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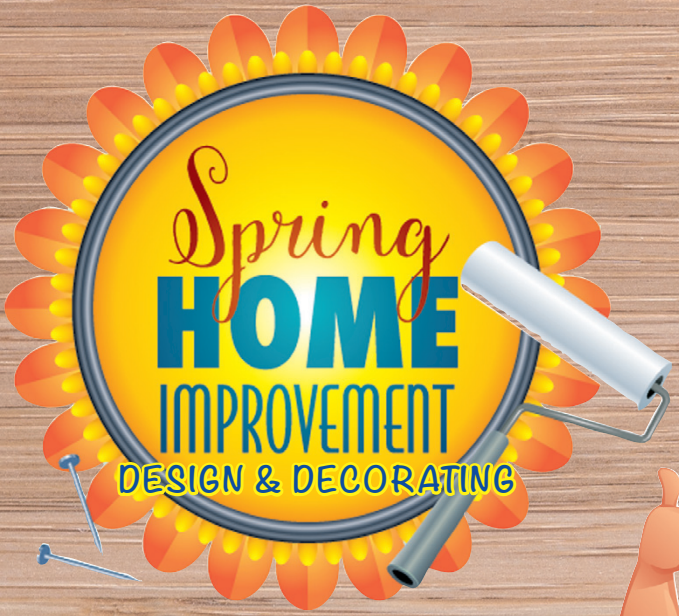
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### What to know about kitchen countertop materials

Kitchens are the busiest rooms in most homes. Kitchens have become more than just places to prepare meals, with many functioning as gathering spaces and even go-to dining spots in homes that do not feature formal dining rooms.

So much time spent in the kitchen makes it worthwhile to invest in these popular spaces. Kitchen renovations are high on many homeowners' todo lists, and there's many decisions to make once they commit to redoing the room. When renovating a kitchen, homeowners will have to choose which countertop material they want to install, and the following rundown of popular options can help simplify that decision.

**Granite**  
Consumer Reports notes that no two slabs of granite are the same, and that uniqueness has long appealed to homeowners. Tests run by Consumer Reports found that heat, cuts and scratches did not harm granite, though this material, like quartz, can crack around edges and corners. Granite is a durable material that, if properly maintained, can last several decades. Granite also is nonporous, which makes it resistant to bacteria.

**Quartz**  
Quartz is considered a low-maintenance and durable countertop material. The home improvement experts at This Old House note that quartz countertops are typically 94 percent ground quartz and now come with an honed, sandblasted or embossed treatment, which makes them appealing to homeowners with varying ideas on the ideal look of a kitchen countertop. Quartz can crack if it's not handled properly, and edges and corners can chip over time. Rounded edges can minimize the risk of chipping. Costs vary by loca-

tion and product availability, but quartz typically costs about the same as natural stone.

**Laminate**  
Laminate countertops appeal to budget-friendly homeowners and Consumer Reports notes that they're easy to install. Home Depot also notes that laminate countertops

come in a wide range of colors, textures and designs. Laminate countertops also are durable, which helps budget-conscious homeowners stretch their dollars even further. Laminate countertops are easily maintained, though it's also easy to permanently damage them with knives, so Consumer Reports recommends always using a cutting board when preparing meals on laminate.

**Butcher Block**  
Butcher block countertops are among the more unique options homeowners may consider. Sometimes referred to as "wood countertops," butcher block countertops are made from wooden strips that are fused together. The home improvement experts at BobVila.com note that butcher block is among the more affordable materials, but the final cost will be dictated by location and availability. BobVila.com

notes that butcher block countertops are highly sensitive to liquid, so exposure to moisture should be limited. Sealing butcher block countertops immediately after installation can help protect against bacteria and warping. Though butcher blocks can be high maintenance, many homeowners find the unique look is well worth the extra elbow grease. Kitchen countertops can define how the room looks, and homeowners have many options to choose from when designing a new kitchen.



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### How to Create a Garden Room in Your Backyard

If you're ready to create a custom garden room in your backyard, these tips can help you bring it to life. If you don't already have an existing structure, this can be a hefty investment—and you'll likely need to hire professionals for some or all of the project.

- 1. Determine the Size and Location**  
The size of the garden room may be dictated by the zoning requirements or what you're looking to use it for, which, in turn, can affect its location. Bear in mind how the sunlight falls in your yard throughout the day, especially if you need natural light for work or exercise. This is especially important if you don't plan to add an electrical component for lighting.
- 2. Create a Design Plan**  
Whether you're DIYing this project or hiring a professional to build it, it's wise to sketch out your vision first. Make sure all the pieces of furniture—like your desk or workout equipment—will fit into the space. Also, now is an excellent time to map out the area surrounding the room to plan for pathways, landscape details such as a gated arbor or outdoor lighting.
- 3. Choose Materials**  
Although the foundation may be determined by building codes, you can generally be as creative as you'd like with your garden room. Choose high-quality, durable, waterproof materials, paying particular attention to the roof and windows. If you'd like the garden room to reflect a similar aesthetic, take into account the style of your home.
- 4. Prepare the Interior**  
Unless you're licensed, this is the part of the process that you'll need to hire a pro to do.
- 5. Furnish and Decorate the Room**  
Finally, fill your garden room with furniture and set up storage to organize whatever you need, such as office or craft supplies, exercise equipment, or electronics. Add decorative and cozy touches like cheerful artwork and plenty of pillows. Include a mini fridge and style a coffee bar to minimize trips to the kitchen to refill during the work day. If it's feasible, consider installing a half bath in the garden room design, so there's really no reason.



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