

READER'S EDITION · 2026

The Bellingham Homeowner's *Guide* to Hiring a Flooring Installer.

Pricing, prep, acclimation, and the seven questions every Bellingham homeowner should ask before signing a contract. Written by people who actually install flooring in Whatcom County.

What's *inside.*

A quick tour of the guide. Skip to whichever section answers the question on your mind.

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A quick note *before we start.*

We wrote this guide because the questions we hear from Bellingham homeowners every week tend to be the same five or six. Sometimes it's the kitchen tile that's been there since 1992. Sometimes it's a creaky living room floor in a 1920s Lettered Streets Victorian. Sometimes it's the fact that the carpet upstairs has finally given up after sixteen years and three kids.

What's almost always missing is straight pricing, what to ask, and what to watch out for in our specific climate. Phoenix homeowners don't worry about subfloor moisture the way we do. Atlanta homeowners don't have crawlspaces that turn into terrariums every February. We do, and that changes the answers.

Read this start-to-finish if it's your first flooring project. Skip around if you already know what you want and just need pricing or the question list. Either way, you should walk away knowing more than you knew and having fewer surprises ahead of you.

If you have questions we didn't answer, call us. We pick up the phone.

A NOTE ON THIS GUIDE

Nobody paid us to recommend any specific brand or product. The brands we mention by name are ones we install regularly because they hold up here. If a different brand works better for your project, we'll tell you.

The flooring most Bellingham homes *actually pick.*

Five categories cover roughly 95 percent of the residential flooring we install across Whatcom County. Here's where each one wins and where it loses, in your climate.

Hardwood (solid and engineered)

Still the right floor for most main-level rooms in Bellingham homes that have a properly ventilated crawlspace. Living rooms, dining rooms, hallways, formal entries. We see solid white oak, hickory, and Douglas fir most often. Engineered hardwood with a stable core (acacia or eucalyptus) is more forgiving in our humidity and works over radiant heat or a slab. Hardwood refinishes four to six times over its life if it's solid; one to three times if it's engineered.

Where it wins: living rooms, dining rooms, hallways, bedrooms in well-ventilated homes. **Where it loses:** kitchens with dishwashers, bathrooms, basements, anywhere over a wet slab.

Luxury vinyl plank (LVP)

The category that's earned its reputation the hard way. Modern wide-plank LVP with a 20-mil wear layer and embossed-in-register texture looks and feels close to real wood, holds up to dogs and kids, and shrugs off the moisture that wrecks hardwood in Bellingham kitchens and basements. It does not refinish, ever, but a good install will last fifteen to twenty-five years.

Where it wins: kitchens, bathrooms, basements, slab construction, rentals. **Where it loses:** formal living rooms in older homes where character matters, places where you'll want to refinish someday.

Laminate

The budget cousin to LVP. Better than it was ten years ago. Modern water-resistant laminate (Pergo Outlast Plus, Mohawk RevWood Plus, Shaw Repel) tightens its seams and uses water-resistant HDF cores, but the core is still wood fiber and it can swell if water sits on it. We install it in bedrooms and home offices where budget matters and water exposure is low. We don't put it in bathrooms.

Tile and stone

The right floor for entries, mudrooms, master bathrooms, and high-traffic kitchens. Porcelain handles wet boots and dropped pans. Ceramic is lighter and easier on the wallet. Natural stone (travertine, marble, slate, limestone) needs sealing every two to three years. The substrate work is what separates tile that lasts twenty years from tile that cracks in eighteen months.

Carpet

Still wins in bedrooms, stairs, basements, and home offices. The difference between carpet that looks bad in eighteen months and carpet that holds up for twelve years is in the install: power stretching, seam placement, and pad selection. We power-stretch every install. We don't knee-kick.

The most expensive thing Bellingham homeowners *ignore*.

Nine times out of ten, when we get a call about a hardwood floor that's cupping or a laminate floor that's swelling, the surface flooring is fine. The problem is the subfloor. By the time the symptoms show up, the homeowner has already paid for the floor twice (once to install, once to fix or replace).

Why this is bigger here than other markets

Bellingham gets thirty-six inches of rain a year and our average relative humidity sits around seventy-five percent. WSU Extension data shows over eighty percent of Pacific Northwest homes need crawlspace vapor barrier improvements. That's not a marketing line, that's measured.

What it means for your project: subfloor moisture readings that pass in Spokane will fail here. We test on every quote, before we price the job, and we put the readings on the contract.

The numbers we're looking for

- **Subfloor moisture content:** 12 percent or below for hardwood. Under 14 percent for engineered. Under 5 percent for tile installs over wood.
- **Slab moisture (calcium chloride or RH probe):** under 3 pounds MVER for most flooring. RH probe under 75 percent.
- **Wood-to-subfloor differential:** within 2 percent after the hardwood acclimates. More than that and you'll see seasonal cup.

What it costs to fix

Crawlspace vapor barrier upgrade: roughly \$1.50 to \$3 per square foot of crawlspace. A typical 1,500 square foot Bellingham home runs \$2,250 to \$4,500. Joist sister-ing, when needed: \$200 to \$400 per joist. Self-leveling compound: \$2 to \$4 per square foot for the leveling work.

That sounds like a lot. It isn't, compared to replacing a \$20,000 hardwood install that fails because of moisture in eighteen months. The math favors doing it right the first time, every time.

IF YOU REMEMBER ONE THING

Anyone who quotes your hardwood install **without testing your subfloor moisture** is making the same mistake the last installer made on the floor that's failing now. Walk away.

The part most installers *rush*.

Acclimation is the period between when the wood arrives at your home and when it gets installed. The wood sits in the actual installation room (not the garage, not the basement) and reaches equilibrium with your home's humidity. Skip it, or shorten it, and you get cupping or gapping in year one.

How long it takes

- **Solid hardwood:** 3 to 7 days in the installation room. NWFA standard.
- **Engineered hardwood:** 48 to 72 hours, sometimes longer for wide-plank.
- **Bamboo:** 7 days minimum. It moves more than people expect.
- **LVP and laminate:** 24 to 48 hours.

What goes wrong when you skip it

If the wood is drier than the room, it absorbs moisture after install and the boards expand into each other (cupping at the edges, sometimes outright buckling). If the wood is wetter than the room, it dries down after install and gaps open up between boards.

The cup or gap shows up four to twelve months after the install, usually after the first full seasonal cycle. By then, the warranty period for a "free fix" has often run out, and the homeowner pays again.

What good acclimation looks like in practice

The boxes get opened (not stacked sealed) in the room being installed. The HVAC is running at the temperature and humidity you'll keep year-round. We take moisture readings of the wood and the subfloor every day or two. We don't install until both are within 2 percent of each other.

WHAT TO ASK YOUR INSTALLER

"Will you put the acclimation period in writing on the contract, with the specific number of days?" If the answer is anything other than "yes," that's information.

Solid versus engineered hardwood, *decided.*

This is the question we get most often, and the right answer is more nuanced than "engineered always wins" or "solid is the only real wood." Here's how to decide.

Pick solid hardwood when

- You have a well-ventilated crawlspace with an intact vapor barrier (or you're upgrading the crawlspace as part of the project).
- You want the option to refinish the floor four or more times over its life.
- The room is on the main floor of a single-family home (not over a garage, not over an unconditioned space).
- You don't have radiant heat under the floor.
- The floor will see normal residential traffic, not commercial-grade wear.

Pick engineered hardwood when

- You have radiant heat under the floor (most solid hardwood manufacturers void warranty over radiant heat).
- You're installing over a concrete slab.
- You're in a home with limited crawlspace ventilation that you can't fix this project.
- You want wide planks (5 inches or wider) and you live in a humidity-swing climate. Wide solid planks move more than narrow ones.
- You're in a basement, second-story over a kitchen, or anywhere with above-average humidity.

The Bellingham angle

For most Bellingham homes that aren't getting crawlspace upgrades as part of the project, engineered with a stable core (acacia, eucalyptus, multi-ply Baltic birch) is the safer bet. We still install solid in plenty of homes. We just measure first.

What about wear-layer thickness

For engineered hardwood, the wear layer (the real-wood top veneer) determines how many times you can refinish it. 2mm wear layer: 1 light sand-and-recoat. 3mm: 1 to 2 refinishes. 4mm or thicker: 2 to 3 refinishes. Less than 2mm: don't bother.

Luxury vinyl plank, *without the marketing.*

The big-box stores have made LVP confusing on purpose. Here's what actually matters for your install.

Wear-layer mil rating

The wear layer is the clear top coat that protects the printed image. Thicker wear layer equals longer life. The numbers that matter:

- **6 mil:** bargain-grade. Avoid for any room with foot traffic.
- **12 mil:** residential light traffic. Bedrooms, formal living rooms with no pets.
- **20 mil:** residential heavy traffic. Kitchens, family rooms, hallways with pets and kids. This is what we recommend in Bellingham for the rooms LVP belongs in.
- **22+ mil:** commercial.

Click-lock floating versus glue-down

Click-lock planks lock to each other along their long edges and ends and float over the substrate. Easier to install, easier to repair. Most residential LVP installs are click-lock. Glue-down uses full-spread urethane adhesive and bonds the plank to the subfloor. Better water seal at the seams. We recommend glue-down for full bathrooms and any room with high water-exposure risk.

About the "100 percent waterproof" claims

Most modern LVP cores are water-resistant, meaning the core won't swell or warp under standing water. The seams between planks, however, can admit water if it pools and sits. So in bathrooms, glue-down beats click-lock. And no matter the product, water sitting overnight under a click-lock plank will eventually find its way through. "100 percent waterproof" refers to the core, not the install.

Brands we install most in Bellingham

COREtec, Karndean, Mohawk RevWood, Shaw Floorte, Mannington Adura. All hold up. Karndean LooseLay is a unique product that lays flat without click-lock or glue, useful in commercial and certain rental scenarios.

What flooring actually *costs here.*

Real numbers from real Bellingham jobs, current as of 2026. Use these as your sanity-check number when you compare quotes. Anything way under means corners getting cut. Anything way over means you're being marked up.

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|----|-----------------------------|--|----------------------|
| 01 | <i>Hardwood install</i> | Solid or engineered, 1,500-1,800 sqft home | \$12,000 - \$28,000 |
| 02 | <i>Hardwood refinishing</i> | Sand-and-recoat or full refinish, kitchen+living | \$1,800 - \$4,500 |
| 03 | <i>LVP install</i> | Click-lock or glue-down, 1,500 sqft home | \$5,500 - \$13,000 |
| 04 | <i>Tile install</i> | Porcelain, ceramic, or stone, kitchen | \$2,800 - \$6,500 |
| 05 | <i>Carpet install</i> | Power-stretched, 1,500 sqft whole-house | \$3,500 - \$9,000 |
| 06 | <i>Floor repair</i> | Board replacement, scratch fix, water damage | \$300 - \$1,500 |
| 07 | <i>Subfloor work</i> | Joist work, leveling, vapor barriers | \$5 - \$12 / sqft |
| 08 | <i>Stair tread install</i> | Solid hardwood including riser, per stair | \$95 - \$180 / stair |

Four cost factors that swing the number more than the material does

- 1. Subfloor condition.** A flat, dry, sound subfloor adds zero. A subfloor that needs leveling, vapor barrier, joist work, or moisture mitigation can add \$2,000 to \$10,000.
- 2. Demo and haul-away.** Pulling carpet is fast and cheap. Pulling old tile (especially mortared installs) is slow and expensive. Hardwood removal varies by adhesive used.

3. **Stair count.** Each tread is roughly the labor of 6 square feet of finished floor. Staircase-heavy homes can add \$1,500 to \$3,000 over a single-floor home of similar size.
4. **Plank width and species premium.** Wide-plank hardwood (5 inches and over) costs 10 to 30 percent more in material and slightly more in labor. White oak, walnut, hickory cost more than red oak or maple.

When to refinish, when to *replace*.

Most Bellingham hardwood floors don't need replacement, they need refinishing. Here's how to tell the difference.

Refinish when

- The wear layer is intact (no scratches that go through the finish into the wood).
- You have at least 3mm of wood above the tongue (pull a register vent and look at the cut edge).
- The boards are flat (no cup, no crown that you can feel by walking).
- There's no water damage or staining that's penetrated the wood.
- You're happy with the species and plank width.

If all five are true, you can probably get away with sand-and-recoat (\$1.50 to \$3 per square foot) or full refinish (\$3 to \$5 per square foot). Both are dramatically cheaper than replacement.

Replace when

- Less than 3mm of wood above the tongue (you've already refinished too many times, or it was thin engineered hardwood to begin with).
- Severe cup or crown across an entire room (the subfloor is failing and refinishing won't fix it).
- Multiple boards with structural rot or water-damaged subfloor below them.
- You want a different species, a different plank width, or a different layout (parquet to plank, for example).

Sand-and-recoat versus full refinish

The two scopes get confused all the time. Sand-and-recoat ("screen-and-recoat") screens the existing finish and applies fresh topcoat. The wood underneath is untouched. Works for floors with a dull finish but no real damage. Saves you 50 to 70 percent versus full refinish.

Full refinish goes down to bare wood. We sand through the existing finish, fix damage, stain (if applicable), and apply three coats of fresh finish. Required for changing stain color or addressing real damage.

What to ask *before you sign.*

Print this page or screenshot it on your phone. Use it on the next contractor visit. The flooring contract you don't want to sign is the one that doesn't have answers to these.

Before the work starts

- Have you tested my subfloor moisture?** Want the readings written into the contract.

- What's the acclimation period in days, and is it on the contract?** 3-7 for solid hardwood, 48-72 hours for engineered.

- What's the subfloor scope?** If subfloor work is needed, it should be a separate line item, not buried.

- What manufacturer-certified installer programs do you hold?** NWFPA, Mohawk Edge Pro, Shaw Pinnacle, COREtec, INSTALL.

- Can I see your Washington L&I license?** Cross-check on lni.wa.gov.

- Can I see your certificate of insurance?** General liability and workers comp. Required.

- What's the labor warranty, separate from the manufacturer warranty?** Two years is the floor.

About the materials

- What's the wear-layer mil rating** (LVP/laminate) or wear-layer thickness in mm (engineered hardwood)?

- What's the plank width and species** (hardwood) or wear-layer mil and core type (LVP)?

- What's the manufacturer warranty** and does it cover residential install in my zip code?

- What underlayment or vapor barrier is included** in the quoted price?

About the project

- Is demo and haul-away in the price** or extra?

- Are transitions and stair noses** in the quote?

- Will you move my furniture** or do I need to?

- Estimated project duration**, and what triggers a delay?

The local stuff that *changes the answers.*

Every Bellingham neighborhood has its own quirks. Here's what we run into most.

Fairhaven, Lettered Streets, South Hill

Older homes (1890s-1940s) with original Douglas fir or pine flooring under decades of carpet. About seven out of ten times, the original wood is worth saving. Sand-and-recoat or full refinish runs \$1,800 to \$4,500 versus \$12,000+ for hardwood replacement. The trick is finding an installer who knows softer pine sands differently than oak.

Edgemoor, Silver Beach

Waterfront and lakefront. Salt air and lake-effect humidity push subfloor moisture above the threshold for solid hardwood in many homes. Engineered hardwood with a stable core is usually the better bet. Vapor barrier in the crawlspace is non-negotiable. Tile in mudrooms is non-negotiable.

Sudden Valley

Forest canopy and lake proximity create the most aggressive subfloor moisture conditions in our market. Engineered hardwood, LVP, or full subfloor remediation are the only viable paths for most homes. Sound transmission rules apply for second-story units in the multi-family buildings near the golf course.

Roosevelt, Sehome, Columbia

Mid-century housing stock with original tongue-and-groove fir under 1970s carpet. Often a high-value reveal-and-refinish. We pull a corner of the carpet at the quote visit to check.

Barkley, Cordata

Newer slab-on-grade construction. Slab moisture testing (calcium chloride or RH probe) is required before any hardwood install. LVP with proper vapor mitigation often beats solid hardwood here. HOA sound-rating documentation is required for hard-surface upgrades on second-floor units.

Lynden, Ferndale

Mix of historic Dutch Colonial farmhouses and newer suburban builds. Crawlspace ventilation in rural homes is generally better than in city neighborhoods. Period-appropriate refinishing on older homes; LVP and laminate in newer subdivisions.

Year-round, every neighborhood

Two things that apply everywhere in Bellingham: subfloor moisture testing on every quote, and acclimation time in writing on every contract. Anyone who skips either is repeating the mistake on the floor that brought you to look for a flooring guide in the first place.

Schedule a free in-home *flooring estimate.*

If you've gotten this far, you know more about flooring than most homeowners ever bother to learn. Use it. Get two or three quotes and compare them against the question list in section 09. The right contractor will answer every question without dodging. The wrong one will get squirrely on the third or fourth question and that's information you can use.

If you'd like one of those quotes to be from us, we're happy to come out. The visit is free. We measure, we test moisture, we write a real quote with the scope broken out by line item. If the number doesn't fit your project, you walk away. No follow-up calls, no pressure.

Ready when you are.

Most Bellingham homeowners hear back within fifteen minutes during business hours. We're at the address and number below.

bellinghamfloorpros.com • (360) 873-5667 • Mon-Sat 7am-6pm

What our estimate visit includes

- Measurements of every room being installed.
- Moisture meter readings on the subfloor and (if applicable) the existing flooring.
- Visual inspection of the crawlspace or slab.
- Physical material samples in your light, your trim, your existing cabinetry.
- A written quote with subfloor scope, demo, materials, labor, transitions, and stair noses broken out separately.
- An acclimation timeline if hardwood is involved.
- Zero obligation. You owe nothing for the visit.

Built around the *subfloor*.

Hardwood, refinishing, LVP, tile, and carpet by NWFA-certified installers who actually live here. We test the subfloor before we price the job, and we put the acclimation plan in writing.

Phone

(360) 873-5667

Web

bellinghamfloorpros.com

License

Washington State L&I (verify at lni.wa.gov)

Service area

Bellingham, Fairhaven, Edgemoor, Sehome, Sudden Valley, Lynden, Ferndale

Certified

NWFA · INSTALL Alliance · Mohawk · Shaw · COREtec

Insurance

General liability + workers compensation

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