

Smart Words for Smart Homeowners

THE EXPERIENCE OF EXPERTS AND THEIR ADVICE ON RELEVANT HOMEOWNER TOPICS

Tips For Preparing And Laying Earth Tiles

Picture This

The area you want to cover is a fireplace fascia that is 12' wide and 5.5' high. You choose slate squares to cover this area because it will enhance the beauty of the room and make the fireplace a focal point to be proud of.

Using slate and stone inside your home will add beauty, durability and value.

Fireplace surrounds, floors and walls take on a unique and appealing luster. They look great when installed correctly. This toughness combined with the natural beauty of stone and the incredible array of tile types, colors, patterns and textures makes slate and natural stone the materials of choice where durability, quality and character are important. But so often the tiles you buy locally will not be precisely sized or uniformly sized. Unlike ceramic tiles which are made in consistent molds and often edged after the kiln process, many earth tiles do not undergo the accurate edge finishing step. Earth tile, when not inspected and trued prior to installation, is a problem waiting to appear.

What Is The Difference

Ceramic tile and earth tile are formed differently. Earth tiles are just what it's name implies: quarried slate, limestone, flagstone, granite or natural marble. Ceramic tile, on the other hand, is made from slabs of liquid clay that are formed then fired for hardness, thickness and size. A third material, "stone tile", is made from real stone suspended as an aggregate in a polymer binder. This makes stone tile a relatively affordable alternative to some earth tile and ceramic tile.

Tile Tolerances (Problem #1)

Every earth tile (quarried slate, limestone, flagstone, granite or natural marble or stone) you pull from the box has a tolerance of approximately (plus or minus) $\pm 1/32''$ ($\pm 0.0313''$). Some tiles have tolerances greater than this. That means that $1/32''$ more or $1/32''$ less on any side as compared to its exact size. So the real tolerance can be $-1/32''$ per tile on one side (say top or bottom) and $+1/32''$ per tile on the other side (right-left). The horror is this: unless you prepare for inconsistency, there is chance that you could accumulate this $1/32''$ error over the 12' width or length and end up with one heck of a visual aberration when you put a few rows on the wall. Your grout seams will be all over the place...not straight. As an example, the plus side error calculation across 16 nine inch tiles is: ≈ 16 tiles across $\times 1/32'' = 3/8''$ error ($\approx 0.3756''$). The next row could be on the negative side so the potential error is $3/4''$ between rows...every row. Trust me, you'll spot this kind of error from across the street, though a curtained window.

Tile Edge Imperfections (Problem #2)

All earth tiles we have installed, have categories of imperfections. Almost no box has been perfect. Some tiles are not square, some tiles may be de-layering (tops lifting off the bottoms), some are split, others oversize or have cracked corners. It's best to buy 20% more than you need and sort all the boxes before the day of installation.



Arranging By Anomaly

Select one "perfect" tile and use it as a template to match all other tiles. Begin by categorizing every tile by the kind of "anomaly" or imperfection that

you discover. Make sure you clearly label sheets of paper with the kind of imperfection you discover and stack irregular types together so you can select the appropriate category during installation. Stack all the chipped tiles in one place, oversize in another, undersize in another, off color in another, put out-of-square in another, de-layering in another. You may even find some tiles the correct size top-to-bottom but the wrong size left-to-right. Don't forget the thickness check also. Oh yes, put all the perfect tiles in its own stack also.

Truing The Tile

If you have a large stack of oversize tiles or out of square tiles, you may want to true them. This will make the installation process go faster and leave less room for error.

Set up a wet tile saw on a stable table. Set the guide stop to the desired width using the "perfect" tile as a sizing template. Tighten the saw guide and cut the first tile. Check this cut tile against the "perfect" tile. If tile #1 is good cut the other oversize and out of square tiles and stack them together. Remember to cut the chipped and broken corner tiles on their "bad" side if they are also oversize.

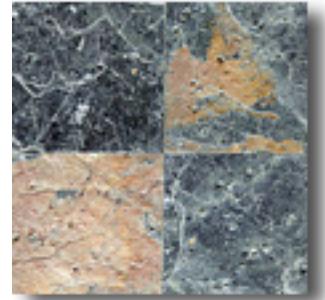
Installing Slate Tile.

- 1) Do not apply any adhesives or thin-set yet.
- 2) Determine the grout space and buy a bag of spacers for that size space.
- 3) Do not try to install spaced tiles without using place holder spacers.
- 4) Clean all surfaces thoroughly. This includes the floor or wall and the surface of the tile that will be in contact with the surface. Do this religiously.
- 5) Make sure you have all the tiles where you want them... next to you in the work area.
- 6) Mix a 1/2 bag of Thin-Set Mortar Mix in a large pail or mortar pan. Thin-Set can be found at almost any hardware store. The Thin-Set should be mixed to the consistency of tooth



paste NOT wet like mayonnaise. It should not run with water.

- 7) Carefully lift each tile and place the mortar mix on the surface where the tile goes. It is okay to be generous with the Thin Set. If your surface should be just a bit uneven you can level it a bit and you can always wipe away extra mix. Work on a small section at a time. After you become comfortable with the process you can begin to expand your work area.
- 8) Spacers must be inserted at every edge near the corners. That means every side will have 2 spacers where it mates against another tile or surface.
- 9) Space is correct and that the spacers are "tensioned" equally before the tiles and mix set and harden.
- 10) After the thin set is dry and the tiles are cured in the mortar, it's time to remove the spacers and plan the grouting process.
- 11) Depending on the surface, the ambient humidity and the mortar thickness this could take up to 48 hours.
- 12) Fill in the 1/4" grout space with the grout color of your choice. Almost any true grout brand will work. On larger spaces use sanded grout. Thinner spaces require non-sanded grout.
- 13) Wipe away grout haze with a clean non-soapy sponge rinsed in cold water. Keep the sponge clean and repeat this wiping without soaking the grout.
- 14) Let the the grout sit for 12 to 24 hours to make sure it cures. Again, wipe the grout haze with a cold water rinsed sponge. Cold water helps to hard-cure the grout.



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