

Planning to update your kitchen? Green choices can have an impact

By Tom Watson
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A major kitchen remodel offers delicious promise for your home, but it may not always be the best way to “green” your kitchen.

Because kitchens provide so many opportunities for improving sustainability, incremental changes also make a big impact.

When contemplating a big kitchen renovation, consider whether the rewards will be worth the investment in time, money and resources. If you only have one or two problems, such as inefficient appliances or a lack of counter space, you can often take care of those issues without tearing the whole kitchen down.

Also keep in mind that

most kitchen remodels cost from \$5,000 (for a budget do-it-yourself job) to upwards of \$100,000.

Choosing greener materials and approaches may increase up-front costs, but will typically pay off in the long run, making your kitchen healthier and more sustainable.

For kitchen projects large and small, you can find free resources online or at the library. For example, King County’s Eco-Cool Remodel Tool (ecocoolremodel.com) offers two new guides: a checklist for choosing a contractor and a green-product buying guide.

From floor to ceiling, let’s take a quick look at our menu of green kitchen choices.



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Rather than taking on a full remodel, it may be better to make selected updates that improve a kitchen’s sustainability.

Flooring

Durability especially counts underfoot, so pay a little more for high-quality flooring if you can. For wood flooring — or wood anywhere in the kitchen — choose Forest Stewardship Council-certified products.

Inexpensive vinyl flooring may be very durable, but off-gassing of VOCs (volatile organic compounds) can be a problem with certain brands. Some laminate flooring products have recently been found to contain high levels of formaldehyde.

Many green-building experts favor linoleum flooring.

Recycling

Today’s Seattle-area kitchens definitely need a system for collecting recyclables and food scraps, though not necessarily an elaborate built-in setup. An old plastic trash container under the sink works fine for recycling.

For collecting food scraps before you take them out to your yard-waste cart, you can now find many attractive containers, including new space-saving slim styles.

Countertops and sinks

Quartz (engineered stone) countertops received the highest scores in recent Consumer Reports tests, with resistance to heat and cuts highlighted. Recycled glass countertops also performed well. Bamboo countertops garnered surprisingly low ratings.

For your sink, the popular stainless steel models generally perform best, and most

stainless steel contains a high percentage of recycled metal. Choose a new faucet with a high-efficiency, water-conserving aerator, or add one yourself on an older faucet.

Appliances

When choosing a cooking range, refrigerator or dishwasher, focus on energy efficiency and durability. In a Consumer Reports reader survey of appliance reliability

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by brand, GE scored well for ranges; Maytag and Kenmore for refrigerators; and Bosch, Whirlpool and Miele for dishwashers.

Think twice about fancy features, such as elaborate touchscreens or a hot-water dispenser on your fridge door. Some may not yet be perfected, and could increase your cost and energy use.

For the range, an effective ventilation system plays a big role in your indoor-air quality. If you have an older kitchen without venting over the stove, installing a range hood is a great first step toward a greener kitchen.

Dishes and utensils

Buy as much of your dishware and utensils used as possible. Puget Sound-area thrift shops and consign-

ment stores often offer impressive selections. For items you need to buy new, stay away from the cheapest plastic items.

Cabinets

Explore all renovation possibilities before replacing cabinets. Paint or a new finish, plus new hardware, quickly rejuvenates old cabinets. If you need new ones, look for durable, formaldehyde-free models with water-based or low-VOC finishes.

Pots and pans

Many local green cooks swear by cast iron, but there are a multitude of other green choices. Newer non-stick coatings such as Thermolon should be safer than perfluorooctanoic acid, or PFOA, the chemical that is used in making Teflon. Replace non-stick cookware when the coating starts to flake.

Lighting

Whenever it makes sense, start converting your kitchen lighting to LED (light-emitting diode) bulbs and fixtures.

LEDs provide bright, efficient light that is well-suited for the kitchen. New types of LEDs become available nearly every week, and prices have dropped.

So, where should you begin on your floor-to-ceiling green-up? Since it's the kitchen, grab the low-hanging fruit first. Then just keep going, and soon you'll be cooking, eating and living greener than ever, in the room that nurtures us the most.

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