

Coir, made from coconut husk, is a coarser, more fibrous flooring choice. It is hardwearing, making it suitable for high-traffic areas, or as a robust rug.

Coir herringbone natural rug with double border, from £209.63, Alternative Flooring



Natural FOUNDATION

In a tradition that dates back centuries, plant fibres transform into natural flooring that is durable and smart

Since medieval times, plant fibres have been used for flooring, although today they are available in more refined formats. Felicity Irons, founder of Rush Matters, the producer of English bulrush rugs and fitted carpets, reveals that this material was commonly used by both the rich and poor in the fifteenth century. “In grand houses, rush would have been woven as matting, and in lesser houses there would have been strewings thrown on to the floor.”

Today, natural fibres have an appeal as they are “environmentally friendly, sustainable and ideal for people who suffer with allergies from chemicals, pesticides and dyes,” says Guy Gibbon, director of Sisal & Seagrass.

Although the feel underfoot might require adjusting to if you are accustomed to the gentle softness of wool carpeting, the hard-wearing fibres can be remarkably comfortable and are suitable to use in almost any room of the house.

HOME-GROWN HARVEST

Many plant fibres can be transformed into woven matting, either to be used as rugs or fitted wall-to-wall, as carpeting. The most popular and commonly used are coir, sisal, seagrass and jute, but other fibres can be used. Many of these materials are from exotic climes, however, there is a local option: the bulrush used by Rush Matters is harvested in summer from the Rivers Ouse and Nene.

Irons explains that the rush is dried naturally on hedges on her farm before it is wetted again, to be plaited into 50 to 60 metre-long lengths, which are sewn together by hand. “If it is to be fitted wall-to-wall, we make sections of it, working to a floor plan. Then we go on site to sew it all together. I will take a bolt of rush with me, so that I can plait extra sections to ensure it fits perfectly.” The edges are bound with another plait, or with linen. As it is made to fit the room exactly, the carpet is not attached using grips or nails, “it will not move, as it fits perfectly,” Irons says. She adds that it feels very soft to walk on, compared to some natural floor coverings, so much so, that some clients use it for yoga mats. “I love the smell of it too,” she adds. ▶



The silky texture of sisal makes it a soft enough choice for a smart bedroom. Olympia Silver from the Sisal Collection, from £35 a square metre, Sisal & Seagrass



NATURAL DEFINITIONS

● **COIR** is made from coconut husk fibres, softened in water then shredded, dried and woven. The result is a rustic look, with limited weave patterns. It may feel rough underfoot, but is extremely hardwearing.

● **SISAL** fibres, *Agave sisalana*, are white, enabling them to be dyed. Lustrous metallic finishes can be achieved, however, it is often used in a natural palette. The versatile fibre is silky when raw and can be woven into fine or chunky styles. Softer underfoot, yet still hardwearing.

● **SEAGRASS** has a green-like colour and a rustic finish, similar to coir. It is harvested from coastal meadows, and although it is a little softer underfoot than coir, seagrass is difficult to weave, so the available patterns are limited by comparison.

● **JUTE** is a much softer plant fibre, using fibres from the giant *Corchorus* plant. It is ideal for bedrooms but not as suitable for high-traffic areas. It can be woven into fine or chunky carpets. All above swatches, Alternative Flooring

● **WATER HYACINTH** (pictured) and okra are among Flock Living's Gaia range, made from a diverse selection of plant-fibres. These can be in a natural palette or coloured in grey, blue and rose hues. Although less common, most plant fibres can be woven into carpets.



Rati yields a soft fibre. Here it is dyed to a steel colour. Gaia collection, £295 a square metre, Flock Living

CLOCKWISE FROM

ABOVE Combining both sisal and coir, this striped flooring is a durable choice for a busy hallway. *Sisal and coir Bali Cocoa*, £79 a square metre, Crucial Trading
English bulrush is plaited and sewn together to create rugs or fitted carpets by Rush Matters.

Founder, Felicity Irons, says the texture is very soft underfoot and has a pleasant aroma. *Made-to-measure rush flooring*, £165 a square metre (binding and fitting is extra)
Rush Matters fit flooring precisely, stitching segments on site – no movement, no grips.



Rush Matters replicate a historic practice of weaving in fragrant herbs, such as lavender, to further enhance the aroma.

UNUSUAL FIBRES

Natural flooring specialist, Flock Living, also experiment with alternative fibres. Managing director, Ashoke Sethia, reveals that over the last 15 years he has worked with artisans in small villages outside west Bengal to develop ways of using different fibres for the Gaia collection. “The people we work with are proud artists who have been gathering, cultivating, harvesting and weaving these fibres for many years, for products such as baskets. We have worked to find new ways to apply these skills,” explains Sethia. Flock Living uses plant and vegetable matter that might otherwise be wasted, such as Makai – the husks from corn-on-the-cob – or the stalks of okra.

Water hyacinth is a material Sethia speaks passionately about: “The large cell structure that enables it to float in water gives it a texture that feels like walking on air.” The materials are also durable – the Kesav plant fibres used by Flock Living are traditionally used for ropes to tether elephants. “You can rest assured it will be strong enough,” Sethia laughs.

SUITABILITY AND CARE

The hardwearing nature of most plant fibres makes natural flooring a suitable choice for high-traffic areas. Lorna Haigh, head of marketing at Alternative Flooring, advises that “coir, sisal and seagrass are ideal for hallways and stairs.” However, she cautions: “We steer customers away from weaves with bigger loops, as you could catch high heels in them.” Sisal has a silkier feel and could be used in living rooms or bedrooms. Haigh advocates jute for bedrooms, as it is the softest underfoot. Bathrooms can be a problem area as, with the exception of rush flooring, plant fibres do not react well to damp conditions – Irons claims rush “loves the humidity”, and requires dampening around twice a month (with a simple pump sprayer) to prevent it from stiffening.

All natural carpets require specialist fitting. Alternative Flooring recommends allowing a natural floor 24 hours to acclimatise in the home before installation, as it can expand or contract slightly. This will allow for a perfect fit.

Stains and spills can be a worry for all flooring and natural floors are relatively easy to clean. The most important advice is to always dab spillages, not rub them,

as this will damage and break the fibres, causing them to turn mushy. Haigh recommends carpets are treated with Intec – a spray which coats fibres, allowing some time to dab the spillage before it seeps in. A care kit is also available with a dry, granular compound which can soak up major spillages before being vacuumed up. Natural floors can be maintained with the usual vacuuming.

As with any fibre, natural flooring can change colour over time, particularly from bleaching, if in direct sunlight. However, for some, this is part of its charm, with changes bringing character.

Many might be put off if they have pets, but Irons comments that she has two dogs and has never had a problem with them scratching or damaging the carpet. However, as she and Haigh note, it does depend upon your pet’s behaviour. Haigh also warns that sisal is often used for scratching posts for cats, “so if you have trained your cat to use one, then a sisal carpet is not advisable.”

The allure of plant fibres is not only the natural texture but, as Sethia explains, “everything is renewable, and fibres which would otherwise have been wasted are transformed into something gorgeous.” ■