



# THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO HARDWOOD FLOOR REFINISHING

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The only good information is complete information. If you have hardwood floors that you plan to keep and enjoy to the fullest extent possible, and are staring a refinishing project in the face, a quick blog about “easy preparation” or “what to expect” won’t cut it. You can find DIYs and blurbs about small parts of the process, but that’s not enough.

If you’re even thinking about whether to refinish your hardwood floors, that’s a big investment that could make an equally big difference to your home. Wouldn’t you want to know everything you can? There’s the before, during and after. There are the dos and the don’ts. There are the trends and technologies.

Good information changes over time, too. With new products and equipment for hardwood floor refinishing, the only information designed for a successful project in 2020 is what was researched and written in 2020.

This white paper is all that and more.

We’ll start with the basics: how do you know if it’s time to refinish your wood floors? Are there alternatives? If all the signs point to a refinish, continue reading and you’ll learn about your options and the process. It’s all organized here for you.

Finally, we finish this white paper up with floor refinishing FAQs to make sure your all questions are answered.

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# HOW DO YOU KNOW IF IT'S TIME TO REFINISH?

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How do you know if refinishing your hardwood floors is a “must-do” or a “would-like-to-do” project? What are the signs?

Hardwood can last for centuries and is as classic as it is practical. The day will come, though, when it needs to be refinished. In the strictest sense, “refinishing” means working hardwood down to the bare wood before applying a fresh coat of finish.

Here are the top five signs that tell you if the time to refinish has come. Some of these are obvious and others are subtler, so if you're not sure, call an expert.

## **Sign 1: Excessive scratches**

An excessive number of scratches across your floor (especially scratches that have worn through the stain) are a classic sign it's time to refinish. Minor scratches are normal, but anything more will quickly become visible and embarrassing.

## **Sign 2: Boards turning gray**

If any of the boards in your hardwood flooring start to turn gray, that's a high-urgency sign that it's time to refinish. This gray color comes from the old finish wearing off and small amounts of water from feet, pet paws and even cleaning product soaking into the wood. If any boards become so damaged that they turn black, no amount of sanding will fix this problem—you'll have to replace the floor.

## **Sign 3: Water or moisture damage**

You can tell your wood flooring has suffered water damage when you start to see boards separate or cup, or if you see the dark gray or black areas we talked about above. This kind of water damage can come from any moisture, from leaking toilets to pet damage and even moisture from mold in the home. Whatever the source, it's a sign that it's time to refinish.

## **Sign 4: Fading or discoloration**

Hardwood floor fading is usually the result of sun damage. Sometimes, the damage can get so ugly that it merits a refinish for that reason alone, even if the wood is technically in good condition. Refinishing will also help protect your floor from further damage.

## **Sign 5: Hard to clean and shine/luster is gone**

If your floor has gotten hard to clean (and the lack of remaining shine has given the surface a dull quality that seems to act like a magnet to more grime), that's a sign that your previous finish is officially “toast.” Refinishing your floor will make your day-to-day life easier for cleaning and restore the shine you long to show off.

### **If it's not time to refinish, what alternatives do you have?**

If you aren't seeing evidence of any of the signs above, but you still think your floors could do with a "refresh," what are your other options?

Maybe you only have a few minor scratches or a general "dullness" across your existing finish. In cases like these, a process we call screen and recoat could work and be less invasive than a full floor refinishing project.

The New York Times wrote about the screen and recoat process as a great preventative maintenance option, too. It can extend your floor's health as long as possible before that eventual refinish. This process does mean a call to a professional, however, as not all hardwood floors are candidates for a screen and recoat.

### **How many times can a wood floor be refinished in its lifetime?**

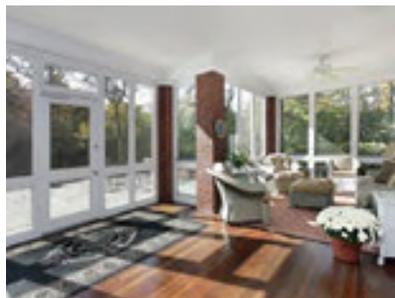
Does your hardwood floor predate your family's time in your home? Do you know how many times it's been refinished? Do you know when the last time was that it was refinished?

The number of times a hardwood floor can be refinished is a central factor in whether your floor will be eligible for a refinish or will need a full floor replacement. Fortunately, hardwood floors usually last between 5 and 10 refinishinges, depending on the species of wood, the skill of the people refinishing it, the equipment used, and the flatness of the floor.

Whether your hardwood floor can be refinished ultimately comes down to the thickness of the remaining layer. A professional will come in and measure the thickness in multiple spots as well as check for your floor's flatness. If the thickness of what we call the "wear layer" is less than 3/32", the floor should not be sanded.

### **So, it's been decided—you're refinishing your hardwood floor**

Let's say you've recognized the signs, you've talked to a professional, and your floor is ready to be refinished. How does the process work? You can find great resources online that explain parts of the process in greater detail (like several of the articles on our website), but here we'll give you a "high-level" look at all the stages of a hardwood floor refinishing project.

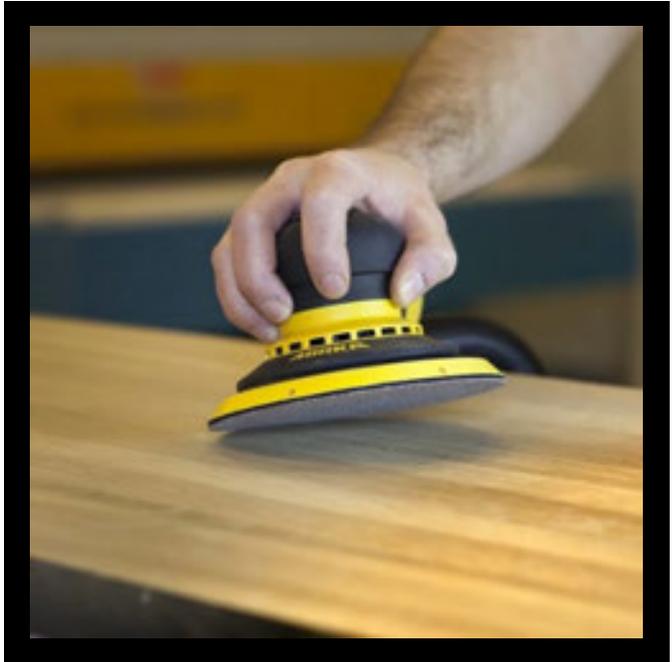


## IT ALWAYS STARTS WITH SANDING

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First, the team refinishing your hardwood floor will come in and prepare the space for sanding. You'll be unsurprised to know that sanding creates dust, meaning much of the precautionary measure taken will be to contain that dust. The team will cover doorways, heat registers, returns, cabinets, fireplaces and windows in the area or areas they'll be working in. Windows will also be covered to keep out direct sunlight. Plastic will be hung using special industry tape to protect light hangings and walls.

We're happy to tell you, too, that modern sanding machines are designed to capture up to 98% of dust produced, so while the project can be messy, rest assured that a professional team will be able to keep dust to a minimum.



After every single “cut” (or round) of floor sanding, the floor will be vacuumed or swept clean. After about one day of work, sanding is usually complete.

## ARE YOU “GOING NATURAL” OR STAINING OR BLEACHING YOUR WOOD FLOORS?

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When it comes to the look of your floor, you have options. Not only will the age and the species of the wood shape that look, but your stain and finishing options give you total control for any design or vibe you're after.

### **Natural finish for hardwood floors**

Floor staining is tricky work. It's finicky. Even professionals have struggled with its hard-to-predict results. There are dozens of variables that can go wrong. Fortunately, some wood floors weren't even designed to be stained, meaning there are several species out there where the natural choice for homeowners is to go the “natural look” route.

Mahogany, cherry, walnut, maple, birch, and pine or fir are all examples of woods that are best left natural. This is partly because of their beauty, and partly because of the nature of their pores, whose sizes vary drastically. This makes for unpredictable application and absorption rate of stains.

Jump ahead to the “finishing” section if your hardwood refinish will leave your floors with a natural look.

## **Staining hardwood floors**

One of the most common questions we hear from clients is whether they should stain their hardwood floors. If the answer is “yes” or even “maybe,” the next question is always, “what color?”

Staining your hardwood floors is a big decision for three main reasons:

1. A stain applied to your floors will have a big impact on the look of your home
2. You’ll live with that stain choice for a very, very long time
3. Once the stain is applied, the only way to get rid of it or correct it is to resand

There are hundreds of colors and shades of hardwood stains to choose from, so we can all understand the appeal of staining wood floors. If there’s a color family you’ve had your eye on that you’re excited to move forward with, it’s just a matter of making the choice. (A conversation with a professional will help you navigate the brands and their maintenance specifications.)

## **Bleaching hardwood floors**

Hardwood floors that can be bleached are often treated this way to complement a specific look or décor the homeowner has in mind. Darker wood species like red oak, hickory and ash are especially attractive with this application.

The process of bleaching does weaken hardwood fibers, however, and so we’re including it here to let you know why it’s done in case you do want to take on the maintenance that comes with it. Like we said at the start of this white paper, after all, only complete information is good information.

Pickling, in particular, is a bleaching technique that highlights the natural crevices of hardwood by applying a stain to contrast with the bleached finish. These processes undoubtedly leave a dramatic look that some homeowners love, but are also more labor intensive. Talk to a professional if you want to discuss these techniques and how they would look with the species of wood in your floors.

## **FINISHING HARDWOOD FLOORS**

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Whether you’ve gone straight from sanding to finishing for the “natural” look, or if you’ve applied a stain and are ready to finish your flooring (and literally seal the deal), finishing is the final phase of your hardwood restoration.

Your contractor will inspect the floor carefully for all sanding errors. Any sander marks found will be repaired. The entire room will be wiped and vacuumed for any dust.

You’ll have many options for finishes, too. There are water-based finishes and lacquers that are known to dry faster, which is convenient for you later but makes them more difficult to apply. Oil-based finishes, on the other hand, are slower to dry, giving more time to ensure a smooth coat.

# HARDWOOD FLOOR REFINISHING FAQs

The “after” part of hardwood floor refinishing tends to be the part that most blogs online tend to forget. We’ve organized this FAQ to tie loose ends and prepare you for what comes after a hardwood refinishing project.

## “When can I use the room after a refinish?”

Depending on the surface and products used, most refinished floors can be walked on after 24-48 hours. Only after 48 hours can you replace furniture, and never by sliding it into place. Lift furniture and ensure it has pads on the bottom of legs and edges to avoid damaging the still-new finish.

## “Do we absolutely have to sand?”

Technically, to be considered a refinishing, floors are sanded to bare wood to remove all of the previous finish. If you do hear about “sandless refinishing,” that’s really an example of the screen and recoat process we talked about above. It won’t get scratches or bad stains out, and it definitely won’t repair crowning or cupping along your boards, but it can refresh the look of your floors.

## “And what is dustless floor refinishing?”

You might think of sandless and dustless hardwood floor refinishing as the same thing, but they’re actually two different processes. With dustless floor refinishing, sanding machines are run with hoses attached instead of collection bags, giving the team greater control in dust control and removal. The setup is simpler than you might think, so be sure to ask a professional about it if you’re curious.

## “How do I find hardwood refinishing near me?”

If you’re looking at different hardwood floor refinishers to get quotes and see who you like best, you’re on the right track. Use a system to compare companies, and be sure to check online reviews. You can even use our Service Decision Analyzer—we believe firmly in comparing providers by these standards, so even if you don’t choose us, if you use this it’s a “win” in our eyes.

## “What about refinishing hardwood floors in sections?”

In our experience, it’s difficult to impossible to refinish a section of floor and have it blend in with the rest. Those “fixed” spots will stand out embarrassingly against the rest.

Refinishing room-by-room is a more realistic option, but even then, without a transition point between doors, the differences in the finish could become an eye sore.

## “What is the cost to refinish hardwood floors?”

Refinishing hardwood floors will depend on the size of the space as well as the stains, finishes and other products used. In 2020, these prices are averaging \$4-5 per square foot, or \$990 to \$2110 for whole projects. This is compared with \$8-12 per square foot for replacing a wood floor, making it an attractive investment if the floor doesn’t need to be replaced.

For more FAQs on all flooring, check out our free flooring FAQ download.

# BEFORE AND AFTER

