



## GOOD MORAL FIBRES

Choose a stylish, practical floorcovering that will earn you environmental brownie points, says Rebecca Bailey

**E**thical consumerism, once the preserve of a forward-thinking minority, has become big news. More than ever before we want to know that the products we buy have been made from sustainable materials, have been produced in ways that don't generate pollutants or use vast quantities of energy, and have been manufactured under ethical conditions. So we're buying more environmentally-friendly paint, we're aware that wood products should be FSC-certified, and we're starting to mend our ways as far as cleaning products go.

But what about floorcoverings? Well, here it's certainly a case of back to historic basics. Early carpets were woven from wool as far back as the 6th century BC, and this natural fibre is

still one of the most popular materials used today. And with good reason – it's one of the most resilient and luxurious options available. Wool carpet retains its original appearance over time thanks to the unique spring-like structure of each fibre. This allows the wool to compress underneath the weight of furniture or a foot, but also allows it to 'bounce back' when the pressure is released – a quality not shared by man-made alternatives.

### SIMPLY SOFT

Wool is also naturally stain-repellent and dirt-resistant too, so there's no need for chemical-based treatments. The fibre's high moisture content means that it is flame-retardant, and has none of the static electricity problems

associated with synthetics. It is non-toxic and non-allergenic, and its hygroscopic qualities enable it to regulate humidity and absorb pollutants – and that's all before we even start to go into its fabulous insulatory properties and luxurious feel. In short, we have a lot to thank the sheep for.

Added to all this, wool is a renewable resource. "The production of wool is both ecologically and environmentally friendly," says Richard Lawrence of Axminster Carpets. "And it doesn't end with its production. This fibre is extremely hardwearing, so the extended lifespan of a wool carpet will result in replacement being required less frequently. In consequence of this, there will be less waste, fewer raw materials used and greater energy



**OPPOSITE PAGE:** This Morocco runner in the Marrakech colourway is made using sisal, and costs £49 per m from Kersaint Cobb. **TOP LEFT:** This pure wool Rustic Charm design in the Tsavo colourway is priced at around £22 per sq m from Pownall Carpets. **TOP RIGHT:** This Stella Sisal Stripe rug features a leather border. Sisal Stripes is priced at £29.95 per sq m from the Alternative Flooring Company. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Victoria Carpets' Diplomat design is made in 100% wool, and is priced at £59 per sq m. **ABOVE LEFT:** Natural Plaid in the Autumn Glow colourway is made in 100% wool, and is priced at around £47 per sq m from Axminster Carpets.

savings to benefit the environment. Of course, this also means that the homeowner will not have to spend money on carpet so often."

And wool is not the only natural option. There are also numerous plant-based fibres that can be used to create stylish floorcoverings. Sisal, coir, jute and seagrass are all harvested from parts of Asia and South America, and woven into carpet. Being organic (in the original sense of the word), these options can be liable to shrinkage or mould growth in areas of high humidity, so they're not recommended for use in bathrooms – if you want the luxury of carpet in this room then opt for wool. Stairs should be carefully considered too, for certain grasses (including the most popular – seagrass) can be a little slippery, which would make it less suitable for stairways. Think about the amount of wear the

carpet will receive too – soft jute is best kept to the bedroom, while harder-wearing coir and sisal suit high-traffic areas such as hallways.

#### HINT OF A TINT

Colour options in such carpets have traditionally been limited. "While some plant fibres don't react well to bleaching or dyeing, sisal, which is naturally golden, will take on colour better than most," explains Michael Turner, General Manager of Crucial Trading. "Our research and development department has experimented with many different ways of introducing colour, but results show that vegetable dyes do not provide the level of colourfastness that we require for our quality products. However, we make sure that the dyes we use are always of a standard that is environmentally acceptable."

When choosing any your floorcovering, it's best check to make sure the backing is natural too, such as latex or jute – if you're choosing organic fibres for environmental reasons then it would be better to avoid any product which makes use of any man-made materials. But this isn't as difficult as you might at first think. "Almost all woven carpets will have a backing weave composed of mainly natural fibre."

#### SOFT OPTION?

"Some have been quick to portray carpet as a floorcovering that harbours dirt" says John Richardson of Cavalier Carpets. "But research has revealed that it actually minimises dust levels in the home, helping to keep everyone healthy and providing a great contribution to improving the life of allergy sufferers."

## NATURAL FLOORING



**TOP LEFT:** This Sisal Basket flooring from Crucial Trading is shown here in Silver. It costs £38.50 per sq m. **TOP RIGHT:** This Pebble carpet in Chesil is made in 100% wool. It costs £37.95 per sq m from the Alternative Flooring Company. **ABOVE LEFT:** Made in 100% wool, this Chatsworth Naturals carpet is shown here in Dove. It costs £29 per sq m from Ryalex. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Pinmill from Cavalier Carpets is made in 100% wool. Shown here in Agate, it is priced at around £33 per sq m.

explains Rupert Anton of the Carpet Foundation. "In addition, British-made tufted carpets are likely to have a secondary backing of jute rather than a synthetic fibre."

For those who want to boost their ethical credentials even further, there are other aspects to bear in mind. "Several manufacturers, such as Axminster Carpets and Ulster Carpets, actually buy, scour and spin wool within the UK, which keeps 'product miles' to a minimum, explains Tim Booth, Product Development Manager at the British Wool Marketing Board. "However, these essential processes often cost less in other countries and the pressure to keep costs low, particularly from cheaper imports, is putting considerable pressure on some manufacturers to go abroad. The long-term effect on our historic textile industry is huge, but the impact on the environmental footprint could be even greater." And it's not just 'product miles' that are to be

considered. You can be safe in the knowledge that UK-made carpets are produced in compliance with the stringent regulations policed by the Environment Agency.

### KEEP CALM

If all this seems a little bit too radical and involved for your tastes, then panic not. While shopping with a conscience is most certainly to be applauded, there's no point in turning yourself into a neurotic wreck worrying about whether the product you're buying has had no impact on the environment – this is not actually possible. Instead, adopt an environmentally-aware yet common-sense attitude, and let it be your guide. It is far better to make a careful, informed choice that means you will lessen your environmental impact in some way, than not try at all because it just seems so impossible to navigate your way through the ethical minefield.

### MITE IT BE SO?

The climate in the UK means that the temperature and humidity levels in our carpets are too low to support any sizeable populations of dust mites.

### USEFUL CONTACTS

- Alternative Flooring Company 01264 335 111  
or [www.alternativeflooring.com](http://www.alternativeflooring.com)
- Axminster Carpets 01297 630 650  
or [www.axminstercarpets.co.uk](http://www.axminstercarpets.co.uk)
- Cavalier Carpets 01254 268 053  
or [www.cavaliercarpets.co.uk](http://www.cavaliercarpets.co.uk)
- Crucial Trading 01562 743 747  
or [www.crucial-trading.com](http://www.crucial-trading.com)
- Pownall Carpets 01706 716 068  
or [www.pownallcarpets.com](http://www.pownallcarpets.com)
- Kersaint Cobb 01675 430 430  
or [www.kersaintcobb.co.uk](http://www.kersaintcobb.co.uk)
- Victoria Carpets 0808 100 6161  
or [www.victoriacarpets.com](http://www.victoriacarpets.com)