

COUNTERS from previous page

especially noticeable at the seams once installed. The Aylwards chose granite because its non-uniform striations offered texture without being overly busy. Consider the backsplash, too, Ann said. A lively patterned tile backsplash needs a more subtle countertop. A standard 4-inch-tall granite backsplash usually is more economical than tile. She also cautions against picking an unusual color.

"If you want something funky, go with a funky backsplash," she said. It's easier to change if you tire of it years later or sell your home.

The Aylwards chose a high-level artistic granite for the coffee bar in a highly visible spot and extended the granite backsplash all

the way up to meet the top cabinets. Rather than match a specific pattern of granite to designated cabinetry, they chose either light or dark granite, depending on the room.

Some customers hire an interior designer solely to shop with them for countertops. Friend has learned to guide without judging.

"Everyone always asks me what I think," he said. "That's tough, because it comes down to what they like. I've installed countertops when I thought, 'Why the heck did they pick that out?' And after it's installed, I think, 'Wow, that looks great.'"

With research, thought and planning, you can make a rock solid decision about countertops.



Bella the dog poses in the Aylwards' brand-new, spacious kitchen with granite countertops.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

CONSIDER THIS

Rely on reputation more than price. A company that offers to do the work at a deep discount may be using thinner slabs. The standard thickness of a slab is 3 centimeters (about 1 1/4 inches). A company that prides itself on customer service likely will be more accountable should a glitch occur.

Learn the levels. Stone has five price categories ranging from Level 1, the least expensive, to Level 5, the top of the line.

Understand the quote. Does it cover removing and hauling away existing counter? Supplying an undermount sink? A backsplash? Your preferred edging? Drilling holes for a sink, faucets and cooktop? Reconnecting the plumbing? Make sure you have the "out the door" price.

Ensure insurance. Ask to have the company's insurer send you proof of coverage.

Bring your phone and a cabinet drawer. Take pictures of slabs you like, then look at the photos at home in the room where you will install the stone. Take a cabinet door or drawer to the showroom to see how the stone will work with your cabinetry.

Select stone before cabinets. If you are refinishing cabinets, install the granite first. Seeing the stone in the room's normal lighting may affect your cabinet decision.

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1 Try to project your future housing needs.

Whether you're 25 or 65, it can be tough to plan for your future housing needs. But attempting to look ahead is worth the effort, Nash says.

He encourages homebuyers to plan ahead at least three to five years.

"People nearing retirement have a lot to consider when choosing a house. At this age, problems with health or mobility can surface at any time," Nash says.

On the other end of the spectrum, Nash says couples with young children should think ahead to when their kids will be pre-teens or teenagers. Those for whom affordability is a major issue may wish to choose a two-story house with extra bedroom space for the changing needs of their offspring.

2 Factor in the investment potential for ownership of a one-level house.

Now that the oldest boomers are well into their Medicare years, Nash says demand is increasing for single-floor living among pre-retirees and retirees. The result: ownership of one-level homes should prove a good investment over time, so long as they're located in popular neighborhoods.

"No doubt the market for ranch houses will intensify in the future. Buying a one-story house in an area where they're in short supply should be an especially good deal," Nash says.

But he notes that some retired homebuyers prefer to buy a multi-level house where their grown children and grandchildren can be comfortably accommodated during overnight stays or vacations.

3 Think through the advantages of a second-floor "hideaway."

Perhaps you already work from home or expect to start doing so in the next few years. If so, Nash recommends you consider the advantages of a second-story office where you can concentrate with few interruptions. For similar reasons, many homeowners enjoy a tucked-away upstairs room where they can pursue a hobby.

"It feels good to have a space where you can leave your projects all spread out

without anyone bothering you," he says.

Another less-than-obvious advantage of an upper-level retreat: you're further from the temptations posed by the high-calorie snacks that call out to you from the kitchen.

4 Avoid any property that requires you to build an addition.

What if you're over 50 and starting to suffer from osteoarthritis in your knees and hips, yet still wish to purchase a traditional two-story place? Should you consider buying a vertical property with the intention of building on a first-floor master suite later?

That's usually a poor idea, according to Nash.

"Getting an addition done will likely be more costly than you imagine and take six months or longer to complete," he says.

Of course, one-level houses aren't to be found in every community. However, if you're sure a one-story house is your best choice, Nash suggests you look at comparable neighborhoods to the one you've targeted to locate a property that's "turn-key ready." Or find a two-story place that already has a first-floor suite built in — an increasingly common feature in newly constructed houses.

"But always remember that location should be the top element on your selection list," Nash says.

5 Differentiate between your lifestyle and that of your parents.

Maybe you were raised in a family that always lived in two-story colonials. Though you're emotionally geared toward buying this type of home, you intellectually realize that the simplicity of one-level living is better suited to your busy lifestyle.

If that's so, Nash recommends you step outside your comfort zone and envision a different picture of your ideal lifestyle.

"We all have to break from our family traditions at some point. The good life isn't about replicating your parents' choices. It's about embracing what brings happiness to you and your loved ones," he says.

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