How to Get Beautiful Wood Floor Staining Results in Your London Home

Wood Floor Staining Done Right

If you have lived with a tired-looking solid wood floor for a few years, you know the feeling. The varnish has worn thin in the hallway, there are a few dark patches near the radiator, and the whole thing looks a bit flat. The obvious solution is to sand it back and start again. But what many people overlook is just how much the staining stage matters. Getting the wood floor staining wrong can undo all the careful sanding you have done. Getting it right transforms the room.

I have worked on parquet flooring in Victorian terraces and engineered wood floors in new-build flats across London. The same principle applies every time. The stain is not a colour you paint on top. It is a treatment that soaks into the grain and changes the wood from within. That is why preparation matters far more than most people realise.

Understanding the Base Before You Stain

Before you even open a tin of stain, you need to know what you are working with. A moisture meter is a simple tool, but it saves a lot of heartache. If the moisture content of the wood is above twelve percent, the stain will absorb unevenly and you will get patchy results. I always check a few spots across the floor, especially near exterior walls where damp can creep in.

The type of wood also dictates your approach. Oak, for example, has a pronounced grain that can look wonderful with a spirit-based stain because the colour sinks into the open pores. But if you have a beech floor with a tight, closed grain, a gel stain might be a better choice. Gel stains sit more on the surface and give a more even colour on difficult woods. They are also helpful when you are working on an engineered wood floor, where the top veneer is thin and you cannot risk heavy sanding.

Preparing the Surface

Heavy sanding with a rotary sander will remove old finish and flatten the boards, but you should always finish with a finer grit using an orbital sander. That final pass removes the swirl marks left by the rotary machine. I recommend going up to 120 grit for most hardwoods. Going finer than 150 grit can polish the surface too much and prevent the stain from gripping.





After sanding, vacuum thoroughly and wipe the floor with a tack cloth. Any dust left behind will show up as a lighter spot once the stain goes on. If you have bevel edge boards, pay extra attention to the gaps. Dust loves to hide in those grooves.

For floors that have had water damage or staining from old pet accidents, a wood grain filler can help create a uniform surface. Apply it after the final sanding and before any stain. It fills the open pores so the stain sits evenly across the whole board.

Choosing Your Stain Type

The market offers more options than ever, and each has its own character. Here is a quick breakdown based on what I have seen work well on London floors.

- **Spirit-based stain:** Dries fast, penetrates deep, and gives rich colour. Good for experienced users but hard to correct if you make a mistake.
- **Gel stain:** Thicker consistency, stays on the surface longer, and gives you more working time. Ideal for vertical grain and tricky end grain areas.
- **Water-based polyurethane:** Low odour and easy clean-up. Best for engineered wood floors where you want a clear, durable topcoat after staining.

I have used all three on different jobs. For a recent solid wood floor in a Clapham flat, I went with a spirit-based stain because the client wanted a rich walnut tone that would deepen over time. The result was beautiful, but it required a steady hand and quick work.

The Application Process

Working with wood floor staining requires patience. You cannot rush it. I always start in the least visible corner of the room, like inside a cupboard or behind a door, to test the colour. Stain on a small sample block never looks exactly the same as it does on the actual floor. The wood species, the age of the boards, and even the lighting in the room all affect the final colour.

Apply the stain along the grain using a lint-free cloth or a brush. Do not flood the surface. Thin, even coats work better than one thick application. After a few minutes, wipe off any excess with a clean cloth. If you leave too much on, you will get a sticky, uneven finish that will need sanding off.

For parquet flooring, pay attention to the end grain of each block. End grain soaks up stain much faster than the face of the wood. If you do not wipe it off quickly, those edges will turn almost black. A light sanding after the stain dries can help tone down the contrast if it happens, but it is better to prevent it in the first place.



Sealing and Protecting the Stained Floor

Once the stain is fully dry, usually after 24 hours, you need a protective topcoat. This is where the choice of finish becomes critical. A hard wax oil like Osmo Polyx-Oil or Fiddes Hard Wax Oil gives a natural, matte look that feels soft underfoot. It is also easy to repair later because you can spot-treat worn areas without stripping the whole floor.

If you need a tougher finish for a high-traffic hallway or a commercial space, Ronseal Diamond Hard Floor Varnish is a reliable option. It forms a clear, durable layer that stands up to scuffs and spills. The downside is that it creates a plastic-like surface that some people find less appealing underfoot.

For those who prefer a natural oil finish, Danish Oil and Tung oil are both excellent choices. Danish Oil soaks in and hardens inside the wood, giving a warm, low-sheen appearance. Tung oil takes longer to cure but produces a very water-resistant surface. Both require multiple coats and regular maintenance, but the look is worth the effort.

Maintenance After Staining

A stained floor is not maintenance-free. You should clean it regularly with a Bona hardwood floor cleaner or a similar pH-neutral product. Avoid wet mops and harsh detergents. Water is the enemy of any stained floor. It will lift the colour and leave cloudy patches.

I also recommend reapplying a maintenance coat of oil or wax every 12 to 18 months, depending on foot traffic. This keeps the colour rich and the wood protected. If you notice the finish wearing thin in front of the sofa or along the hallway, a light sanding with a fine-grit paper followed by a fresh coat of oil will bring it back to life.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

Even experienced people make errors with wood floor staining. Here are the ones I see most often.



- Skipping the moisture check. A damp floor rejects stain and looks blotchy.
- Using the wrong applicator. A foam brush can leave bubbles. Use a natural bristle brush or a lint-free cloth.
- Not wiping off excess stain quickly enough. The longer it sits, the darker it gets, and the harder it is to correct.
- Applying a topcoat before the stain is fully dry. This traps solvents and causes the finish to peel.

- Forgetting to test on a hidden area. Every floor is different, and the colour on the tin is never exact.

I once worked on a floor in a converted warehouse in Shoreditch where the client had already applied a stain themselves. They had used a water-based stain over an old oil finish without proper preparation. The stain beaded up and slid off in patches. We had to strip the whole floor back to bare wood and start again. That job taught me more about preparation than any manual could.

Final Thoughts

Wood floor staining is one of those jobs where the process matters as much as the product. If you take your time with the preparation, choose the right stain for your wood type, and seal it properly, the result can last for years. If you rush, you will be sanding it all off and starting again sooner than you expect.

For anyone in London looking to restore a worn floor, the same advice applies. Know your wood, check your moisture levels, and never skip the test patch. A well-stained floor is something you walk on every day. It deserves the care.