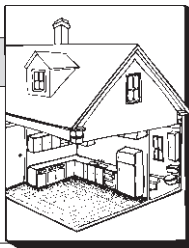


Making Countertops User-Friendly

by Paul Turpin



User-friendly countertops not only look good, they're also easy to work on and care for. You can satisfy the first requirement by using a material the homeowner likes and by doing a good job installing it. But a countertop that works well should include the following:

- A dripless edge or raised lip at the front and sides of the counter that prevents liquid and crumbs from running over the edges
- An under-mount or flush-set sink that lets the user sweep scraps and water into the sink with a sponge
- Side splashes at the closed ends of counter runs, where a counter stops against a wall, pantry, or refrigerator cabinet
- A coved transition to the back-splash to eliminate hard-to-clean square corners
- It would also be nice if the material were scratch- and stain-resistant and if the homeowner could set hot items on the countertop without worry

High-End Choices

With both ceramic tile and solid surfacing you can satisfy most of these needs. The beauty of tile is that it is extremely durable and heatproof. It also allows a great deal of design flexibility. For instance, I use V-cap nosing edges to create a dripless edge (see Figure 1) and install flush-set or under-mounted sinks with surface

bullnose or quarter-round trim. I also set cove tiles along the back corners to eliminate square-cornered grout joints.

Aside from its high cost, solid surfacing is my favorite material for countertops. Because you can glue it up and work it with carbide-tipped woodworking tools, solid surfacing lets you build anything you can dream up (see "Solid Surfacing Options," 11/90). While all the user-friendly features are possible, one of the handiest designs is a "seamless" inlaid sink. These look great and make cleaning adjacent countertops simple. Solid-surfacing can also be refinished easily, which may, in some circumstances, justify the higher up-front costs.

Despite the friendliness of these two materials, builders and remodelers find themselves working with plastic laminate countertops most of the time. The reasons: They're affordable, easy to install, and widely available. Laminates can be user-friendly, but it takes some extra effort to make them work.

Postformed Laminates

Postformed countertops have some friendly features, including a raised, rounded lip at the front edge and a coved transition to the built-in, 4-inch backsplash. Since they are prefabricated, these countertops are easy to install. You can buy

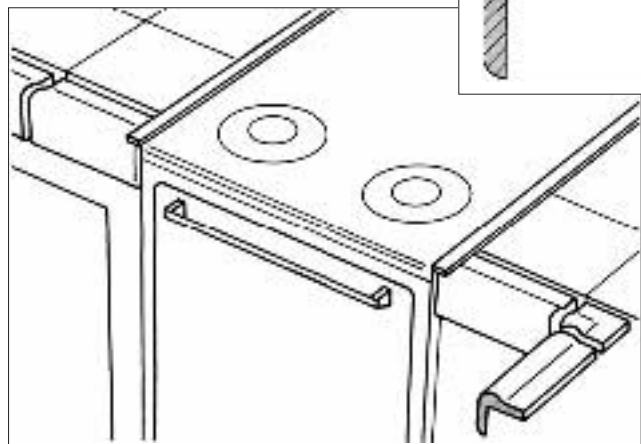
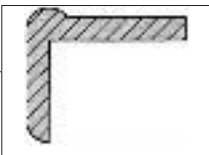


Figure 1. The author uses a V-cap nosing on ceramic tile countertops to create a dripless edge.



Figure 2. A flush-set sink, like the one in this laminate countertop, takes time to install. But the low-profile sink rim doesn't create a roadblock for sweeping water and kitchen scraps into the sink.

Vance Industries

lengths of the material and cut it using a carbide-tipped blade, but I prefer to order it already cut to size. The countertop is bulky and hard to get a saw through and the plastic laminate has a tendency to chip when you're cutting it.

Despite its friendly features, postformed laminate is my least favorite countertop material. The first problem is finding a technique for joining the precut mitered corners on an L-shaped counter. Drawbolts are typically used to pull the two sides of the joint together, but the two surfaces don't always line up. I've seen joints where one side of the miter is slightly concave and the other is slightly convex. The easiest technique for keeping the surfaces flush is to use a plate joiner. I set the biscuits 6 inches on-center.

But no matter how tight the joint is, you'll still have a crack. It's essential to keep water from seeping in since it will swell the particle board and cause the laminate to crack. You can run some caulk in this joint or glue a strip of metal over it. But one of the best solutions is to fill the crack with SeamFil (Kampel Enterprises, 8930 Carlisle Rd., Wellesville, PA 17365; 717/432-9688). This is a one-part, solvent-based plastic that is applied as a liquid but cures to a hard finish. It's available in standard and custom laminate colors. Be forewarned that your countertops must be secure. If there's any movement, the filler will crack and pop out of the seam.

Self-rimming sinks are almost always used with laminate countertops, but these can be a nuisance for the homeowner. The rim is like a roadblock when you're trying to sweep scraps or water into the sink with a sponge. While it takes time and effort to make a template and rout the more accurate hole required for a flush-set sink, the results are worth it (see Figure 2). I use a metal trim

ring to cover any stray cuts (available from Vance Industries, 7401 West Wilson Ave., Chicago, IL 60656; 708/867-6000).

When the counter ends abut a wall or cabinet, I make an endsplash by gluing a section of scrap laminate to the vertical surface. This serves as a bumper for wet, soiled sponges, protecting adjacent walls and cabinets. I use an adhesive caulk to attach the endsplash, which allows me to float the endsplash out if things aren't even and square. The piece of laminate should match the height of the backsplash and run to the outermost edge of the nosing.

Custom Plastic Laminates

Like postformed countertops, custom shop-made or site-built laminate countertops are inexpensive and widely available in any color. The biggest advantage of a custom-built laminate top is that you can avoid the mitered corner by using lapped butt joints of substrate and laminate. This creates overlapping plies so the corner joint is less susceptible to movement or alignment troubles. You still have a seam, but it is more stable.

While the backsplash is not smoothly integrated, as in postformed, you have the option of building it as high as you like and installing it along all the counter ends — even when they don't abut a wall or cabinet. A formed dripless edge is not easy to craft on a custom countertop, but you can build an attractive square edge out of hardwood. Mating the surfaces gets tricky, so I use a plate joiner for accurate alignment. This avoids all the usual problems of trying to sand down the wood without marring the laminate's finish. ■

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