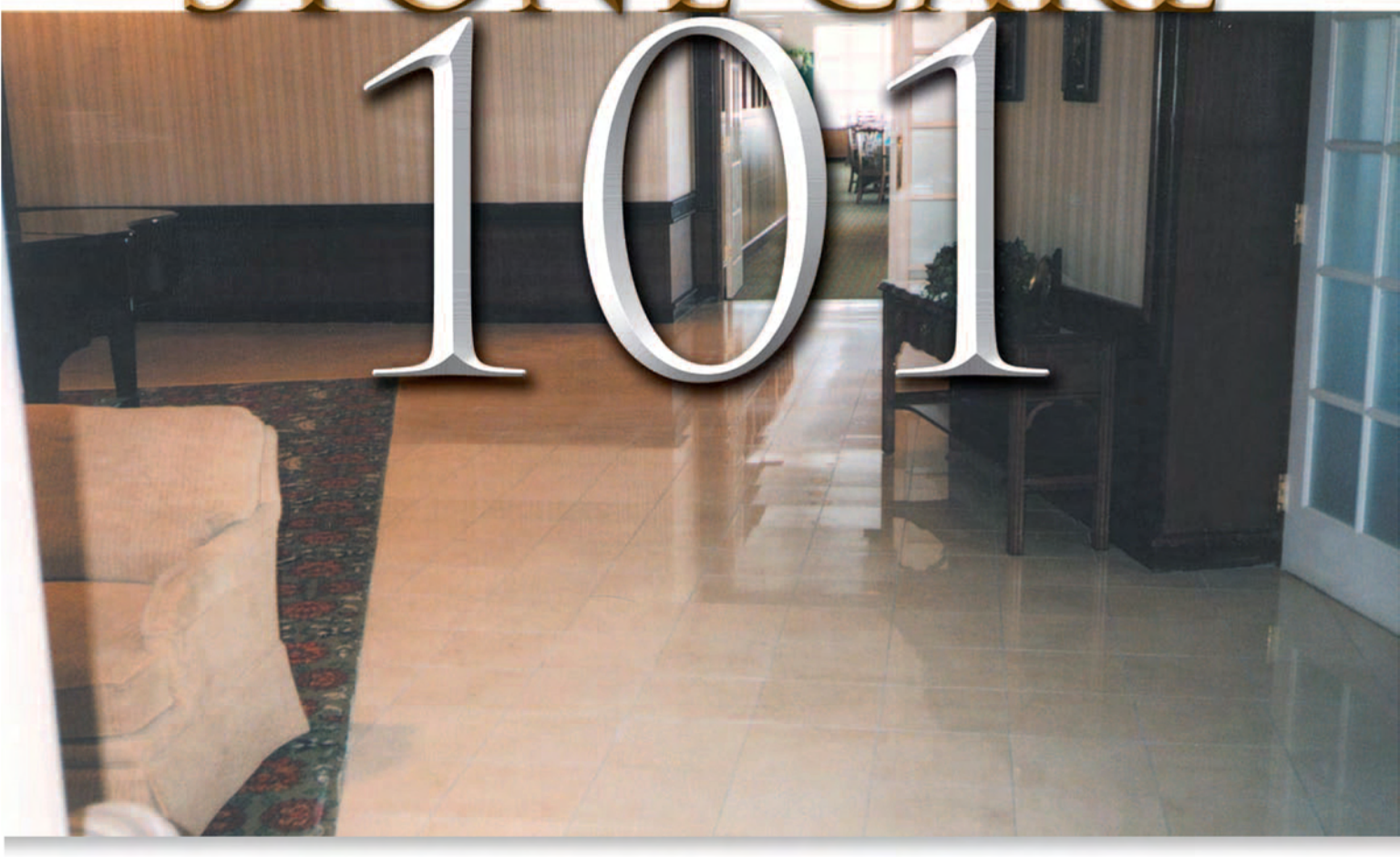
STONE CARE 101

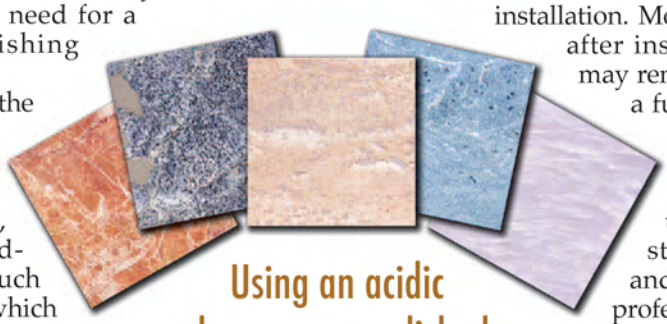


BY SALVATORE BANCHITTA

Two misconceptions regarding natural stone floors are: they will always maintain the same luster as the day they were installed; and they will last forever, requiring no maintenance. The beauty of natural stone is everlasting, but only if you learn the proper way to care for and maintain your floor. In fact, unless properly cared for, a natural stone floor will become dull and vulnerable to unsightly staining. Proper care and maintenance involves some diligence and a few basic steps, but will preserve the beauty of the stone and ultimately prevent the need for a costly mechanical refinishing process.

The first step is to identify the type of natural stone and its finish. Among the most popular natural stones used for floors are marble, granite, travertine, limestone, sandstone, slate, agglomerates such as terrazzo, and terracotta, which is baked clay. Natural stone can have many finishes such as polished or honed, textured or tumbled.

Knowing the finish is equally important when choosing the correct care product. For example, using an acidic cleaner on a polished floor will permanently "etch" or burn the finish. When etching damage occurs, only a restoration professional can mechanically refinish the surface of the stone to restore the shine. Always use only pH neutral cleaners designed specifically for natural stone on your floor, unless otherwise directed by a stone professional.



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A+ for installation

New floors need to be thoroughly cleaned after installation. Most installers will clean stone after installation but some residue may remain. Cleaning the floor with a full strength pH neutral stone cleaner will remove the residue in most cases. Do not use an acid-based product for the removal of grout stains on any polished floor and only upon the advice of a professional for honed floors.

Some installers seal or impregnate stone prior to grouting thus preventing excess grout stains. Impregnators absorb into the stone, filling the many pores and allowing

stains to remain on the surface for easier removal. Water, grease and oil are repelled while the stone still breaths. Some impregnators contain enhancement agents to deepen the color of the stone. Others will not alter its appearance.

Topical sealers work best on very porous and absorbent surfaces thus preventing water from staining and insuring the easy removal of dirt. Some topical sealers can be used to change the look of the stone. Choose a topical sealer wisely as natural stone needs to breath, allowing vapors to escape. Some sealers can trap moisture in the stone, rendering it susceptible to mold and mildew, and causing a break down of the stone.

Ask the installer if they have protected the floor with a sealer or an impregnator as it will be necessary to do it later if they have not. This is one of the most important maintenance steps and must be repeated as often as every six months to a year, depending upon the foot traffic. Most commercial sealers/impregnators are easy to apply: one or two even coats; removal of the excess; and about five to seven days to fully cure. Read all instructions and applications on the packaging carefully as there may be some variation between products.

Cleaning etiquette

Certain honed marbles may be cleaned with an acid-based cleaner to remove stubborn mortar or grout residue after installation and before sealing or impregnating. It is recommended that the product be applied to a small, inconspicuous test patch to determine its effectiveness and the proper dilution ratio before beginning. Prior to cleaning, coat the floor with water and let it stand for ten minutes. This will allow the capillaries of the stone to absorb the larger water molecules, thus preventing the smaller molecules of the acid in the cleaner from absorbing too deeply into the stone.

Remove excess water with a squeegee. Next, apply the cleaner in the proper dilution to the surface of the floor and vigorously agitate with a brush. After a few minutes, remove the cleaning solution using a wet vacuum. The floor should be neutralized using an alkaline-based (pH neutral) stone cleaner diluted with clean water.

Older floors may have a heavy wax buildup on the surface, causing yellowing and dullness. A basic stripping procedure is recommended using a wax-stripper designed specifically for the type of natural stone being restored. A 750 rpm floor polishing machine with a dark pad and a wet vacuum is needed.

The wax stripper should be applied according to the product's instructions, generally letting it sit on the floor for ten minutes. Use the polishing machine to work the area where the stripper has been applied until the wax is removed, then rinse with clean water and remove the water with the wet vacuum. Repeat the process if necessary and let the floor dry for twelve hours before protecting it with a sealer/impregnator.

The final step to bring out the natural beauty of a newly installed or restored floor is the application of a polish specifically designed for natural stone. There are many different types, some solvent-based and others solvent-free. Almost all polishes contain waxes and synthetic resins and some contain silicone.

These chemicals provide additional protection for the floor, while preserving the natural color. It is best to use a polish that cleans, cares and protects at the same time, returning the original luster to the stone. Some polishes, especially those containing silicone, will polish out superficial scratches on the stone's surface.

Use a waxing machine with 750 rpms or 1500 rpms, a white polishing pad and a quality stone polish. Spread the polish evenly over the surface of the floor and allow it to dry to a light haze. Use the polishing machine in a circular motion, buffing out a small section at a time. Repeat the process, if necessary, until the desired luster is achieved. It is important to note that some stone floors are severely damaged and will require mechanical grinding by a professional in order to restore the stone to its natural state.

The number one enemies to a natural stone floor come in from the outside; these include sand, dirt and ice salt. Heavy foot traffic can abrade the natural polish of the stone, so dust-mopping is essential multiple times a day depending on traffic. Simple daily maintenance will insure that stone floors retain their naturally beautiful appearance and the necessity of a costly professional regrinding will be avoided. Proper care and cleaning will result in a much desirable, brilliant, lustrous, natural stone floor. MSL

Step by Step

The beauty and endurance of stone surfaces depend on proper maintenance. knowledge and effective product are key. A proper maintenance program should include:

Step 1: A pH neutral stone soap should be applied daily, weekly or bi-weekly depending upon foot traffic. The soap should be allowed to dry to a haze and then buffed. Polish does not need to be reapplied after each buffing. Generally, a ph neutral stone soap can be used for a period of four weeks before the floor will need to be re-polished and buffed.

Step 2: Monthly maintenance should include a thorough cleaning with a ph neutral stone soap followed by a new application of polish and machine buffing.

Step 3: Six-month Maintenance should include a thorough cleaning with a pH neutral stone cleaner, followed by a new application of a sealer or an impregnator. Wait five to seven days for the sealer or impregnator to cure and follow-up with an application of polish and machine buffing.

Step 4: Annual maintenance should include a complete inspection of the floor. Wax accumulations should be removed using a wax-stripper. After rinsing, a ph neutral stone cleaner, diluted with clean water should be used to neutralize the floor, followed by a new application of a sealer or impregnator. Wait five to seven days for curing and follow-up with a new application of polish and machine buffing.