

Choosing a Whirlpool Tub

by Dennis Deloy

As a remodeling contractor who specializes in bathrooms, I've seen a steady increase in interest from my customers in whirlpool bath installations. Homeowners are opting for whirlpools instead of standard bathtubs for a variety of reasons. A whirlpool adds luxury to a bathroom and can also increase a home's resale value. As a bonus for the contractor, substituting a whirlpool tub in place of a standard bathtub can add a tidy profit to a job otherwise limited by size.

Most customers who are interested in adding a whirlpool have scant knowledge of the whirlpool tub itself, let alone the installation. Often, their knowledge comes from a "big box" store display, a color brochure, or just having used someone else's whirlpool. Whatever they know I try to enhance with my own experience to ensure that the new tub will satisfy their needs and expectations.

The Right Fit

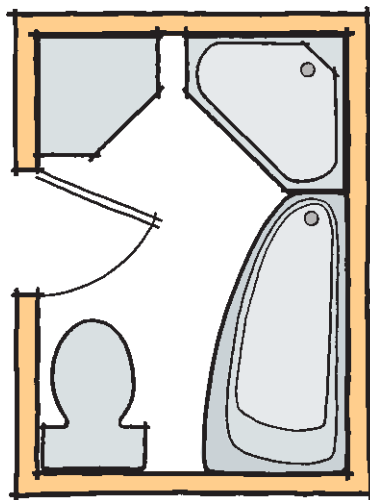
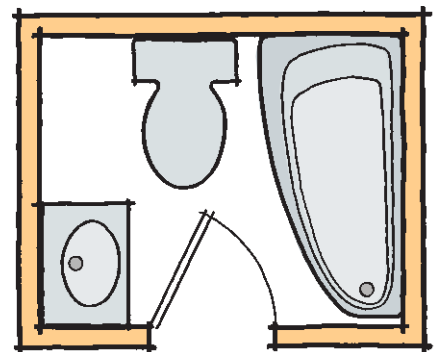
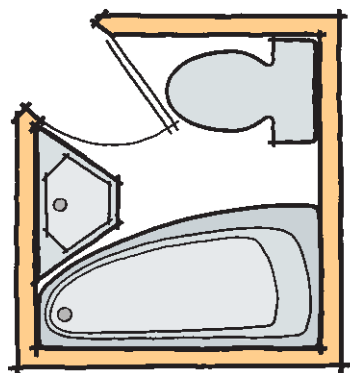
The first issue to address (which relates directly to installation) is tub size. Generally, without moving walls, the current floor plan automatically limits tub selection to the existing width and length, although many manufacturers now offer tapered designs that allow for increased space efficiency. Compared with a standard 30x60-inch replacement size, a tapered whirlpool design may afford the user more comfort and more water capacity (see illustration, at right).

Tub mounts and access. Another determining factor is the height of the tub. Most whirlpool tubs are deck or platform-mounted, and can range from 21 to 26 inches, making them as much as a foot or more higher than a standard tub. I always have my customers envision stepping up and over the additional height as they get into the tub (grab bars, strategically placed, usually enter the dis-

cussion here). I also suggest that they visit a showroom so that they can see the actual tub and step into it. From a selling standpoint, this works much better than a picture in a brochure. If the showroom display doesn't feature it, I suggest a step or a wide tile ledge along the edge of the tub to sit on. Either one makes entry easier and safer.

Another matter related to tub depth is the bathing of children. If a whirlpool is to be the only tub in the home, the customer should be aware that leaning over a deep basin with a step or shelf in the way will make assisted bathing awkward.

Tub/shower combos. Will the whirlpool also be used as a shower? Depending on the model, this feature can present a number of problems. In their attempts to create a sleek, contoured "European" look, manufacturers are producing sculpted tubs with options that may not lend themselves to the installation of an effective shower door or curtain. Rail-mounted controls, factory emblems, and rounded surfaces can all limit the tub to bath-only use. Island installations generally preclude the use of the tub as a shower, with the exception of a hand-



The versatility of a tapered design makes it possible to replace a standard 60-inch tub without moving walls or plumbing, and still increase water volume and depth. This 7-jet model from Aquatic, available in right and left models, measures 60x42 inches, and includes integral grab bars to assist entry into the 23-inch-deep tub.

When the whirlpool must double as a shower, chose a rectangular unit with a raised lip to accommodate backer-board.



A corner tub makes it possible to install a two-person whirlpool in almost any size bathroom.



held shower. The placement of the tub fill valve and spout might also present a problem if it forces the user to reach more than 36 or 42 inches to turn on and adjust the water. If any of these features is going to interfere with practical shower use, it's best to revert to a more standard tub configuration.

Features and Options

After covering the various physical limitations of some tub designs (which usually helps to narrow the selection), I explain the interior and mechanical options. The most important of these is the selection of hydro-massage jets.

Manufacturers now offer such choices as "rotary," "fan," and "pressure flow" jets, each of which has a specific "feel." Customers usually want the hydro-massage effect for different reasons, and the placement, type, and number of jets will greatly affect their choice. Here again it makes sense to direct them to a supplier's showroom with working models so that they can feel jet surge themselves. Most manufacturers offer pump horsepower upgrades for a small charge, which I usually recommend.

Waste and overflow controls are typically trip levers or round handles with indentations for fingers. Although

both work, for someone with less-than-perfect manual dexterity, the trip lever is a better choice. It doesn't need to be tightly gripped and can be opened or closed with a foot or elbow if need be.

In addition to the tub's mechanics, there are options such as digital readouts, electronic controls, mood lighting, in-line heaters, integral fill spouts, factory skirts, and trim kits and finishes. Some of these options may already be installed on certain models and can jack up the base tub price, sometimes raising it right out of the customer's budget.

Acrylic or gel coat? Most whirlpools are available in either acrylic or gel coat finish. Although both finishes are durable and relatively easy to repair, the acrylic finish is shinier and more impervious to scratches. It will also give dark and unusual colors a deeper, richer look than a gel coat. Acrylic is a less porous finish, which makes it more resistant to body oils, soap, and shampoo. Certain high-end tubs are only available with an acrylic finish.

Lastly, the customer must choose a color. Although manufacturers offer a wide selection, I try to point out that an exceptionally bright or unusual color may be hard to match and will tend to date itself quickly.



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