

Expert advice

DIY DILEMMAS

Big Strong Boys' Jake Robinson answers your DIY questions and this month gives a step-by-step guide to laying hardwood flooring



JAKE ROBINSON

WHAT'S THE BEST WAY TO SECURE A HANDRAIL?

The handrail on my grandmother's stairs has come free and it's now dangerous for her to walk up them without anything to hold on to. When we looked at the handrail, it had only been held in place by small screws. We tried to re-attach it, but the wall is so hard it keeps damaging the drill bits. Can you please advise?
Laura Curry, Durham

Jake says It sounds to me like the wall might be made of concrete or very hard bricks. To penetrate it, you'll need an SDS hammer drill, which you can get from a hire shop, or you may want to invest in one. If you're still finding it hard using this drill, try a smaller drill bit first, then increase the size to about 7mm (for the medium-sized brown rawl plugs). You will need to drill the hole depth to 3in and tap the rawl plugs right into the wall to get a strong grip. Then re-attach the handrail using 3in screws – it may be worthwhile investing in a battery-powered screwdriver for this to ensure you get the strongest possible fixing to the wall. Good luck!

HOW CAN WE USE WOOD ECOLOGICALLY IN OUR HOME?

My husband is a keen DIYer and uses timber to make various items, such as shelves and recently a rather nice dining table. Though I'm delighted, it concerns me that we're using a lot of wood. Is there any way we can be more environmentally friendly?
Lucy Dale, London

Jake says Wood is a great material and I certainly wouldn't discourage you from using it. Many timber merchants are now doing their bit to save the planet by planting trees to replace what they sell, so make sure you use one with an ethical policy. Reclaimed wood is another good tip; go to www.salvo.co.uk to find your nearest yard. Also, try to reuse any leftover timber or get it recycled by your local council.

WHY DO ALL MY LIGHT BULBS KEEP BURNING OUT?

The light bulbs in my home always seem to burn out within a matter of months. Do you know what could be causing this?
Maggie Harrison, Sutton Coldfield

Jake says The typical light bulb is good for roughly 900 hours but check the life expectancy on the packaging. If they're definitely lasting less than they should be, there are many reasons why they might burn out. You may have over-voltage in your house. Get a cheap multimeter to measure this – if it's 230V or higher, talk to your electricity company. If you're using too high a wattage bulb in an enclosed light fitting, such as a globe design, the bulb will overheat, shortening its life. Similarly, attic insulation can cover recessed light fittings and block the ventilation, causing heat to build up. Bulbs under a heavily used stairway or near a door that slams can be subject to vibration. You can buy special shock-resistant, or rough-service bulbs, or try compact screw-in fluorescent ones.



Send in your DIY queries to

Expert advice, Real Homes, 64 North Row, London W1K 7LL or email Jake at realhomes@hf-uk.com



Jake's guide to... laying wood flooring

Unlike laminate and engineered flooring, hardwood can be refinished many times and will add years of beauty and warmth to your home. It's hard-wearing and simple to maintain, and is now available in easy-to-lay click-style designs too. Try Kährs (023 9245 3045; www.kahrs.co.uk) or Broadleaf (01269 851 910; www.broadleaftimber.com) for traditional and contemporary floors, including parquet designs. Follow these steps to lay click-style flooring:

YOU WILL NEED

Dust mask; hammer; jigsaw; fitting wedges, pull bar and tapping block (often part of a floor-laying kit); pencil; ruler; set-square; trim cutters; nail gun; high-performance adhesive and tensioning strap (if using).

ESSENTIAL PREPARATION

Let your flooring acclimatise in situ for 48 hours, otherwise it might warp once installed. Also remember you need to leave the recommended expansion gap against all walls. If laying the wood onto a concrete floor, cover the concrete first with a damp-proof membrane and screw in timber battens, normally 2x1in. Fix on plywood boards, ready to lay the floor on top.

STEP 1 Floorboards look best laid in the direction of incoming light. Start by laying the first board in the left-hand corner of the room with the tongued edges against the wall, using the fitting wedges to mark the expansion gap (see picture). Get the next board ready – if using glue, apply it to the tongue. Then hold the board end on and angle it upward 30 degrees to slot the tongue into the groove of the first board. Lower the board and lock in place. Lay more boards in the same way until you reach the end of the room – you'll probably have to cut the last one with the jigsaw to make it fit.

STEP 2 Use the cut-off piece to start the next row, rather than a whole board – the joins should be staggered from row to row. Place the piece lengthways against the start of the previous row with the cut end against the wall. Angle the next board into the short end groove as in Step 1. Continue until the end of the room as above. Then lift the new row and angle it into the grooved side of the previous row. Press forward and fold down to lock the rows together and use the hammer and tapping block to close gaps (see picture).

STEP 3 Lay one row at a time, marking and cutting each final piece as you go. Close the gaps using the hammer and tapping tool and if using glue, use straps to keep the boards together while it dries (see picture).



Right Use a damp cloth to wipe up sticky spills but ensure you thoroughly dry the area afterwards to keep your hardwood floor in tip-top condition

STEP 4 The last row may need cutting lengthways to fit. To work out the width, place a board over the gap, overlapping the previous row, with the tongue touching the skirting; then place another board on top so it's parallel with the previous row and use the edge to mark the cutting line on the board beneath. Cut and position the boards, using the pull bar to tap them into place. To finish, cut lengths of beading and fix to the skirting boards – not the floor! – with pins or a nail gun (see picture).

How to... look after your new flooring

Follow these tips and your floor will keep looking as good as it did the day you laid it for years to come

1. When washing hardwood flooring, take care not to soak the surface – a damp mop will suffice. Do not use ammonia, regular floor cleaners, household cleaners or dusting products on hardwood. Specialist cleaners are available and the flooring manufacturer or your local flooring shop will be able to recommend one.

2. Clean up spills immediately with a paper towel or dry cloth. A damp cloth can be used for sticky liquids, but wipe over the spot immediately afterwards with a dry one.

3. If your floor becomes damaged by water marks, remove the protective finish and rub the marks with fine-grade steel wool. Repeat if necessary, clean the area, then refinish the floor with varnish.

4. You can repair unsightly burn marks by lightly sanding the area and using a damp cloth to pick up the grit. Then refinish as desired.

5. If your floor gets scratched or gouged by furniture, all is not lost. Wood-matching putty or a putty stick can conceal shallow scratches. Once the area is dry, sand and refinish.

