

# covering **installation**

*Proper installation and maintenance is key to long life*

## Understanding linoleum

*By Christopher Capobianco*

**Although sheet vinyl flooring** is still often referred to as linoleum, the terminology wonk in me has to keep pointing out that it's not linoleum. I explain that old fashioned, marbleized, natural linoleum is still alive and well, and has made a strong comeback in the industry because of its appeal for green design projects. As sheet vinyl started to gain in popularity compared to natural linoleum in the 1960s and '70s, the term linoleum or lino continued to be used for all sheet goods, and even a lot of tile products. Even today, sheet vinyl is regularly called linoleum and vinyl composition tile (VCT) is sometimes called linoleum tile. However, these are two totally different products. Linoleum is defined in ASTM F 141 as "...a surfacing material comprised of a solidified mixture of linseed oil, pine rosin, fossil or other resins or rosins, or an equivalent oleoresinous binder, ground cork, wood flour, mineral fillers, and pigments, bonded to a fibrous or other suitable backing." That mouthful of language describes good, old fashioned, natural linoleum like my great-grandfather used to sell, and my grandfather used to install. It is still around today, and it is definitely not vinyl.

**Linoleum was invented** in England by Frederick Walton in 1864 and named after its main raw material, linseed oil. Linoleum incorporates the environmentally friendly ingredients of linseed oil, cork powder, wood powder, organic pigments,

limestone and jute. If you are asked to install linoleum, and it turns out to be real, natural linoleum and not the vinyl you have installed a hundred times before, you had better be ready because there are some differences between the two products.

Whenever I think about any kind of carpet or sheet goods, I think about seaming. Linoleum seam preparation is different from other sheet resilient products. Because linoleum tends to shrink in length and expand in width, seams are cut slightly open on side seams, but not on cross seams, just like the seams on other sheet products. This detail is a real key to success in a lino installation. Specialized tools are available for trimming linoleum to get this seam detail just right.

**Another difference** between linoleum and other sheet goods is what's called drying-room yellowing, which happens during the curing stage when long rolls of linoleum hang in drying ovens. During this process, a yellowish film may develop on the surface of the product, which is part of the normal curing process of the linseed oil. This yellowing goes by several different terms: stove yellowing, seasoning bloom or drying-room film, although drying-room yellowing is the official definition per ASTM F 141. The yellowing will disappear in a few hours to a few days depending on the amount of natural light. This is why it is common for new material to not match the old sample.

One of the installation challenges is dealing with stove bar marks, another condition that occurs during the drying room process where the rolls drape over bars in the



*It takes some expertise to achieve a tight fit at the edges of a room.*



*Stove bar marks like these can be removed and recycled, or stuck down with extra adhesive.*



drying room, which leaves a slight roll in the material that is removed and recycled. However, at the bottom of the roll, there is often a noticeable crease. Manufacturers make an effort to remove these from the rolls but they may be present. The procedure to remove these marks is to butter the back of the material by spreading adhesive with the flat side of the trowel on the backside of the sheet. Spread the adhesive on the floor to double stick the material right into wet adhesive, roll the material in all directions and put weights on the stove bar area until the adhesive has set up.

**It is important to note** that linoleum gets installed into wet adhesive, so adhesive open time is very important, as is the type of adhesive and the trowel. Do not use anything other than the recommended adhesive and trowel, and make sure the floor is rolled immediately after setting the material into the adhesive. However, specific chemicals need to be used on linoleum that are different from those used on other resilient floors, including the type of cleaner, stripper and floor finish. Be sure to use products made specifically for natural linoleum.

Some people are afraid of linoleum, but it's not the product that's at fault. Linoleum is a fantastic, beautiful, durable, environmentally friendly product that has been around for generations, but is often misunderstood. Failures abound because of a lack of understanding of installation maintenance, so it's advisable to take advantage of manufacturer training programs for dealers, installers and floor care technicians. If the right methods are specified and enough time is allowed, then everyone makes money, the job gets done right and the customer has a beautiful floor that will last a lifetime. It's not difficult; it's just different! ●

*A fourth-generation floor-covering specialist, with experience in retail, architectural sales, technical support, consultant, writer, educator and activist, **Christopher Capobianco** is owner of Christopher Collaborative Inc. Capobianco volunteers with FCICA, ASTM Committee F.06 on Resilient Flooring and II CRC (Institute of Inspection, Cleaning and Restoration Certification).*



*A skilled installer can achieve great looks with linoleum.*



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