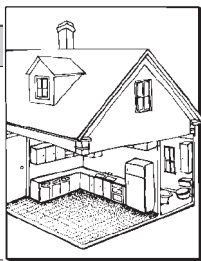


# Making a Splash With Backsplash

by Nancy Thomas



Adding a small amount of detail to the backsplash can really make the kitchen sparkle. But we must always be aware of the kitchen's utilitarian nature. Water, grease, heat, and cold are the primary sources of aggravation to keep in mind when choosing materials and details.

First and foremost, the counter must be fully sealed to the backsplash to prevent liquids from seeping down the back—leading to rotting plywood or swelling particleboard.

Second, whatever material is used, it must be easy to clean. In some cases, especially with commercial ranges, fire retardation and clearances would be a wise third concern. Fourth, consider ways to use the space more effectively—for example, for storage.

Another design consideration is where to stop and start the backsplash. Should it extend beyond the wall cabinets with a strange jog, or stop before the end of the counter? And at what height should it stop if there are no wall cabinets to define the space? This is not always detailed as well as it could be.

## The 4-Inch Splash

Take the 4-inch attached laminate backsplash. This ordinarily comes as a one-piece coved riser referred to as a

the backsplash be attached to the counter itself rather than the wall. Otherwise, wall movement or the settling of the house is likely to break the seal between counter and splash.

## Get Creative

Once we've determined how to make the backsplash functional, the question becomes how to make it more interesting. There are numerous possibilities:

- Top a 3- to 4-inch backsplash with ceramic tile to add color and texture. Or cap it with wood.
- Match the color of the backsplash to a complimentary accent. It could match the counter-edge, a tile floor, or sink, for example.
- Bevel the edge of the counter and the splash, then insert a color-core pinstripe, or a small detail of wood. Be sure to fully finish the wood.
- Soften the room by using bullnose edges on counters and backsplashes, in laminate, wood, or synthetic marble.
- If the backsplash is Corian or another molded plastic, your fabricator may be able to rout in a decorative pattern, and fill it in with an alternate color using resins or other materials.
- The backsplash need not be one height. You can step it up and down

## Two-Tone Walls

Turning now to other backsplash alternatives, let's look at wallboard, splashes. In these, you run a full laminate splash to the height of the wall cabinets, and down behind metal receivable molding. One way to add interest to this common detail is to use a different color laminate. This will add linear detail.

Another variation would be to create a design with two colors of laminate. This might sound difficult, but it's easy if all the seams are covered with prefinished wood trim. For example, the main backsplash could be almond laminate to match the countertop, but a stripe of smoked-hickory laminate could be added to break it up. Where the two colors meet, cover the seam with a wood molding that matches the wood counter edge.

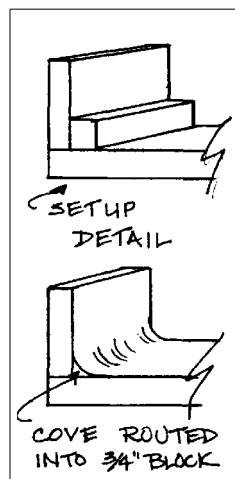
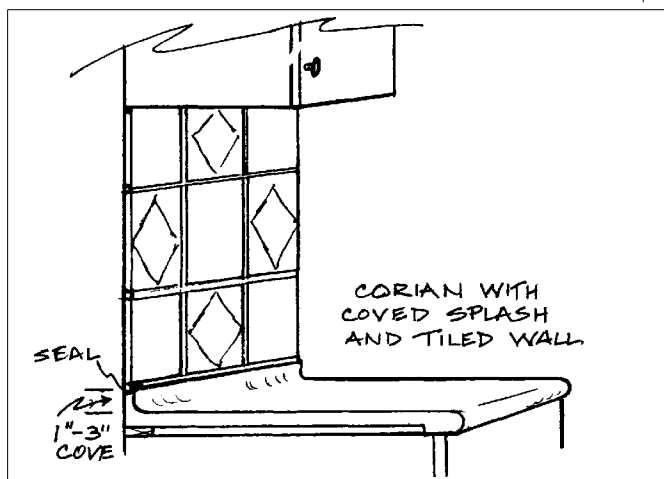
## Fun with Acrylics

As mentioned earlier, Corian (acrylic-based), and its polyester-based cousins, offer interesting possibilities. They can be used for standard 3- to 4-inch splashes, or run full height. These materials can be shaped to provide interesting details, such as ogee edges, bullnoses, coved joints, and so forth. Also, because the material can be routed, custom designs can be permanently etched into the material.

One word about using Corian counters with tile backsplashes: If the counter is not made with a formed cove at the backsplash joint, the fabricator should provide the special silicone sealant recommended by the manufacturer. Ask your supplier or fabricator for details.

## Tile and Other Materials

Other materials to be considered for



For an attractive and watertight detail, create a cove in the molded-plastic or Corian counter, then add a ceramic tile splash.

“formed” splash. A variation of this is an attached square-jointed backsplash.

The advantage of the formed top with no joint is its ability to prevent seepage. But there are tradeoffs. These tops are premade, only come in specific sizes, and are often made of thinner laminate stock. The thinner laminate can cause seaming problems in the counter surface. The square-edged counter is generally made of thicker laminates, and the factory-made seams are usually fewer and better.

The square-jointed backsplash may be mounted and sealed by the fabricator, or can be installed in the field with the proper sealants. It is of the utmost importance, however, that

from 1 to 16 inches or so. The steps can be symmetrical or irregular.

- What about pulling the cabinets forward and building a small ledge (4 to 6 inches deep) on top of the backsplash. This can be a good solution in houses that need heat distribution from behind the cabinets.

This type of ledge can also be built without pulling the base cabinets forward, but it might take too much space away from the counter. What are these ledges good for? Besides the design effect, they make good storage space for spices and decorative items. They also provide areas for vertical knife slots and for inserting stainless restaurant-style utensil holders.

backsplashes include: wood, furniture-type moldings, mirror, granite, and marble (now available as wall tiles).

Tile, of course, is commonly used. It is durable and adds texture. Tiles range from simple 4x4-inch solid-color tiles, to hand-painted custom tiles. Whatever you use, pay attention to ease of cleaning. Durability is also a concern, particularly on horizontal surfaces, which are prone to chip. Keep grout lines tight to minimize the exposed surface of this problem area. Also use a silicon compound to seal the grout or use grouts with additives to make them impervious to water. Avoid light-colored grouts since these are more likely to discolor. Greys, tans, and other colors are more

suitable for this use.

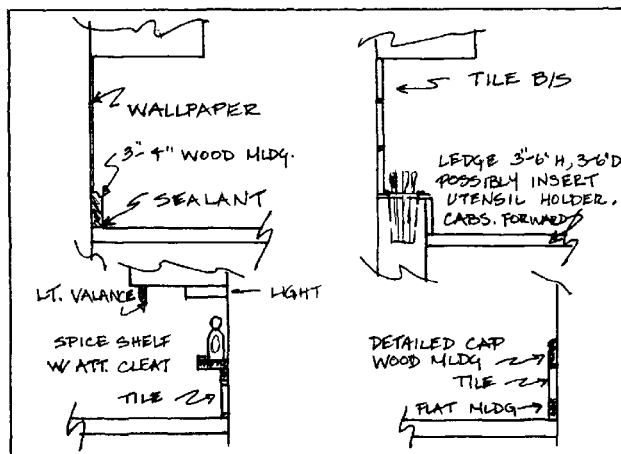
You can create an interesting backsplash by sandwiching tile between sections of wood, Corian, laminates, other tiles, or stone-like materials. Using one color of tile on the lower portion of the backsplash creates a border effect. Similarly, tiles can be inserted into laminate countertops in a recess routed in the counter.

### Use the Space

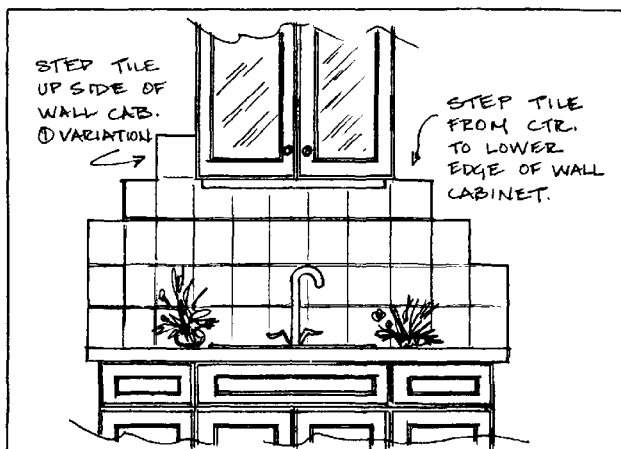
Backsplashes are not simply covered walls. They can also serve as utilitarian space, such as shelving. You don't want to reduce the counter depth in all areas of the kitchen, but an extra deep backsplash may work well in some areas. Another example is appliance garages, which have become very popular recently. These are compartments built into a corner of the backsplash—sometimes with a tambour door. Also on the market now are metal and wood wall racks—innovative contraptions for hanging utensils, cups, pots and pans, bins or dried goods, and so on. If the backsplash walls are on the interior, and not filled with pipes or ducts, small shelf areas can be recessed between the studs.

In all applications, vary the materials, colors, and utilitarian uses of the backsplash spaces. Remember to seal all joints well, and detail the locations of electrical outlets and switches so they don't interfere with the function of the backsplash. Go for drama in these small details! Your clients will rave about it. Surprisingly, these details often make more of an impact on the client than the cabinetry or the layout. ■

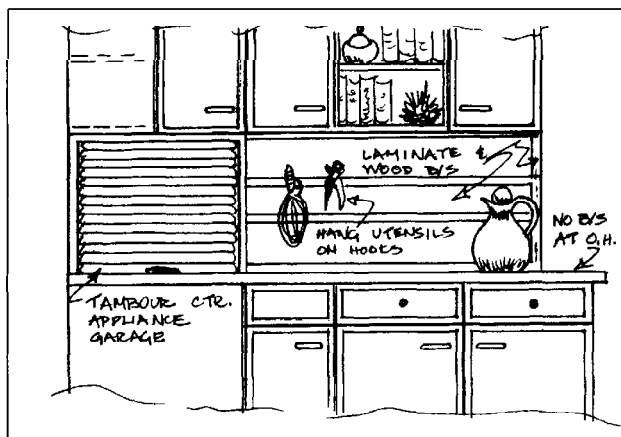
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Four backsplash possibilities (clockwise from top right) wood molding, ledge with utensil holder, wood and tile combo, and tile with spice shelf



When the counter area is wider than the wall-cabinet, you can step tile up the wall-as shown in these two details.



This detail shows an appliance garage, an overhang that looks complete with no backsplash (at the right end), and a backsplash that mixes plastic laminate and wood moldings. The laminate strips could vary in color.