



Choosing a Backsplash

by Sandy McAdams

An important but often overlooked part of designing a countertop for a kitchen or bath is choosing the backsplash. Many designers and builders mix different materials — a practice that can make the final product more interesting, but can also cause problems. You'll lessen the chance of mistakes if you follow a few simple guidelines.

Backsplash Heights

The first decision is height. A *partial-height* backsplash is usually 4 to 6 inches high and is molded or glued onto the surface of the countertop where it meets the wall. A *full-height* backsplash extends from the countertop to the bottom edge of the cabinets. Full-height backsplashes are easy to clean, and serve to visually join the countertop and the wall cabinets. They also require more materials and labor, however, so the installed cost is higher than for partial-height backsplashes.

If you'll be installing a partial-height backsplash on a countertop that steps down at some point along its length, you'll also need to decide how the backsplashes for the two countertop levels intersect. Working this out at the design stage can prevent big headaches later on.

Moldings won't prevent water from seeping into the joint between the backsplash and the countertop. Seal the joint

with a silicone or other caulk that matches the color of the countertop.

Backsplash Materials

The most popular backsplash materials are wood, tile, laminate, and solid surfacing. Wood and tile vary in cost according to the species of wood and the type and pattern of the tile.

Laminate is the least expensive material. Partial-height laminate backsplashes can be glued to the wall with construction adhesive, or formed as an integral part of the countertop, eliminating the joint between the backsplash and the countertop. However, I don't like the exposed seam between the wall and the top edge of the backsplash, so I finish it with a metal bead (available from nearly any laminate supplier) or a wood molding.

A full-height laminate backsplash is easy to install before the wall cabinets are in place, and you only have to worry about molding the vertical edges at the end of the countertop. But using full-height laminate requires two installations — one for the backsplash and one for the countertop — and could pose scheduling problems unless you do the laminate work yourself. On the other hand, installing a full-height laminate backsplash after the cabinets are in place requires precise cuts and placement, and



A full-height tile backsplash is both decorative and easy to clean. Epoxy grouts withstand stains the best, and porous tiles should be sealed.

all of the edges must be finished with molding.

Tile is the most decorative of all the backsplash materials, allowing nearly unlimited design possibilities. Tile backsplashes are appropriate for countertops of tile, laminate, or solid surfacing. Tile is frequently installed at full height, though it's not uncommon to see a backsplash made from a single row of 4- or 6-inch tiles. In the latter case, it's important to select a tile with a bullnose edge. If the tiles you select don't come in bullnose, you'll have to finish any exposed vertical edges with molding.

A crucial — but often forgotten — detail in a full-height tile backsplash is the location of the electrical outlets. The best place for an outlet depends on the tile size. In general, try to locate an electrical box symmetrically in the tile pattern. If the tiles are large enough, you can center an electrical box in a single tile. For smaller tiles, you can center the box at the intersection of four tiles. This requires eight tile cuts, but it avoids small tabs of tile that can easily crack off.

If you're installing patterned or colored tile in a decorative manner, an improperly placed outlet may also may interrupt the design. The only way to avoid this is to design the tile layout before the drywall is in place, and make sure it matches up with the electrical plan.

Tile is glued directly to the drywall or backerboard with a thinset adhesive. Epoxy grouts are the least susceptible to food stains, but they're also hard to install. If you're using a porous tile, you might also want to seal the tile after installation, especially around food-preparation areas.



This electrical outlet interrupts the tile accent strip and protrudes beyond the top of the backsplash. The outlet should have been placed higher up on the wall.



Avoid using wood backsplashes in very wet areas. This maple backsplash is still new, but it will deteriorate quickly from constant exposure to moisture.

Solid-surfacing backsplashes are only used with solid-surfacing countertops. The partial-height version sits on top of the countertop with a caulk line at the seam. Partial-height solid-surfacing backsplashes can also be glued to the countertop for a seamless, watertight installation. In this case, caulk the small joint between the top of the backsplash and the wall. If this joint is too large, however, you'll have to scribe the edge, which can be tedious work.

We have also installed some full-height solid-surfacing backsplashes. They look a whole lot better than laminate, but they're also a whole lot more expensive. In fact, a full-height solid-surfacing backsplash can cost as much per foot as the countertop.

Wood. The main selling points of wood backsplashes are that they're easy to shape, fit, and install. Wood works well with countertops of laminate, tile, or solid surfacing. Most wood backsplashes are made from the same species as the cabinets, but you still need to choose the thickness, the height, and the profile of the top edge. The most common design is 4 inches high with a beveled top edge. (The top can be squared, but the bevel gives it a more finished look.)

I don't like to use wood in very wet areas, such as across the back of a sink. Because the backsplash sits in a puddle of water much of the time, both the wood and the finish will eventually deteriorate. The most durable finish for any backsplash is a good polyurethane. I never use paint, as it fails quickly when exposed to constant moisture. ■

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