

The Sensible Environmentalist

Tropical vs. North American Hardwoods

(NAPSA)—DEAR DR. MOORE:

I'm planning to install hardwood flooring throughout my house and I want to make an environmentally friendly choice. Should I avoid hardwoods from the tropics?



Dr. Moore

Not necessarily. Tropical hardwoods aren't inherently bad—it's just more difficult to ensure that they come from sustainably managed forests and that they weren't illegally logged.

In North America, we have laws that govern environmental stewardship and we have several forest certification programs—most notably those run by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI), and the Canadian Standards Association (CSA)—through which companies can demonstrate that the forests under their care are sustainably managed.

The FSC also offers certification in the tropics, but encouraging forest sustainability is a challenge because illegal logging is a problem and it's reasonably common for governments not to have or not to enforce environmental laws.

In the early 1990s, tropical hardwoods were the focus of a massive boycott intended to force improved logging practices. Unfortunately, it didn't work. Instead of replanting their forests, farmers replaced them with crops like papayas that the world wanted to buy. By working within these countries, the FSC is offering the proverbial "carrot instead of a stick"—letting people know that, if they take good care

of their forests, the world will want to buy their wood and they'll be compensated.

Providing you have assurance that the wood you buy comes from a sustainably managed forest, any hardwood flooring is an environmentally positive choice. It's renewable, biodegradable and recyclable. It contributes to healthy indoor air quality, because bacteria and other harmful particles don't imbed themselves in wood floors as they do in, for example, carpet. Wood flooring also requires less energy to manufacture than other materials, and produces less waste and fewer greenhouse gases.

That said, however, native North American hardwoods do have an advantage because of the added energy and other factors involved in transporting wood from other countries.

It's also easier to receive the assurances mentioned above. In North America, more than 250 million acres of forest have been certified as sustainably managed by independent third-party certifiers. This is on top of the laws designed to ensure the protection of biodiversity, wildlife habitat and the many other factors that comprise sound forest management.

Like all wood products, the bottom line is that hardwood flooring makes environmental sense whatever the country of origin, providing it comes from a source that can demonstrate its ability to practice sound forest management.

Dr. Patrick Moore has been a leader of the environmental movement for more than 30 years. A co-founder of Greenpeace, he holds a PhD in ecology and a BSc in forest biology. Questions can be sent to Patrick@SensibleEnvironmental.com.