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By Randy Wirtz, Technical Representative

Maple floors present unique challenges for the hardwood-flooring contractor unlike most wood species offered in today's flooring market. What makes maple a difficult wood to work with when sanding is it's hardness, dense grain structure, and light colored appearance.

The grain of maple is hard, but its structure has a range of density that responds to abrasion differently. Consequently, a rippled appearance is common, especially when sanded to a fine degree. Abrasion marks from the big machine, edger or the buffer, if too coarse, can be a problem. This is due in part to the hardness of the wood and the light colored appearance. These distinctive characteristics combine to create a medium that is tricky to work with.

The hardwood-flooring contractor today has a tough task ahead of him. It is not uncommon to encounter a homeowner who has a very high, if not flat out unobtainable, expectation of how their floor should look. This trend in the marketplace has pushed the contractor to achieve the "optimal" appearing floor. A very common practice is to sand the floor to a fine degree, and apply numerous, thick coats of finish. Unfortunately this approach does not work well, especially with maple.

The flooring contractor should approach sanding maple with a different mindset than he does with oak or other more forgiving woods. Very possibly, his sanding regimen may need to be altered to get favorable results. A balanced approach to sanding is necessary to achieve a wider scope of acceptability. Too rough or too smooth can be a problem.

When sanding make sure that the rough cut removes all over-wood so that the subsequent finer grits can do their job correctly. Proper abrasive choices are also very important, skipping no more than one grit in sequence. A final cut of 100 and no finer than 120 is recommended. Follow by screening the floor with the same grit that you finish cut with.

Remember, the finer you sand, the more prone the floor will be to scrutiny. If your routine is to sand very fine, consider ramping down your final grit selection to no finer than 120 grit.

A closing comment about finishing

Equally important to this discussion is the finish application process. Most definitely, keep coats to a minimum, and on the thin side of the specific manufacturer's recommendations.

With waterborne coatings, three, thin, uniform coats will bring about the best appearance. Applying more than three, thin coats is asking for trouble. The more finish, the more reflective the floor becomes.

Swedish Finishes likewise look best when thin, uniform coats are applied. Also keep coats to a minimum, applying no more than three coats. A semi-gloss or satin topcoat will have a wider range of acceptable results as well. ♦