



slated
for
greatness

By Lis King

Photos by Kerry Paul

This Los Altos home incorporates slate into the fireplace surrounds, hearth and foyer floor.



Multicolored slate adds a rustic, contemporary aesthetic to this San Jose bath. Design by Import Stone.

You might call slate the Robert Redford of the stone world: handsomely craggy, enormously versatile and gets better with age. It's that kind of star.

Now add a dollop of fashion — as has happened in the last few years — and it's easy to understand why this material is making a huge comeback. >>



Slate lends itself to any room, especially the kitchen, where it serves as a durable and low-maintenance backsplash. Design by Marie Chan.



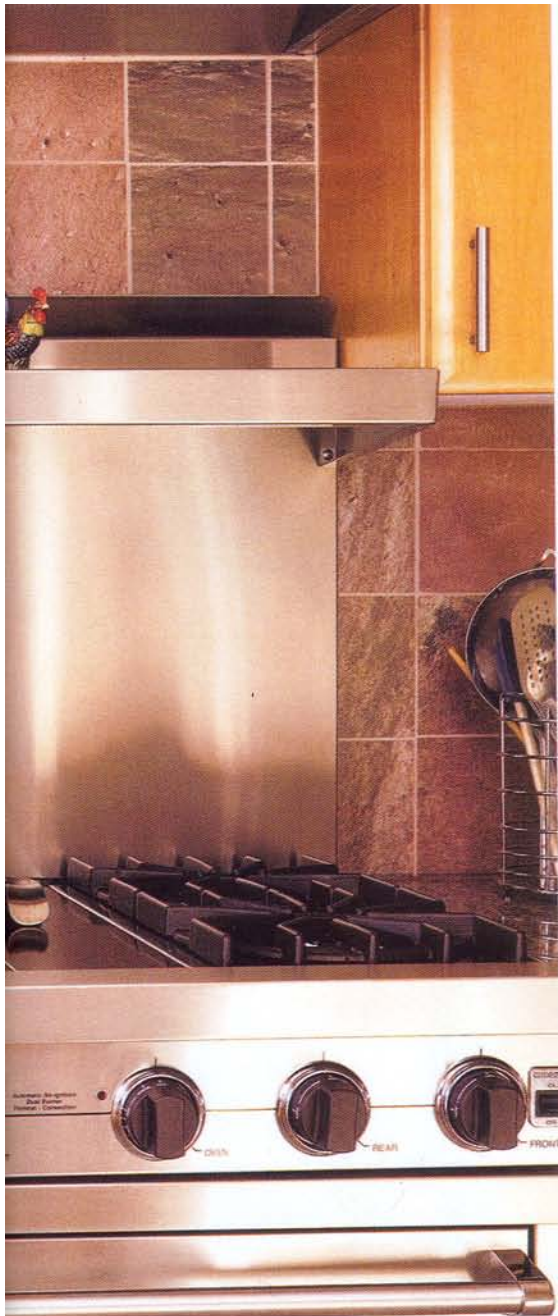
Dr. Karin Meng of Los Altos is typical in her enthusiasm for this stone that has come down from the roof to enhance floors, fireplaces, showers, countertops, pool decks and more. “At my house, there’s slate on the patio and it is continued into the foyer for the indoor-outdoor look that I love,” Dr. Meng says. She also has slate around the fireplace and in her son’s bathroom. “It isn’t just beautiful to look at, it’s also extremely practical. In fact, it’s so care-free that we welcome patio visits by our neighbors’ peacocks.”

Meng also liked slate enough to build much of her Sunnyvale office around it.

She chose Autumn, a gorgeous mix of russets, red and gold. “I often find myself taking patients — who openly admire the reception area floor — into the kitchen and bath to show them the other installations.”

RICH PALETTE

Slate has come a long way from those old schoolroom blackboards and walkways you might remember as a kid. Just visit any stone showroom and you’ll see exotic slate tile and slabs from around the world. The material comes in virtually every shade under the sun, with hundreds of colors and textures



from India alone.

At American Slate in Los Altos, for example, there are 60 varieties of slate in colors ranging from ambers and greens to reds and purples, many multihued. However Showroom manager Dan Smith says that Bay Area homeowners tend to be fairly conservative. Current bestsellers from his showroom are Midnight Black, a Brazilian slate featuring gray accents on black; a multicolor from China that combines grays and golden browns; and Kashmir, an Indian slate with purple flashes on medium browns.

Sometimes designers use slate to

project a different aesthetic than the traditional cleft and rustic surface. A good example is a kitchen backsplash where Santa Clara designer Marie Chan created a collage of polished slate and brushed steel. "Polishing slate sometimes produces a 'birds-eye' effect," she says, "and in my clients' kitchen, this tied contextually with tinted maple cabinets. The slate's color, which ranges from glowing copper to taupe and gray, is a beautiful juxtaposition to brushed stainless steel."

Chan says that slate in mixed shades often resemble abstract watercolors, so

Slate makes an elegant alternative to marble in this South Bay entry.

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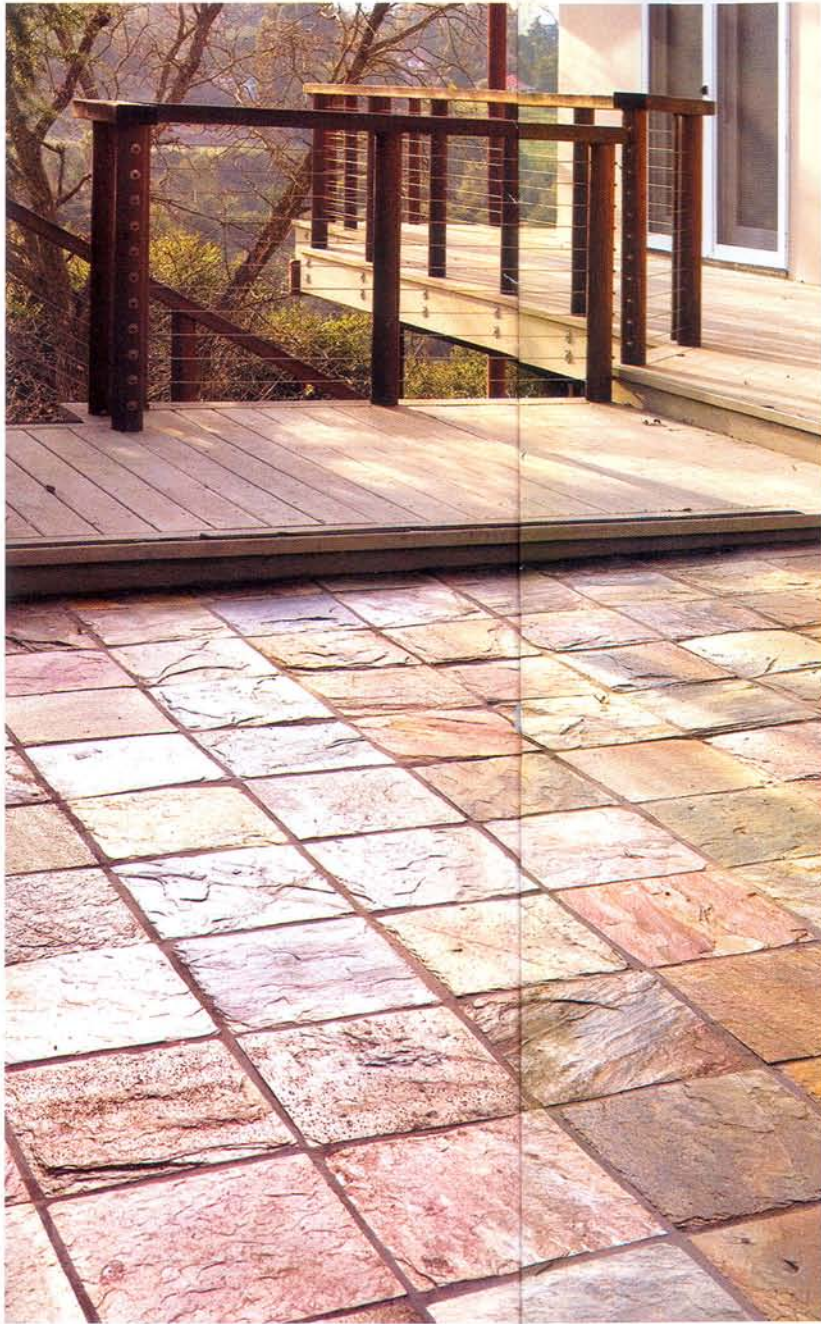
color, and carbon and/or graphite are responsible for blacks and grays. Iron oxides give the reddish tans their hues.

You can buy slate in the form of tiles or in asymmetrical shapes and sizes. Floors that mix tile shapes, sizes and colors are often works of art, but it takes a trained eye to put them together, designer says. Slabs are also available, and popular for tabletops and counters.

“Slate counters are great for kitchens where granite or marble would appear too slick,” Chan says. Architects and builders are great fans of slate floors because they can be radiant heated and also work well as collectors in solar-heated homes. The material’s compatibility with water is another advantage that appeals to architects and builders. It won’t alter the chemistry of water, so it’s excellent for fresh-water aquariums and pools. When it is broken, slate retains its natural look but can still remain relatively flat or can be easily stacked. This is a technique that also works well for stairs and pathways.

Everybody agrees that you can’t beat slate for durability, price (often as little as \$4 per square foot) and low maintenance, but there’s considerable industry debate on whether or not it ought to be sealed. Eveland says that in his experience it’s a good idea to seal slate floors at the time of installation and then repeat the procedure every three years. Smith, however, contends that it isn’t necessary to seal good quality slate. He explains that some slate is actually shale, which is soft. American Slate mines thousands of feet down and the quality is a far cry from products quarried near the surface.

Dr. Meng says that while none of her slate installations are sealed — and she’s had no problems — she would consider sealing shower surroundings. But no matter what you decide, slate is still the rising star in today’s home decor. ♣



This deck shows the array of colors now available in slate.

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she sometimes feels the need to maneuver them. “The Thompsons wanted to emphasize the copper colors,” she says. “So we increased the amount of slate by 30 percent and then sorted the tiles into three piles for first, second and third choice for the contractor to draw on. I find this process helpful when I need control over materials with significant color ‘flashings.’”

ROCK OF AGES

So what exactly is this material? It consists of clay-like elements that were

hardened into folds under intense heat and pressure some 400 million years ago. Particles re-crystallized and flattened, often at right angles to the direction of compression. This gave the rock a “grain” called “slate cleavage,” which makes it easy to split.

Slate basically consists of quartz and illite as well as small amounts of mica, calcite and other minerals. Sometimes fossils and crystals can be seen, fascinating reminders of the Paleozoic Era. Dr. Meng’s floors, for instance, feature plant fossils. Red-colored slates contain hematite, while chlorite gives greens their