

Take your time

Furniture gives you a wide variety of options

Next to purchasing a house, buying furniture is one of the largest and most important investments a homeowner can make.

Wood furniture has always been a popular choice, especially for people seeking to capture a touch of the past. Traditional styles, from classic to simple country looks, are particularly in demand today. Combining charm and durability, they are a popular choice in city and country homes as well as highrise apartments.

With the variety of styles and woods or simulated woods available, it's important to buy with care. The best investment is one that gives you high-quality, long-lasting furniture at the best possible price. That means sometimes paying a little more than you want. But it's well worth it. If you can't afford a whole bedroom or dining suite, try buying a few pieces at a time.

Before you begin shopping, determine your needs and how much you want to spend. Also get to know your woods and how to read the product labels.

By law, retailers have to advertise honestly. A label that says "pine", "all wood", "oak", or "mahogany" is telling you this is a solid wood product. One that says "walnut finish", "mahogany finish" or "simulated wood products" usually

means a less expensive wood or non-wood product has been used.

Furniture can be built of softwood or hardwood or wood particles. It can be solid wood or veneered (a thin sheet of wood usually placed over a less expensive or simulated wood). Wood grains can be natural. Or, they can be mechanically or photographically reproduced on products other than wood such as particleboard or panel.

Hardwoods, such as oak, cherry, walnut, mahogany and maple, come from deciduous trees. They are heavier and more durable. They're also more expensive. Because they have richer grains, they are often used as veneers.

Softwoods, such as pine and fir, come from evergreens. Canadian pine is a popular softwood for moderately-priced furniture. If treated properly, pine can be quite durable. However, it can easily dent and scratch and is a poor choice for tables and chairs that will be bumped a lot.

Both pine and oak are popular solid wood choices today. While pine is more affordable, oak is more durable. Both are equally attractive.

Teak, a medium hardwood, is another popular choice. But teak items seldom come in solid wood. Teak veneer over

pressed board is usually used in large furniture areas while smaller areas, such as legs, edges and handles, are usually made of solid teak.

Most solid wood pieces come in a satin finish to show off the grain. Veneers often come in glossy finishes which are very easy to clean and maintain. Wood finishes can be dark or light. The colour is really a matter of personal preference.

High-quality furniture pieces can be solid wood or veneers on less expensive wood or simulated wood. Workmanship is the key measure of high quality.

To judge quality, check the item carefully up and down, inside and out. Regardless of the finish, the surface should be smooth, consistent and attractive. Hand-finished furniture is more expensive because the process requires many more steps than machine finished products.

Run your hands along the surface to ensure there are no rough spots. Also look for cracks and bulges in the finish. Check any legs to ensure they are secure and rigid. Open and close drawers to see if they slide easily. Turn all knobs and handles.

Check to see if corners and joints are secured with dove tails (ends cut to fit into each other). Dove tails are a sign of quality.

Staples indicate low-quality construction. Ask to have the item moved away from the wall if necessary. Back panels should be inset and screwed into the frame. In high quality, free-standing furniture, backs and undersides are usually sanded, colour-stained or even given the same finish as the rest of the item.

If the item is upholstered, try to feel the frame under the fabric. The entire frame should be covered with padding so no hard spots can be felt.

When you decide to buy, check the furniture again after it has been delivered to ensure it is exactly what you ordered and has no defects or damage.

Some specialty hand-finished pieces can take up to several months for delivery. Get the estimated delivery date in writing when you purchase in case the waiting period is prolonged and you decide to cancel.

Also, ask about any warranties on the furniture. Most reputable retailers will offer warranties and even repair services.

And, finally, don't forget to shop around for sales. The best deal is one that gets you the highest quality furniture at the most reasonable price. Items which may seem too expensive at full price are more affordable at 20 or 30 per cent off.

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