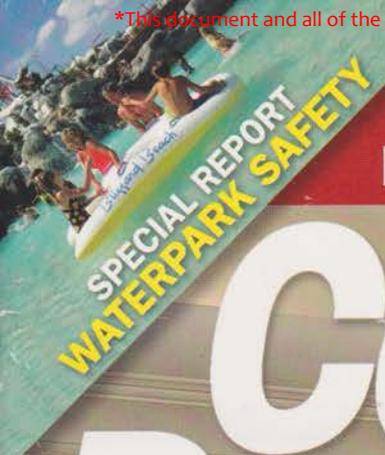


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WHAT'S BELOW THE SURFACE

Top-Rated Kitchen Cabinets, Countertops & Flooring

Manufacturers of kitchen countertops and flooring have cooked up new features and lengthened warranties. Kitchen-cabinet manufacturers sweetened the pot by making soft-close features standard, but the price of touch-to-open mechanisms might leave you sour.

By Drew Vass

Tightened credit standards—particularly those that pertain to home-equity lines of credit, which often are used for home improvements—have placed the kitchen-remodeling industry in a vise, experts tell us. We wouldn't have been surprised to learn that makers of kitchen cabinets, countertops and flooring would have been standing pat with the design of their products. To the contrary: We found refreshing changes aplenty. What's better yet, some of those changes were added at no extra cost.

ROUNDING OUT. Manufacturers of laminate countertops haven't let a listless economy get in the way of innovation. In 2012, two major countertop manufacturers, Formica and Wilsonart, introduced—at a price—moldings that add rounded edges to all four sides of laminate countertops, including those that are curved—a feature that previously was exclusive to stone and solid-surface products.

In February 2012, Formica Group introduced Ideal-Edge, which is a molding that can be attached to any of its laminate countertops to add *ogee* (intricately curved)





Roll Up Your Sleeves

If you aren't attracted by the sound of hammers and chisels

or the \$22.50 per square foot that countertop dealers say you can expect to pay to replace your countertops with even the least expensive laminate countertop, you can opt to roll up your sleeves and set aside a weekend to "replace" your countertop yourself with a little sandpaper and a roller.

Although roll-on countertop surfaces aren't new, more choices emerged in the past 3 years. Giani led the way by introducing its Granite Paint countertop-coating kits 5 years ago (and tweaked its formula in 2011). Counter Coat and Rust-Oleum followed suit by introducing roll-on countertop kits in 2010, and Daich Coatings began to market its Spreadstone roll-on product specifically for kitchen-countertop kits in 2011, although it has been sold for years as a coating for concrete. Do-it-yourself kits coat 20-60 square feet in total surface area. Prices range from \$2 to \$8 per square foot. (You should measure backsplashes before you select your kit size.)

The \$14.50-\$20.50 per square foot that you might save by rolling one of these coatings over your existing countertops is attractive, but you should know that that process will take time. Applying roll-on countertop products takes 2-3 days, manufacturers say, because you first have to prep the countertop's surface by scuffing it with sandpaper and applying a primer before you apply one or two base coats (depending on the brand), followed by a sealant. Typically, roll-on kits don't require tools beyond sandpaper, roller applicators and paint brushes or sponges. (Daich's Spreadstone product is the only material that we found that comes completely premixed.)

The key question, of course, is how long that a roll-on countertop surface lasts.

Shri Thanedar, who is the chief executive officer and the chief chemist at Avomeen Analytical Services and a 20-year veteran of the coatings-analysis industry, tells Consumers Digest that the materials that are in these products are suited perfectly for renewing countertops and are capable of lasting decades before you'll have to apply another coating or replace your countertops. Manufacturers cite the same expectations, although none was willing to give an exact estimate of how long that these products should last. (Counter Coat has a lifetime warranty; all others promise satisfaction, money back or a product replacement.)

Thanedar and manufacturers caution that the results are affected by care and maintenance: Using these coatings as a cutting board or a holder for hot-off-the-stove frying pans could damage their appearance. Thanedar says roll-on coatings can take a hit from, say, a large can of tomato juice that tumbles from an overhead cabinet, without cracking or chipping.

Manufacturers of roll-on finishes say that, unlike other types of countertop finishes, you can repair these surfaces quickly with a dab of touch-up product or by applying additional layers of coating. Counter Coat sells a touch-up kit (\$20) that provides enough material to cover up to 2 square feet. Giani says it plans to introduce a similar kit in 2013.

and *bullnose* (rounded) edges. Wilsonart followed suit in March 2012 by introducing Cascade and Crescent curved moldings.

Although niche manufacturers have sold edge moldings, and Wilsonart previously marketed a beveled-edge molding that wasn't capable of being curved for its countertops, these newest products aim to make the features more accessible for consumers. How? The manufacturers made it simpler for countertop fabricators to add these moldings quickly by using basic tools—a router to cut grooves and a miter saw to form tightly knit corners.

Previously, the countertop fabricators, who buy laminate sheets from manufacturers and build and sell the finished countertops, either had to buy large and expensive manufacturing equipment to create the rounded edges on laminate countertops or had to order laminated countertops that had curved edges from large manufacturing facilities. Even then, they weren't able to have the feature on four sides (of a kitchen island, for instance). Our hands-on analysis revealed that these basic procedures make the molding indistinguishable from the countertop's main surface. Unlike on most countertops that have flat edges, we found no unsightly brown seams.

The innovation means that if you order a Formica or Wilsonart laminated countertop, not only will it duplicate the contours of a granite countertop, but you also will get it faster than before, because a local countertop fabricator can create it in his/her shop, instead of waiting up to 2-1/2 weeks for it to be delivered from a factory.

We believe that adding edge moldings on all four sides of laminate countertops eliminates the last at-a-glance difference between the two products, surface material aside.

Homeowners like the variety of shaped edges that were available from a factory-made laminate countertop, but they were unhappy that these shaped edges were limited to countertops that have straight edges (no curved or crescent shapes) and to just two sides of a countertop, says Crit Richardson, who is president of Mid-Atlantic Manufacturing, which fabricates laminate and solid-surface countertops for cabinet manufac-

turers, millwork shops and contractors. (On an island countertop, or at countertop ends that are next to a doorway, for example, the ends couldn't have ogee or bullnose edges.) Until recently, Richardson had to steer his customers toward stone or solid-surface countertops when they insisted on these features.

For now, it seems as though Formica and Wilsonart will be the only manufacturers that will make molding that's attached easily to their laminate countertops. Other laminate-countertop

manufacturers tell Consumers Digest that they have no plans of doing so.

Unfortunately, the new edge moldings increase—and sometimes double—the cost of a laminate countertop, says Susan Verdi of Advanced Cabinets & Tops, which is a laminate- and solid-surface-countertop dealer. Several factors contribute to this result, including the added labor: Even though fabricators can do the work more easily than the manufacturer can, it's more work for them, and thus, results in higher costs

for consumers. Also, because Formica and Wilsonart sell moldings in only 12-foot lengths—and not every countertop edge is divisible by 12—fabricators most often have to overorder to have enough laminate moldings for a project. In other words, if your kitchen's island includes 16 feet of total edge length, you'll pay for 24 feet of molding.

By the time that Verdi adds Formica's IdealEdge molding to a 3-by-8-foot island countertop, she says, the price nearly doubles to \$990 from \$528

✓ Best Buys in Kitchen Cabinets

Best Buy Categories

- [P]—Premium selection
- [M]—Midrange selection
- [E]—Economy selection



Best Buys in kitchen cabinets were selected based on construction, design variety and features.

The MSRP reflects an uninstalled 21-by-24-inch single-drawer cabinet that has a natural finish and unfinished sides. All cabinet Best Buys have a lifetime warranty and three-fourths-inch solid-wood frames, and are semicustom, which means that you start with a single product and then configure it as you desire.

Full overlay is a door style that covers the frame fully. *Overlay* is a door style that leaves a partial reveal of the cabinet's frame as a design element. The *inset* cabinet

door style has recessed panels. The *mullion* door style has glass panes in the door.

Best Price isn't available for cabinets, because retail prices include fabrication charges that vary greatly among dealers and regions.

[P] *Advanced Cabinets & Tops*
MSRP: \$605

>> The *Advanced Cabinets & Tops* is the least expensive cabinet to combine all-plywood construction with a lifetime warranty. It also is the only cabinet that has a one-half-inch plywood back panel, which is more than twice as thick as those of cabinets that cost at least \$40 more. It also has more style options than does any other cabinet that's on the market.

Features:

- * Door styles: 42 full overlay; 26 inset; 6 mullion; 7 overlay



- * Door materials: 9 choices
- * Additional cabinet materials: 1/2-in. plywood box
- * Drawers: 5/8-in. solid maple box with dovetail joints
- * Delivery time: 4-5 weeks

[M] *Advanced Cabinets & Tops*
MSRP: \$425

>> The *Advanced Cabinets & Tops* is the least expensive cabinet line to combine a plywood back panel with three-fourths-inch plywood shelves and three-fourths-inch solid-wood drawer boxes. We wish that its delivery time were shorter, but because of its construction, which we found to be better than that of any other midrange cabinet, we believe that this cabinet is worth the wait.

Features:

- * Door styles: 62 full overlay
- * Door materials: 7 choices
- * Additional cabinet materials: 1/2-in. furniture-board box with plywood veneer
- * Drawers: 3/4-in. solid-wood box

- with dovetail joints
- * Delivery time: 9-12 weeks

[E] *Advanced Cabinets & Tops*
MSRP: \$160

>> *Advanced Cabinets & Tops* is the least expensive cabinet that we found that has a solid-wood frame and drawer boxes. It also is the least expensive cabinet that comes with soft-close doors and drawers as a standard feature.

Features:

- * Door styles: 56 full overlay; 57 inset; 19 mullion; 11 overlay
- * Door materials: Birch, cherry, hickory, maple, oak, thermofoil (vinyl coated)
- * Additional cabinet materials: 1/2-in. engineered wood sides
- * Drawers: 3/4-in. solid-wood box with dovetail joints
- * Delivery time: 4 weeks

For more information about the above Best Buys, contact the manufacturers directly. See page 67.



AFFORDABLE KITCHEN MAKEOVERS

(Formica says you should expect to pay around \$10 per linear foot to add Ideal-Edge, including materials and labor. At that rate, even Formica's most expensive laminate, which costs \$26 per square foot, comes out to \$844 for a 3-by-8-foot island.) The price of an otherwise identical countertop that's made of granite runs about \$911. A quartz version costs about \$936; solid-surface versions start at \$840 for that product.

The pros and cons between laminate and stone or solid-surface options have been reported widely—compared with the latter, laminates are easier to clean, can be created in a wider range of patterns and colors, and are quicker to install or replace; compared with laminate, stone and solid-surface countertops typically resist stains better, are more durable, and, in the case of granite, provide a one-of-a-kind aesthetic.

LEATHERED LOOK. It's no surprise that laminated-countertop manufacturers are trying to better mimic the look of stone and solid-surface countertops. Three kitchen-design experts tell *Consumers Digest* that more homeowners choose granite to gain an edge in a tough real-estate market. Those and other designers say leathered (sometimes called antiqued) finishes emerged in the past 3 years as an alternative to the polished finish that's typical of most stone surfaces.

Leathered finishes feature an irregular, unpolished surface and don't produce the glare that typical stone surfaces do. Matte finishes on stone that reduce the glare, of course, have been around for years, but leathered finishes up the ante by doing a better job of hiding stains, according to the kitchen-design experts with whom we spoke. Based on our observations, the irregularity that a leathered finish adds to an otherwise smooth surface makes spotting a stain or a leftover crumb a bit like searching for a golf ball on a hilly course. In other words, stains hide from the naked eye at certain angles. Matte finishes on stone countertops, which are dull but also are uniform, like polished surfaces are, make stains or residue stand out like water spots on a wine glass.

The kitchen designers with whom we spoke tell us that they pay anywhere



KRAFTMAID

from 10 percent to 30 percent extra for leathered finishes over the cost of a standard polished finish on stone countertops (and from 10 percent to 25 percent over the cost of matte), although a little spot-checking among countertop dealers revealed that most stay closer to a 10 percent boost. One countertop manufacturer says it doesn't charge extra, however. Cosentino will put a leathered finish on its Silestone quartz line at no charge.

MAKE IT PERMANENT. Among flooring products, the big news is that engineered-wood flooring has overtaken solid plank flooring in sales. One key reason for the shift, experts say, is that beginning in 2011, manufacturers changed the formula of the finishes that are on their engineered-wood flooring to make them more resistant to wear and tear.

A primary drawback for engineered-wood flooring is the fact that refinishing the product is risky, because the thin profile of its wood veneer, which typically ranges from one-thirty-second-inch to one-eighth-inch thick, can be worn through during the sanding process, leaving the floor's plywood or fiberboard core exposed. Solid plank flooring, most of which is three-quarters-inch thick, can be refinished until the cows come home. To address this drawback, three major manufacturers changed the finishes on their engineered-wood products supposedly to make them more resilient. The manufacturers backed up their products with longer warranties—many of which exceed the length of most home mort-

gages. Design experts tell us that these warranties preclude the need for refinishing or replacement. Manufacturers stop short of saying that, although their warranties imply it.

Shaw Floors, which includes Anderson, tweaked the top coat for its engineered-wood flooring in 2011 to add wear-resistant particles to the formula, although the company was vague about what actually changed. What was clear, however, was that Shaw doubled the length of its warranty to 30 years on its three-eighths-inch-thick products, which carry prices of between \$4.59 and \$5.49 per square foot; and to 50 years on its one-half-inch flooring, which spans from \$6.50 to \$8.56.

In addition to changing its top coat to include nanoparticles of aluminum oxide, Armstrong says it developed a process that it calls acrylic infusion for its new Performance Plus line of engineered-wood flooring to make it tougher. Acrylic infusion combines liquid acrylic with stain, which is injected throughout the surface layer of its wood. The company claims that this process can more than double the hardness of a wood species.

Wood and wood-technology experts tell *Consumers Digest* that Armstrong's claims are reasonable. They point out that acrylic-infusion technology has been around for decades and has been used in commercial-grade wood flooring to boost its durability. Performance Plus flooring starts at \$4.99 per square foot and carries a 50-year warranty,

(Continued on page 38)

Best Buys in Kitchen Countertops

Best Buy Categories

- [P]=Premium selection
- [M]=Midrange selection
- [E]=Economy selection



SEE PAGE 72

Best Buys in countertops were selected based on surface quality and style.

Because manufacturers don't provide MSRPs on their countertops, our MSRPs are a national average that includes fabrication and installation costs. You should keep in mind that fabrication and installation costs vary widely by region.

All laminate countertop Best Buys have a 1-year warranty.

LAMINATE

[P] *MSRP: \$33 per sq. ft.*

>> The _____ line is a repeat Best Buy because of its combination of appearance and toughness. We found that this line best replicates the look of stone surfaces of any laminate countertop that we found by combining matte and gloss finishes to mimic stone's texture and look. This line's surface also has four times the wear resistance of the industry standard, according to _____, which means that it can stand up to abrasion better than other models do.

Features:

- * Colors/patterns: 53
- * Edges: Post-formable, fabricated; decorative shaped-edge moldings available
- * Delivery time: 3-10 days

[E] *MSRP: \$12 per sq. ft.*
>> The _____ line, which is a repeat Best Buy selection, is the least expensive laminate countertop that we found that has the industry-standard 1-year warranty. We like that this line has more pattern and color choices than any other laminate-countertop line has, regardless of price.

Solids line (\$12 per square foot), which has 49 design patterns, also is a Best Buy.

Features:

- * Colors/patterns: 130
- * Edges: Post-formable, fabricated
- * Delivery time: 3-10 days

STONE & SOLID SURFACE

[P] *MSRP: \$65 per sq. ft.*

>> The _____ line is the least expensive _____ countertop that carries a lifetime warranty. You'd have to spend at least \$15 more per square foot to get more color selections than what this line has, and its nine finish and texture options are the most of any stone countertop that's on the market. _____ expected delivery period is the shortest of any stone-countertop provider that we found.

Features:

- * Thicknesses: 3/4 in., 1-1/4 in.
- * Colors/patterns: 42
- * Delivery time: 1-7 days
- * Warranty: Lifetime



[M] *MSRP: \$45 per sq. ft.*

>> The _____ line is a repeat Best Buy selection, because it's the least expensive granite countertop that's on the market, and it's covered by a lifetime warranty. You'd have to spend \$20 more per square foot to buy another granite line that has a lifetime warranty. We found only one other granite-countertop manufacturer that has more than this line's 40 color/pattern options, but those products cost \$20 more per square foot.

Features:

- * Thickness: 1-3/16 in.
- * Colors/patterns: 40
- * Delivery time: 2 weeks
- * Warranty: Lifetime

[E] *MSRP: \$36 per sq. ft.*

>> The _____' 15-year warranty is the longest of any solid-surface countertop that we found, and its maximum delivery period of 5 days can't be beat. You'd have to spend \$4 more per square foot to get a countertop that has more than this line's 65 color/pattern options.

Features:

- * Thicknesses: 1/4 in., 1/2 in.
- * Colors/patterns: 65
- * Delivery time: 3-5 days
- * Warranty: 15 yrs.

For more information about the above Best Buys, contact the manufacturers directly. See page 67.



(Continued from page 36)

which is twice as long as that of any of the company's other engineered-wood products, which start at \$5.50, but feature more-expensive wood species and exotic finishes.

Armstrong's and Shaw's products will be joined later in 2013 by a similar product from Mannington Mills. Mannington says its new Copper Mountain line, like the enhanced engineered-wood flooring of Armstrong, incorpo-

rates nanoparticles of aluminum oxide in its new top coat. The new line will have a 50-year warranty on its one-half-inch products and 30 years on its three-eighths-inch products. The new engineered-wood line is planned for release to select retailers, although as of press time, the company was mum on the retailers and the price.

Shri Thanedar, who is the chief executive officer and chief chemist at Avomeen Analytical Services and a 20-year

veteran of the coatings-analysis industry, tells Consumers Digest that, although nanoparticles of aluminum oxide greatly increase scratch and wear resistance, he cautions that a 50-year life expectancy is unknown territory. "We haven't had that level of durability testing, and the use of these materials hasn't been in practice long enough to fully substantiate those claims," Thanedar says.

The warranty on some engineered-wood flooring isn't the only thing that's

✓ Best Buys in Flooring

Best Buy Categories

- [P]=Premium selection
- [M]=Midrange selection
- [E]=Economy selection



Best Buys in flooring were selected based on quality of construction, range of style options and exclusivity of species or design.

Best Buys in ceramic-tile and porcelain-tile flooring have a lifetime warranty that covers manufacturer's defects but not installation.

The MSRP for ceramic and porcelain flooring is based on 12-by-12-inch tiles. All ceramic and porcelain flooring Best Buys come in four color choices.

Best Buys in engineered-wood flooring are for prefinished collections. They feature an aluminum-

oxide wear layer to protect against scratches and are available with standard transition moldings. The economy Best Buy is a laminate and doesn't have an aluminum-oxide coating.

Best Price is a reflection of the lowest retail price that was available at press time and is subject to change.

CERAMIC/PORCELAIN

[P]

MSRP: \$8.26 per sq. ft.;

Best Price: \$8.57 per sq. ft.

>>The _____ line which has seven choices of dimensions that range from 2-by-2 inches to 24-by-24 inches, has the most size selection of any ceramic/porcelain flooring line. When combined with its four colors and eight designs,



this tile line carries the largest lineup that's available.

Features:

- * Breakthrough strength: 450 lbs.
- * Sizes: 2 in. x 2 in.; 3 in. x 6 in.; 6 in. x 6 in.; 6 in. x 24 in.; 12 in. x 12 in.; 12 in. x 24 in.; 24 in. x 24 in.

[M]

MSRP: \$5.68 per sq. ft.; Best

Price: \$3.92 per sq. ft.

>>The _____ line is a repeat Best Buy selection, because it's the least expensive _____ line that's available in a 24-by-24-inch size. You'd have to spend an additional \$2.21 per square foot to buy a thicker 24-by-24-inch tile than this line's 11 mm (three-eighths of an inch). This product also is the least expensive _____ line that has a breakthrough-strength rating of 550 pounds.

Features:

- * Breakthrough strength: 550 lbs.
- * Sizes: 12 in. x 12 in.;

12 in. x 24 in.; 18 in. x 18 in.; 24 in. x 24 in.

[E]

MSRP: \$2.25 per sq. ft.;

Best Price: \$1.33 per sq. ft.

>>The _____ line is the least expensive ceramic-tile flooring that we found that comes in four colors. You'd have to spend at least \$1.12 more per square foot to buy a line that has more color options than this line provides.

Features:

- * Breakthrough strength: 325 lbs.
- * Sizes: 12 in. x 12 in.;
- 18 in. x 18 in.

ENGINEERED WOOD/LAMINATE

[P]

MSRP: \$8.56 per sq. ft.; Best

Price: \$7.99 per sq. ft.

>>The _____ line is the only engineered-wood flooring that combines extra width (6-1/4 inches) and an industry-high 50-



expanding when it comes to kitchen floors. Ceramic tiles that come in larger sizes have expanded. The number of manufacturers that we found that sell oversized options, i.e., bigger than the previous 18-inch standard, is about to increase to three, from one in 2010.

Florida Tile, which previously had no 24-inch tiles, introduced three lines that include a total of 13 style options in early 2013. Crossville, which was the manufacturer that led the way on the

size, has more than tripled its options in the past 3 years. It now has 71 options in 24-inch tiles (including 12-by-24-inch and 24-by-24-inch sizes)—51 of which were introduced since 2010. Congoleum plans to introduce a 12-by-24-inch DuraCeramic product—its first 24-inch tile—in spring 2013 in 12 color and style combinations.

This is a good thing in terms of design, designers tell us. “The grout lines are far fewer, so the space flows

much easier visually and appears more spacious, as well as more modern and clean,” says Susan Serra, who is the owner of kitchen-design company Susan Serra Associates.

What’s better is that larger tiles come at no additional cost, because you pay by the square foot. Plus, tiling contractors tell us that larger tiles go down faster and more easily than do smaller sizes, which keeps labor costs at the same level as for smaller tiles.



year warranty. Further, this line is the only extra-wide flooring product that we found that comes in one-half-inch thickness.

Features:

- * Installation: Floating, glued, stapled
- * Wood species, styles: Hickory, maple; 6 styles
- * Available width: 6-1/4 in.
- * Warranty: 50 yrs.

[M]

MSRP: \$4.99 per sq. ft.;
Best Price: \$5.05 per sq. ft.

>> The _____ line is the least expensive engineered-wood flooring that comes with a 50-year warranty, which is the longest that’s available. No other engineered-wood flooring has a wider variety of options than this line does, and it’s the only line that we found that features a top layer of wood that’s infused with acrylic. Independent experts tell us that

this increases the hardness of the wood, which helps it to resist dents and deep scratches.

Features:

- * Installation: Floating, glued, stapled
- * Wood species, styles: 7 species, 30 styles
- * Available width: 5 in.
- * Warranty: 50 yrs.

[E]

MSRP: \$3.47 per sq. ft.;
Best Price: \$2.99 per sq. ft.

>> The _____ line is a repeat Best Buy selection, because it’s the least expensive laminate flooring that has a lifetime warranty. You’d have to spend at least \$1 more per square foot to buy a laminate line that’s only 1 mm thicker than this line is.

Features:

- * Installation: Floating
- * Wood styles: 64
- * Available widths: 5 in., 8 in.
- * Warranty: Lifetime

VINYL

[P]

MSRP: \$4.49 per sq. ft.;
Best Price: \$4.49 per sq. ft.

>> The _____ line has the widest variety of stone and wood finishes that we found among vinyl flooring. No other vinyl flooring that has a lifetime warranty provides a wider variety of options than this line has.

Features:

- * Colors: 44
- * Delivery: 1–2 weeks
- * Warranty: Lifetime

[M]

MSRP: \$3.29 per sq. ft.;
Best Price: \$4.19 per sq. ft.

The _____ line is the least expensive vinyl flooring line that we found that has the combination of a lifetime warranty and a desirable thickness of 3 mm,

which is about one-eighth inch.

Features:

- * Colors: 50
- * Delivery: 1 week
- * Warranty: Lifetime

[E]

MSRP: \$1.99 per sq. ft.;
Best Price: \$1.65 per sq. ft.

>> You’d have to spend nearly \$1 more per square foot to get a longer warranty period than the _____ line provides. This line’s 26 stone designs rival the number from products that cost at least 50 cents more per square foot.

Features:

- * Colors: 30
- * Delivery: 1–2 weeks
- * Warranty: 20 yrs.

For more information about the above Best Buys, contact the manufacturers directly. See page 67.



AFFORDABLE KITCHEN MAKEOVERS

SEEN, NOT HEARD. Cabinets aren't going jumbo, but, since 2010, the number of kitchen-cabinet manufacturers that sell soft-close doors and drawers that close without slamming as a standard feature on all of their cabinets has doubled to eight from four. Cabinets that have standard soft-close features start at as little as \$160 for a standard base cabinet, which is about the same as 3 years ago.

At a glance, soft-close hardware as a standard feature might not sound like a big deal, but it adds up. Some brands charge \$7.50–\$10 per door and \$22–\$30 per drawer for the soft-close mechanism as an add-on option. Other manufacturers don't charge at all: Alno, American Woodmark, Bertch, Dura Supreme, KraftMaid, Masterbrand (including its Decora, Diamond and Kitchen Craft brands), Medallion (Elkay) and SieMatic.

Further, soft-close features for kitchen-cabinet doors used to require additional hardware that took up space in cabinet openings, but new soft-close mechanisms are incorporated into the hinges, which means that they won't be in the way.

At least nine companies migrated to those space-saving soft-close hinges since 2010, but so far, the hinges are standard only on five companies' cabinets: American Woodmark, Bertch, Kraftmaid, Masterbrand (including its Decora, Diamond and Kitchen Craft brands) and Medallion (Elkay). Dura Supreme made the hinges standard on some of its lines.

(Although it isn't unusual for kitchen-cabinet manufacturers to charge a premium for add-on options, American Woodmark is the only company that we found that goes the other way: It will allow you to remove standard soft-close hardware from your order and will give you a discount of about 10 percent, or around \$7.50 per door and \$22 per drawer, based on the cost of most of its base cabinets.)

Aside from eliminating the sound of clanking cabinets, soft-close hardware also eliminates the need for you to grasp the door or drawer handle to close it softly. Consequently, that makes soft-close hardware particularly beneficial for *aging-in-place* homes—those that are friendly to aging bodies and people who have disabilities, designers say.



TARKETT FIBERFLOOR

However, cabinets that take the ease of opening to the extreme are more common than ever before. Four manufacturers now have powered, touch-to-open—and even remotely controlled—hardware on their cabinets. Tiny electric motors let you open and close cabinet doors and drawers at the touch of a button or by pressing on the cabinet face.

“If you're 40 years old and you're building a home that you plan to live in forever, that's when you want to incorporate these things,” says Sandra Brannock of Expert Kitchen Designs. “You want to design and build your cabinets in such a way that, should you ever be disabled in any sort of way, you can still operate and function effectively in your kitchen.”

As cool as these cabinets might be, they won't have an easy touch on your wallet. The least expensive version that we found was from Dura Supreme. The company says the easy-touch feature can be added for about \$650 to a single cabinet. The company says that price includes a required \$250 power-supply unit that's capable of powering up to 20 cabinets. That means that subsequent cabinets could have the feature for an extra \$400 per cabinet. In other words, adding easy-touch technology to eight cabinets, for example, would tack on

\$3,450 to the price.

In 2013, a major company is expected to enter the market. Armstrong tells Consumers Digest that it plans to introduce touch-to-open options in fall 2013, although company officials were unable to provide details—or prices—as of press time.

“My hope is that, like many other products, as these items become more popular, and more companies start offering them, the price will go down,” says Debbie Grazioso of P&D Remodeling. However, we believe that Grazioso's wish isn't likely to come true anytime soon. All of the cabinet manufacturers with which we spoke that don't have motorized touch-to-open features say they have no plans to introduce the technology, because the cost is prohibitive.

So, adding touch-to-open technology to your kitchen-remodeling project is anything but an open-and-shut case. ●

Drew Vass is a regular contributor to Consumers Digest. He has written on a wide variety of home-improvement topics that range from replacement windows and doors to garage doors and exterior building products.



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