

Kitchen Remodeling on the Cheap: Simple, Practical Ideas for Creating Your Dream Kitchen on a Budget

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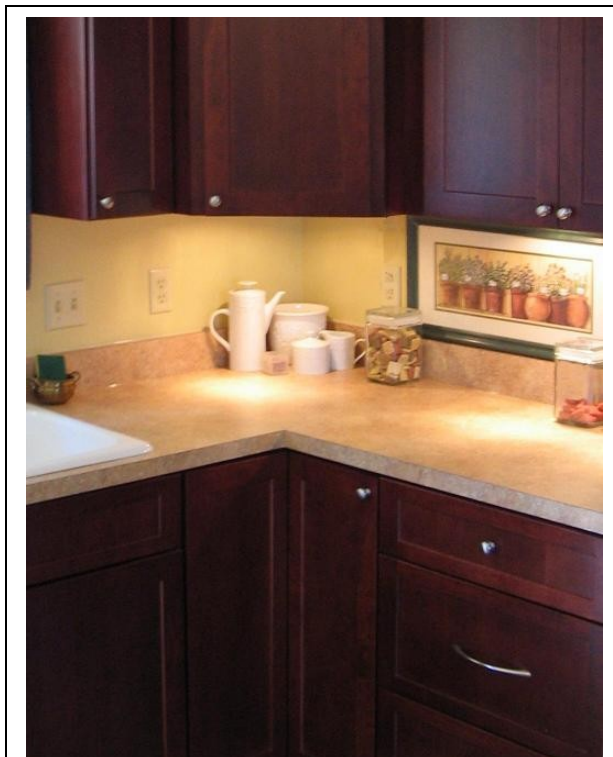
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So, you're tired of your old kitchen. You are not alone. According to an annual survey by, *Kitchen & Bath Business*, the trade journal of kitchen and bath remodeling professionals, so are 5.5 million other homeowners who plan to do a kitchen remodel in 2009 -- a record number. But at a price tag of \$7,000 to for a face lift and \$30,000 for a complete tear-out and redo, kitchen remodeling on a limited budget can be a real challenge — but not an impossible one.

And the effort can pay big dividends. According to *Remodeling Magazine's* latest "Cost vs. Value Report", even modest kitchen remodeling provides a higher return on investment than any other remodeling project. This means that you can enjoy your kitchen for years to come, plus reap a nice return on your investment if you decide to sell your home down the road.

Staying on budget does not have to mean doing without either essentials or some very nice refinements. You just have to choose wisely and use common sense. At StarCraft we build about 20 kitchens each year, and over the years have learned a few things about how to build beautiful, functional kitchens that are at the same time affordable. This is the Mid-West where we make a buck work very hard. Here are some ideas that we have found work well.



Cherry finish on poplar or alder looks like cherrywood. Beech, maple, poplar, alder and other budget woods can be used to mimic far more expensive hardwoods.

Creative Cabinetry

Your cabinets will make the most visual impact in your kitchen and will probably be the single most costly part of your makeover — as much as 40%. But that doesn't mean they have to break the bank or look cheap. Here are some specific tried and true ways to get cabinets that look like a million bucks, but cost a whole lot less. For more information on cabinets, their construction and the difference between types of cabinets see our article [Cabinet Basics](#). We urge your to reach this article to get cabinet-smart before you select your cabinets.

Stick to Stock

Instead of splurging on full custom cabinets with special doors designed by Cousin Nell (you know, the *artiste*), use your cabinetmaker's stock sizes, standard doors and regular finishes.

Most shops have a catalog or hundreds, if not thousands of designs and finishes already available. One of them should suit you. Use true custom cabinets only in the one or two places where a stock cabinet will absolutely not work.

Fake It 'Til You Make It (Cheaper)

Dress up a budget wood to look like something pricier.

Cherry finish on alder or poplar looks as much like cherrywood as cherrywood does, and costs less than half what cherrywood costs. (Bet you can't say that fast). Often even experts cannot tell without a very close examination. Beech, maple and birch can emulate a host of pricier hardwoods like walnut and mahogany. Ask your cabinetmaker for advice. It's usually free, and well worth listening to.

Enhance stock cabinetry with glass doors and compatible mouldings. But don't overdo it. Mouldings per linear foot are expensive no matter where you get them, so less is best. Use plain glass in some doors now with the idea of replacing it later with stained or art glass. At least in Nebraska, almost everyone knows someone who dabbles in art glass.

Optimize Organizers

Drawer and cabinet organizers are very useful, but the cost of custom organizers can add up fast. If you can make them work, use after-market lazy susans, spice racks and other organizers rather than custom built items. But first make sure the add-ons are actually cheaper. Sometimes they are not or the extra cost of installing them in already-built cabinets exceeds the savings on the aftermarket item.

Sweat Some Savings

There are some routine cabinetmaking tasks you can probably do. If you are at all handy, install your own door and drawer hardware that you buy yourself. You can install the door hinge and drawer runner hardware - something that saves about 3-4 hours of the cabinetmaker's time, and you can probably stain and finish if the finish is not too complex. Any work the cabinetmaker does not have to do, you won't have to pay for.

Appliance Aptitude

Your new appliances will do lots of work, and use a lot of electricity. They deserve careful selection and a good balance between initial cost and long-term operating expense.

Be an Energy Star

Don't buy an inefficient appliance just because it is cheaper. If the price difference is not too great (and maybe even if it is) buy Energy Star® appliances. Most communities offer rebates, tax credits or tax deductions for these appliances. Also see what your local utilities are offering. They usually have some kind of rebate or buying club program in place. So a more efficient appliance may actually end up costing the same as or less than its energy hog cousin. In every case compare the FTC Energy Guide label information and pick the most efficient appliance.

Shun the Gimmicks...

Shy away from "bells and whistles" unless they'll make a real difference in your day-to-day life. That gotta-have pop-up, touch-pad, LED display is not really gotta-have if it adds \$200.00 to the price.

...and Stainless Steel

Stainless steel is the new "must-have" appliance finish. We don't know why. Stainless shows the print of every finger that touches it. It requires nearly daily cleaning. Stick with white. It's cheaper, never goes out of style, and is everyone's second if not first choice, so it's easy to resell. Put your color in something that is easily changeable, like paint or curtains. That way you won't be replacing your new "teal blue" appliances in 5 years because the color is so incredibly out of date.

Restrain Your Refrigeration

Refrigerators are the big power hogs in your kitchen. Buy the most efficient refrigerator you can afford. As a general rule, the tried and true freezer on top models are going to cost less than side-by-sides which are less costly than newer freezer-on-bottom and French door models. Don't buy the model the manufacturer is advertising heavily - that's the most expensive model. Absolutely shun the so-called "professional" appliances. They are hugely expensive for what you get which is essentially a home appliance wrapped up in a restaurant-looking shell.

Don't Buy the Brand

Just because you've bought GE appliances all your life, as your father and grandfather did before you, does not mean you should buy GE today.

Brand name is a lot less important than it was just a decade ago. There are only a dozen large appliance manufacturers left in the world. All of the smaller companies have been



bought up by the monster brands.

Whirlpool, for example, now owns Maytag, Amana, Admiral, KitchenAid, Speed Queen, Sub Zero, Jenn Air, Magic Chef, and Norge as well as Whirlpool. And most of the appliances in Whirlpool group are actually manufactured by such firms as Guangzhou Junjian Kitchen Appliances & Refrigeration Equipment Co., Ltd. of China. These may be sold by Whirlpool group under any of its brand names.

Look for features, warranty, and efficiency, not brand name. Brand name no longer makes much difference — except to the price. A Whirlpool refrigerator is generally cheaper than the exact same Maytag refrigerator. The car companies have been doing this for years, A Plymouth Voyager is cheaper than a Dodge Caravan which is cheaper than a Chrysler Town and Country — although they are exactly the same vehicle. The appliance makers have adopted the same marketing strategy — and we keep falling for it.

Avoid Built-in Refrigerators

The current design trend is toward built-in refrigerators. These are just shallow refrigerators, often called cabinet-depth refrigerators, designed to be wrapped in cabinet wood to look like they are part of the cabinetry. Often they can be fitted with a wood door cover to look like a tall cabinet with big doors. Figure on doubling your refrigerator budget to buy a cabinet-depth refrigerator which actually holds 30% less than its full-depth cousin. And add a few hundred dollars for your carpenter to build it in. If this is the look you want, fine. But expect to pay for it.

A much better choice, if you have the room (and most kitchens do), is to increase the depth of your base cabinets to match the depth of your normal refrigerator then wrap the refrigerator in a wood panel. The refrigerator looks built-in and you get a lot more countertop space. To learn more about the other advantages of opting for deeper base cabinets, see our article [Off the Wall Kitchens: Living Without Upper Cabinets](#).

Home (Cooking) on the Range

A separate cooktop and wall oven are going to cost about twice as much as a good quality range with built-in oven. Unless you are a daily or near-daily baker, forget the wall oven. You won't use it enough to make it worth the price. Wall ovens are also hard to design into small kitchens because of their sheer size and mass. They always seem to be in the way of other essential kitchen functions. Ovens in ranges are too low to be comfortable enough to use regularly, but if you use it only once in a while, it's a bargain. Many of us don't use the oven at all — substituting countertop toaster-ovens and microwaves, and most home cooks use it only on occasion. So here is an opportunity to save big by avoiding that expensive cooktop/wall-oven combination.

If you have natural gas in your home, go for gas. Gas ranges are a little more expensive to buy, but also less expensive to operate and, as most professional chefs will agree, better to cook on. But keep in mind that efficiency is relative. Cooking on gas for a year saves just \$18.00 in my home town, Lincoln, Nebraska, over cooking with electricity. Of course consumer-owned Lincoln Electric System's electricity is the third cheapest in the country, so the difference may be much greater where you are.

Counter(top) Measures

A countertop takes incredible abuse. You put hot pans on it, cut on it, scrape and scratch at it, scour it, pound it, and spill hot liquids on it. Yet after years of use, it is still expected to look as good as ever. We present most of the countertop options available in our article [New](#)

[and Traditional Countertop Materials](#) and strongly urge you to increase your countertop IQ by reading it, but here is our take on price vs. value after working with countertops for nearly half a century. Keep in mind, that after cabinets and appliances, countertops are the most expensive item in your new kitchen and savings here can be substantial with no sacrifice in function or quality.

Laminates

The no-question winner in the price/value countertop category is laminate. Unless there is a very good reason for using another material, stick with a good quality laminate countertop like Formica® or Wilsonart®. Sure, granite, Corian® and Silestone®, stainless steel and concrete countertops are beautiful and will certainly make your friends and neighbors go "Ooh" and "Aah", but at a price. The price, in an average size kitchen, is about \$2,000 for the "Ooh" and another \$2,000 for the "Aah". And, with stone countertops becoming more commonplace, the ohs and ahs just ain't what they used to be.

We have heard all the same talk about how the pricier materials are so much better than laminates. Well, they can sometimes be better, but they are *absolutely not* four to ten times better. They are however four to ten times more expensive. Stick with a good quality laminate. If you like the look of granite, buy a laminate that looks like granite. If you like

Corian solid surfacing, there are laminates that look like Corian. In about 20 years you and your neighbor with the granite countertop are both going to be tired of your countertops and want to change them. He's going to throw away a \$6,000 piece of rock, while you are going to junk \$1,000 worth of paper and plastic. Who was smarter? There's a reason this stuff has out sold every other countertop material combined for the past 70 years. It is by far — by far — the best countertop value.

Ceramic, Porcelain and Stone Tile

Our second choice for the value-conscious countertop buyer is ceramic, porcelain or stone tile. Tile is, if anything, even more versatile than laminates, comes in many more colors, patterns and textures (and that's saying something since there are over 1,000 laminates to choose from), and can actually cost less. It can also cost a great deal more. Tile is both the least expensive and most expensive countertop option. You can easily spend just pennies per square foot for good-quality ceramic tile on sale. You can also spend many thousand dollars per square foot for hand-fired, hand-painted art tiles.

No doubt you have heard those awful things about tile countertops. Tile stains, cracks, and so on. Actually, it is no more susceptible to cracking than granite, soapstone or concrete, and does not stain. What used to stain was the grout. Not true any longer with the new urethane-based grouts (See "Myths and Fables", below). These very new products are flexible, durable, last nearly forever, never fade, and are as likely to stain as, well, polyurethane varnish.

Photo: Wilsonart.



Is this countertop granite or laminate? If you can't immediately tell the difference, is the hefty up charge for granite worth it? It's Wilsonart laminate, by the way, the pattern name is "Bahia Granite".

There is no necessary quality difference between ceramic tiles that say "porcelain" on the box and ceramic tiles that don't. So don't pay more for a tile because it calls itself porcelain. Look for tile that is rated for countertop use — which is generally tile that is suitable for wet areas. Most tile meets this criteria easily. On sale, it is possible to find suitable tiles that cost \$1.00 per square foot, or less. Quite the bargain. And to sweeten the deal, ceramic tile, made literally out of dirt -- clay and silica (sand) -- is a reasonably green material – much greener than even the greenest engineered countertop.

(For more information on how tiles are rated, and which ratings work for countertops, see our article [Porcelain or Ceramic: What Is the Difference?](#))

If you use good judgment and common sense, you can easily get a countertop that will probably last as long as stone for the price of a quality laminate. Still longing for that granite look? Use granite tiles instead at one-quarter the cost. And if you want that "Wow" factor, it's hard to beat the color, texture and flexibility of tile. Mix and match to your heart's content. Play with patterns and color. Add a few art tiles for interest.

Tile, then, is definitely our second choice for budget countertops.

Solid Surfacing

Now we get into an area where there is much disagreement among our professional countertop guys and gals. But a solid plurality of us prefer solid surfacing to all of the remaining options. Solid surfacing, like Corian®, has the twin advantages of being cheaper than most of the rest of the pack, and at least as durable. Some of us don't care for the matte appearance of the material, but this is an aesthetic not a value choice. Tough, durable, almost impossible to stain, repairable if it is damaged, and relatively inexpensive, solid surfacing is a solid (pun intended) third choice for the value conscious.

The Also Rans

Then there are all of the rest — all of which are excellent materials: durable, long-lasting, nearly indestructible. They will outlast you, your house, your city, and probably the United States. You will grow tired of your countertop many, many years before it wears out. If you just have to have these premium materials, we will install them for you. Now all you have to do is figure out where to save the money to pay for them.

Photo: [American Olean](#)



It's hard to beat the design possibilities of ceramic or stone tile, even with materials costing several times more than tile.

Photo: [Pratt & Larson Tile](#)



Mix one-of-a-kind art tiles with plain tile to create your own unique pattern. This design from [Pratt & Larson Tile](#) which specializes in recreating distinctive Arts & Crafts period tiles.

Mix and Match

Have you heard of some rule that says all of your countertops have to be the same? We haven't either. A good way to get an interesting look is to mix and match countertop materials. Use laminates for most of the countertop, but perhaps hard maple at the prep counter and granite on both sides of the range. We have seen this technique used to wonderful effect by decorators and creative homeowners. It works, and it's cheaper than all-premium countertops — a whole lot cheaper.

(Back)splashes of Color

If you really want to jazz up your kitchen, consider the artful ways backsplashes can be used. The days of automatically matching the backsplash to the counter are gone. Glass, stone, tile and even wood can be used as a dramatic and inexpensive kitchen accent. Ceramic, stone, glass or metal tiles are available in tile shops and kitchen show rooms, or we can buy them for a little less at home improvement stores. Here is where you can get creative at a very modest price.

Sinks and Faucets

Sinks and faucets are real savings opportunities. You can easily spend thousands of dollars for these items, but just as easily get very high quality sinks and faucets for less than \$200.00.



Stylish faucets do not have to cost a mint. This contemporary pullout faucet by Kohler has a street price of about \$230.00 with a lifetime guarantee.

Faucets

There is no appreciable quality difference between a good mid-range faucet and an expensive designer faucet. The difference is only the cachet of the mark. If you buy a Grohe or Lacava faucet over a Kohler, Moen or Delta faucet it's because you appreciate the artistry of a Grohe or Lacava. The Kohler will give just as good service, it just does not have the pizzaz of a Lacava or the hand-made reputation of a Grohe.

If you must have high design, expect to pay for it. But for most homeowners the thousands of excellent mid-range faucets have so many design choices that looking any further for a faucet is just not necessary. For an overview of dozens of faucet manufacturers and their products, take a look at our article [Sources of Supply: Faucets Overview](#). For your faucet finish, stick with chrome. Faucets are available in everything from gold to "hand rubbed bronze", but these premium finishes can easily double the price of the faucet. Our second choice for easy maintenance and great looks: brushed stainless.

Sinks

Sinks mount into your countertop in three ways: drop-in, tile-in and undermount. Tile-in sinks are used with tile countertops and designed so the top edge of the sink is flush with the countertop tile. Undermount sinks, as you would expect, are mounted under the countertop. Tile-in and undermount kitchen sinks are preferred by most homeowners over drop-in sinks because they seamlessly flow into the countertop, eliminating the grunge-collecting lip of drop-in sinks. Until recently, however, undermount sinks could be installed only be-

neath pricey stone or solid surfacing countertops. There was no good way to undermount a sink in a laminate counter top that would last more than a few years. That has all changed.

[Karran Products](#) has introduced an acrylic undermount sink that bonds seamlessly to the underside of a laminated counter top. The sink selection is still rather limited (and only in white or bisque), and there are just a few counter top fabricators familiar with the product (we happen to be one of them), but the list of both is growing. At about \$300, the Karran sink is no more expensive than a good composite sink, and comes with an incredible 50 year warranty against staining.

If a composite sink is not for you, then consider our second choice for the budget-minded: good quality stainless steel. It is durable, easy to clean, heat resistant, tarnish free, less likely to break dishes than cast iron or stone, blends well with just about every decor, and, best of all, is the most affordable sink. But don't grab the first sale sink you find at Lowe's or The Home Depot. There are grades of stainless steel, some are much better than others.

The steel alloy you want is Type 302 or 304. These alloys have the best combination of chromium and nickel for superior corrosion resistance and durability. Also, they are fairly soft and have a little "give", reducing the chance of dish breakage. Look for Type 302 or 304 on the box (sometimes they are collectively referred to as "18/8" stainless). If the sink has one of these alloys the box will say so. If it does not, pass it by. There is a tiny difference in the composition of 302 and 304 steels, but either is very suitable to sinks.



The new Karran sinks seamlessly undermount in laminate countertops eliminating the grunge-collecting lip of traditional drop-in sinks.

The thicker the steel, the less susceptible it is to denting, bowing and noise transmission from pots and pans hitting the metal surface. The thickness, called "gauge", can be determined by its number. The lower the number, the thicker the steel. Most sinks come in 18 or 20 gauge steel. The 18 gauge is the thicker of the two and is more than adequate for residential sinks. If you can find a 16 gauge Type 302 or 304 sink on sale, then buy it, you cannot possibly go wrong with this sink.

Look at the finish. Some manufacturers have started selling highly polished stainless sinks. These glistening wonders look great in the showroom, but not so great after a few years of use. Steel scratches. Polished steel shows every scratch, brushed stainless steel does not. And, brushed steel is almost always cheaper.

The layout of your new sink is important. In the era before dishwashers, two-basin sinks allowed washing to be done on one side, rinsing on the other. With a dishwasher a deep one-basin sink is usually best for hand washing those big pots and roasters that will not fit in the dishwasher. If you must have a two-basin sink, choose an asymmetrical design: one that has one big basin and one small basin and put the disposal in the small basin.

Smart Floors

The least expensive floor option for kitchens is vinyl: either sheet vinyl or vinyl tile. But the best value is either ceramic tile, hardwood or laminates. The most eco-friendly is cork and bamboo. You can find much more information on these various products in [Flooring Options for Kitchens and Baths](#). Each of these has advantages and disadvantages.

Hardwood: The Warm Choice

No material says "warm and homey" like a polished wood floor. Oak, which is now mostly harvested as a crop from managed forests, is the ultimate hardwood flooring deal — relatively inexpensive and extremely long lasting. In former years the wood finishes available did not protect well-enough to use hardwood in a potential wet area like a kitchen. But the new finishes protect wood from all but flooding. Avoid prefinished wood floors. These are usually a hardwood veneer on a medium density fiberboard (MDF) backer. If it gets wet, MDF, swells like cardboard, ruining the floor. You will want solid unfinished hardwood sanded smooth and varnished with polyurethane by a local floor specialist. This seals the wood and the cracks between the planks so water cannot get in.

Laminates: The Low-Maintenance Choice

Laminate flooring is similar in construction to laminate kitchen countertops but with a much tougher wear layer. It is usually installed over a sturdy subfloor using an interlocking tongue



There is no other flooring material that is more versatile or inspires more creativity than ceramic, porcelain or stone tile. This stone-look floor is actually inexpensive ceramic tile.

and groove system. Some brands require a bead of specially formulated, water-resistant, glue be placed between the tongue and grooves of every plank to hold the planks together and to seal all the edges of the planks from moisture. These products are the best choice for kitchens. There are also special water-resistant designs made especially for bathrooms and kitchens, look for them. Warranties range from 10 years to lifetime. Most of them guarantee against defects, wear, fading, stains, and water damage. The drawback to laminate is that it is noisy — walking on it produces a drum-like sound that can be very irksome to some people.

Ceramic, Porcelain and Stone Tile: The Permanent Choice

Glazed tile or stone is probably the ultimate kitchen flooring material, and with care in selection can also be the most affordable. Large format tiles (12" x 12"

or larger) are usually the best choices since they are faster to install (costing, therefore less money) and easiest to maintain. The former problem with the hard tiles was grout which stained and was difficult to keep looking nice. New stainless urethane grouts have all but eliminated this problem (See "Myths and Fables", below).

The creative options available with ceramic and porcelain tiles are endless. Patterns, solids, textured looks are just the baseline for designs. Add to that a myriad of size variations and specialty looks, and the combinations approach infinity. So if you want to get creative, a tile floor gives you every opportunity, but keep in mind that tile is a permanent floor, so use care in your selection. You want something that you will still like 50 years from now because

it will still be there.

Cork and Bamboo: The Green Choice

For those concerned with protecting the environment while getting a great kitchen floor, bamboo and cork are the options. Cork is a wholly green material. It is the bark of the Cork Oak and can be repeatedly harvested without harming the tree. It is minimally processed into a tile that is dense, stain resistant and very water resistant. Before plastic, it was the material used for fishing bobbers and life jackets. Ever see a cork fishing bobber sink? Neither have we. The closed-cell structure of cork defeats water penetration. Still, it's best not to let water sit on a cork floor. The water will work itself around the cork and into the subfloor, which, if it gets wet enough, will buckle and warp, ruining the floor.

Bamboo is also considered a green material. We have a few doubts about that. Its basic raw material is definitely green. It is a renewable, sustainable grass stem from what may be the fastest growing plant in the world. But the processing the grass goes through to make flooring is anything but green, and requires some very, very eco-unfriendly chemicals and a whole lot of power. In fact, from one point of view, bamboo is really an engineered material with a bamboo filler, similar to Silestone® which uses quartz as a filler. Quartz, although it is one of the most common minerals in the world, so abundant that we cannot possibly ever run out of it before the sun explodes, is not considered green. Beats the hell out of us. We think of bamboo flooring as "greenish", not green.

Cork is probably, then, the greener of the green choices, but bamboo is usually cheaper and has, generally, a longer guaranteed life cycle. Fifty-year bamboo warranties are common.

Let There be (Fluorescent) Light

There is a lot more information on choosing efficient lighting and using it effectively in our article [Designing Efficient and Effective Kitchen Lighting](#). But here are the highlights:

Fluorescent Lighting

Whatever style of light fixture you prefer, make sure the bulb is a fluorescent. This is the smart choice, not just for the budget, it's also the green choice and the low maintenance choice.

Fluorescent lighting produces much more light for the electricity used than any other form of lighting except LEDs (more below). Compact Fluorescent Lamps (CFL) can be used in almost any place a less efficient incandescent bulb can be used. The bulbs last a lot longer - up to 5 times longer, so they do not have to be replaced as often, which is nice for landfills, and they produce the same quality of light. Their drawback is that they require minute amounts (4 milligrams) of mercury to operate, and mercury, as you know, can be an environmentally dangerous metal. The EPA maintains, however, that the amount of mercury use is so small that the total amount of mercury use in all the CFLs made has an insignificant



Cork flooring is very "Green", relatively inexpensive, very water resistant and absolutely beautiful as well as a treat to walk on.

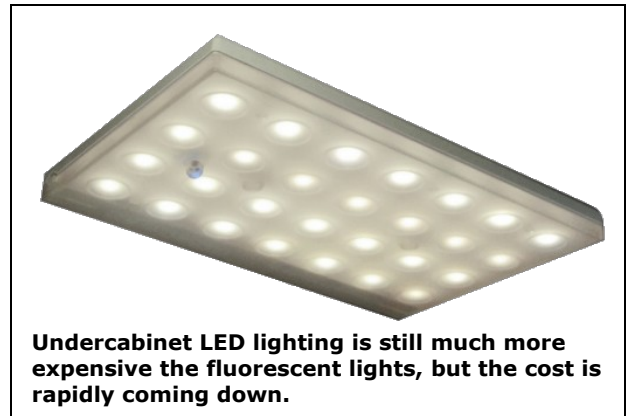
impact on the environment compared to the enormous ecological benefits of CFLs. Some CFLs use less mercury than others, and some last much longer than other CFLs. It's usually not possible to tell from the box which CFLs are stellar performers, but the [Environmental Working Group](#) recently tested CFLs and identified the seven most efficient and eco-friendliest. See the study results [here](#).

For undercounter lighting, use T-5 or T-8 fluorescent instant-on fixtures. You may not know what these are, but your electrician does. These are not pretty fixtures, but they are hidden under the cabinet, so what difference does it make? Avoid low-voltage halogen or xenon lights. These are not only more expensive to buy, but more expensive to operate, and they burn very hot so special care in installation is required. Low voltage lights have *no advantage whatsoever* over fluorescent undercabinet fixtures.

Light Emitting Diodes (LED)

The only real challenge to the fluorescent is the light emitting diode. LEDs are not yet suitable for general room lighting. But you can use them for task lights, reading lamps, and night lights; in closets and for path-marking outdoor lighting. The downside; LEDs cost more than equivalent fluorescent lights, but the cost and performance of these bulbs are rapidly improving. At some

point, probably very soon, we are going to reach the point at which LEDs become comparable. Available in undercabinet light bars and pucks and as recessed ceiling lighting for three or five years, now, an LED that works in a standard light socket has recently come on the market. It is very expensive, but expect the price to come down rapidly as the technology gets cheaper and competition more intense.



Kitchen Remodeling Myths and Fables

Like every enterprise, kitchen remodeling is awash in myths and half-truths that can cause a lot of confusion and wasted effort and money. Here are a few of our all-time favorites.

Cabinet Myths

Refacing cabinets saves 50% over replacing the cabinets. If your kitchen layout is good, and your cabinets are working for you, refacing is definitely an option. It will save something, but probably closer to 20-25% over the cost of new cabinets. Refacing cabinets requires that new doors and drawers be made, and the entire exposed part of the cabinet box be veneered with new wood. But, it is precisely the doors and drawers that are the expensive parts of the cabinet. The box itself is cheap. Veneering is tedious and time consuming. It is not at all cheap if done right, and is, in fact, about the same as the cost of remanufacturing the box. What you really save is the installation cost. Since your cabinets are already installed, they do not have to be reinstalled. This savings will not be anywhere near 50%. Keep in mind also that by keeping your old cabinets, you give up many of the nicer features of today's cabinets, including better hardware and door and drawer organizers just not available 20-30 years ago.

Factory cabinets from the big box stores cost a lot less than cabinet shop cabinets. This used to be true. Twenty years ago the big cabinet manufacturers

were so much more efficient than regional and local cabinetmakers that the price difference was significant. Not any longer. Local shops have gotten a lot more efficient. Locally manufactured cabinets are now about the same price as equivalent factory cabinets when you consider that:

- Factory cabinets have to be shipped, often from far away, and this cost is added to the price.
- The cabinets have to be installed. With local cabinets the installation is part of the package. The cost of installing factory cabinets is separate and in addition to the cost of the cabinets. We used to install for a major lumber-store chain, so we know what they charge, and it is not inconsiderable.
- Cabinets have to be designed. You cannot just order a handful of cabinets and expect them to fit your kitchen. Factory cabinets ordered through box stores are "designed" by a sales person who has had only rudimentary training in kitchen design — usually about 3 days in a classroom. Local cabinets are designed by an experienced cabinetmaker to precisely fit your kitchen.
- If a cabinet is damaged, missing or just the wrong size, a local cabinetmaker can produce a replacement cabinet in a matter of days. A factory cabinet takes weeks.

Of course, having said all that, there are exceptions. If you stay with stock cabinets in standard finishes, avoid high-markup fancy trim, mouldings and accessories; and look for sales, you can really get a deal on store cabinets. But before you order, make sure of the design. We puzzle over why store designers do things like specify drawers that cannot open because another cabinet is in the way. Rather than contracting with the store to install the cabinets, hire a local carpenter, and have him double check the design. It will almost certainly be cheaper because the store does not pile on its overhead and profit, and you often get better workmanship from the guy who depends on your satisfaction for his paycheck.

For more information on how cabinets are actually made in the 21st century, see [Distributed Manufacturing: Today's Cabinetmaking Revolution](#). For a detailed discussion of kitchen and bath cabinetry, visit [Cabinet Basics](#). For peek at how cabinets are made and the differences between cabinetmaker cabinets and factory cabinets, see [Comparative Cabinet Construction](#).

Tile Fables

Porcelain is better tile than ceramic. They are actually pretty much the same thing. Porcelain is just one type of ceramic tile. Historically the only difference has been that porcelain tiles were made of light clays while other ceramics were made of red and darker brown clays. What makes the real difference in tile quality is how long and how hot tile is fired. Tiles fired longer at higher temperature are denser, harder and more impervious to water. This applies to any ceramic tile whether made of red clay or light clay. Our recommendation, ignore the term "porcelain". Look for the tile that's the right size, durability, color and luster. It does not matter whether a tile is porcelain or ceramic as long as it is graded for how it is to be used. Learn more about how tiles are graded and the difference between grades at [Porcelain or Ceramic: What is the difference?](#).

Tile grout stains and is nearly impossible to clean. There was a time when stain was a major worry when using grouted tile on a floor, countertop or backsplash. The grout at the time was cement grout. It was inexpensive and came in a rainbow of colors. But cement is porous and has to be regularly sealed with a silicon sealant to remain looking fresh. Even with sealant, it would eventually get grungy.

The new grouts are very different. Rather than being cement based, they are urethane based. You know urethane, the stuff used to make nearly indestructible polyurethane varnish. Unlike cement grout which was colored by pigments that were hard to match exactly from batch to batch, urethane grout is colored with bits of quartz in the mix, and will match perfectly from batch to batch every time. Urethanes cure to a flexible, self-sealing, semi-elastic, hard finish that lasts for years and years without staining. Anti-microbial formulations for baths also defeat mold and mildew.

Dishwasher Fictions

Hand-washing dishes rather than running the dishwasher saves water and electricity. This is one of our all time favorite misconceptions. Many homeowners believe they're helping the environment and reducing their water bill by washing dishes the old-fashioned way rather than using a dishwasher. Nothing could be further from the truth. Modern dishwashers use, on average, 1-1.5 kilowatt hours of energy and 3.7 gallons of water (an amount equal to one full kitchen sink). Take into consideration how many full sinks you use to wash a pile of dishes and the amount of water you use for rinsing the dishes and it's easy to see how wrong this myth is. Washing by hand consumes much more water than using your dishwasher, especially when you consider that washing dishes by hand is a daily affair whereas you may only run your dishwasher only every 2 or 3 days. Your dishwasher is one of your most efficient appliances. In most localities (excluding the cost of detergent) it costs between 12¢ and 20¢ to wash a load of dishes.

So if you are going "Green" and thinking about leaving the dishwasher out of your new kitchen to help the environment, forget it. Buy the most efficient dishwasher you can afford. Stop washing by hand, just load dirty dishes as they are used into the dishwasher until it is full, then push the magic button. For more information on saving household water, read our article [Selecting Bathroom Fixtures: Showers and Bathtubs](#).

Dishes should be "pre-rinsed" before being washed in a dishwasher. Many thousands of people seem devoted to removing every spec of food from their dinnerware before putting it in the dishwasher. You can eliminate this "pre-rinse" for any dishwasher newer than 20 years old because it does not help your dishwasher get your dishes any cleaner. Moreover, re-rinsing may actually harm your dishes because prerinsing causes the concentration of alkaline in dishwasher detergent to rise to high levels. Dishwasher detergents are made to clean stuck-on grease and grime. With no grease and grime to attack, the alkaline in the detergent attacks your dishes instead, making them appear cloudy, scratched and in some cases, actually etching the surface. Scrape away large bits of food, but don't prerinse, and if you are one of the fortunate few to have a disposer built into your dishwasher, don't even bother to scrape. By not pre-rinsing, you will save about 14,000 gallons of water each year. That 14,000 gallon figure is **not a typo**.