

## What to Look for When Buying Copper Fixtures

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Few can question the beauty of copper, but many question how to tell quality copper products from the wanna-bes. Here's what to look for when buying copper fixtures.



When it comes to basins and fixtures, there's no denying copper's distinctive aesthetic qualities. Whether it's a hand-hammered copper farmhouse sink, a gracefully turned basin for your bath, or a freestanding copper bathtub, fine burnished copper makes a beautiful, one-of-a-kind statement in practically any home.

But there's more to copper than what immediately meets the eye. Copper comes in a broad array of finishes, ranging from as bright and shiny as a newly-minted copper penny, to deep, rich bronzes. If the copper is unsealed, that original finish will deepen and evolve, taking on a unique, protective patina over time. This has led many to refer to copper as "the living metal."

Naomi Neilson Howard, founder of Native Trails, a leading artisan copper products company, finds copper's gradually evolving look to be one of its most endearing qualities. "Over time, copper will age somewhat and it will react with materials in a really wonderful way," she says. "People are almost always pleasantly surprised at how good it looks and how it really continues to look better over time. It could darken a little bit or it could lighten a little bit, depending on what you do to it."



As with any important purchase for your home, the better informed you are, the better you'll be able to make the right choice. If you're drawn to the rustic elegance of copper for your kitchen or bath, here are some considerations to take into account that will help you make the right choice.

### **A Self-Cleaning Sink**

Copper has a unique trait that truly sets it apart from other materials used in sinks, baths and fixtures: it kills germs. In tests reported by the National Center for Biotechnology Information, copper has been shown to be an inhospitable environment for bacteria – within hours of contact with copper bacteria dies off, as opposed to weeks or months with other materials, such as stainless steel. "In a sense, you could say that copper keeps itself clean," says Naomi. "Of course, you have to clean it... but it does give you that extra peace of mind knowing that you actually have a material that kills bacteria on contact."

### **Gauge the Thickness**

One of copper's inherent qualities is that it is a softer metal, and therefore easy to work with. It to be shaped into smooth, sensuous curves or hand-worked to display a rustic hammered finish. This malleable nature, however, can become a drawback if your sink isn't thick enough. A heavy saucepan that is accidentally dropped into a cheaply made copper sink could result in a serious dent.

When selecting a copper basin, it's important to investigate the thickness of the copper. Metal thickness is measured in terms of its "gauge," with lower numbers indicating greater thickness. "The gauge of the copper is important," says Naomi. "Anywhere from 14 to 18 gauge is ideal." Selecting a sink made from thicker, lower gauge copper will help you feel confident about its long-term durability. "Our products range from 13 to 16 in gauge," she continues. "We like to say we build our products to last, versus a lot of companies that build their products to sell."



### **Check Under the Hood**

It is often the details which set certain products apart and this is certainly true of copper basins and fixtures. You can often find these difference-making details on the underside of the sink. First, look for a Uniform Plumbing Code (UPC) Certification sticker. "UPC certification is going to ensure that the copper is pure and that it's not going to be contaminated with impurities," says Naomi, "And that's very important because you don't want your sink to turn green... and if there are a lot of impurities it's not going to maintain its beautiful patina."

The UPC certification will also help you to be sure your prospective purchase is lead- and mercury-free. "If there are impurities, there also could be lead and toxic materials in there that could actually be a health hazard," says Naomi. "The UPC Certification is one thing that can make you feel comfortable that it has been tested."

Finally, any seams on your basin should be welded with copper, as opposed to soldered with tin or another alloy. Soldered seams will eventually turn gray or black and can begin leaking over time. “You definitely want to make sure that your sink is copper welded and not soldered,” says Naomi. “A soldered sink with a tin solder would be something that would absolutely not hold up over time – visually and functionally.”



### **Sealed or Unsealed?**

As you shop for sinks or fixtures, you may come across a choice between coated and uncoated (or sealed and unsealed) copper finishes. Unsealed copper will age and develop a distinctively rich patina over time.

Some companies, however, will seal the copper finish in order to maintain the original look of the basin for as long as possible. Unfortunately, this seal can be worn through by cleaners and scrubbing, creating unsealed spots that will age unevenly – defeating the purpose of the seal. And remember, if you choose a sealed finish, you’ll be foregoing the anti-microbial benefits of unsealed copper.

### **A Centerpiece of Green Design**

Environmental considerations are always an important consideration, and copper offers strong earth-friendly benefits. Because of its elemental nature, copper is 100% recyclable and can be melted and reforged indefinitely – keeping it out of our landfills.

It’s estimated that nearly as much copper is recovered from recycled copper as there is mined each year. “Sustainability is definitely a cornerstone of our philosophy at Native Trails,” says Naomi. “All of our copper is recycled, so we don’t use any new copper. All of the copper that we use in our sinks is recycled from electrical wiring, copper pipes, and it’s melted down and purified and hammered out and turned into our sinks.”



### **Seek Out a Reputable Source**

Unfortunately, not all copper fixtures – or copper producers – are created equal. But by focusing on products made with thick gauge copper, copper welded seams and a UPC certification, you'll have already winnowed out less reputable producers.

But beyond that, it's a good idea to look for a company that stands behind their copper products by offering a warranty against defects. Remember that most copper finishes will naturally evolve over time and that the warranty will probably not cover changes to the finish. But that's a big part of the joy of being the proud owner of a copper sink!

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