

MAKE A SPLASH WITH GLASS

Cool, clear tiles add sparkle and personality indoors and out

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Jim and Andrea Young's kitchen might make you green with envy, with its 10-foot-long granite-topped center island and countertops made from IceStone, a high-tech terrazzo made of ground-up, recycled glass and concrete. But for real eye candy, check out those shimmering backsplashes.

The Squirrel Hill, Pa., couple took a shine to one of the hottest trends in home design with a 6-inch band of iridescent purple, copper and clear glass tile.

"We wanted something that would play off the glass chips in the countertops," says Andrea Young.

Hand-cast by Oceanside Glasstile of California, the colorful Tessera mosaic immediately catches the eye and sparkles like gemstones.

Glass tiles are not new. Artists in the Byzantine Empire (300 B.C.) were famous for their Smalti tile, an opaque glass tile used in mosaics. But this durable, easy-to-maintain surfacing material has only recently found its way back to the home, and not just in trend-setting California.

One reason more homeowners are opting for glass tile, says Donna Greenbush, Oceanside's marketing director, is that you can use it anywhere your imagination takes you. While designers most often use it as decorative accents in backsplashes and showers, it also works well in pool borders, Jacuzzi installations and fireplace surrounds. With the proper finish, it can even be used on the floor. (Because any crack in glass tile is visible, it should not be installed on a flexible or high-impact surface).



Glass mosaic tiles start in the 1/2-inch range and typically come on mesh-backed sheets or face-mounted on paper. They have become so popular that you can find them at big-box home improvement stores. At Home Depot, for instance, 4-inch squares

of clear glass tile by Banyan Appeal sell for \$3.69 apiece. At Lowe's, a 4-inch stone tile with a 1-inch glass insert by Chiaro Tile runs \$2.96.

Available in an amazing array of colors, sizes, shapes and textures, glass tile allows you to express your personal-

Above: Glass mosaic tile is used extensively in the remodeled bathroom of Jim and Andrea Young's home; **left:** Glass mosaic tile is on the wall in front of the stove in this remodeled kitchen. SHNS photos by Bob Donaldson

ity in a way that stainless steel or stone simply cannot. Yet it looks good alongside those surfaces and with slate and ceramic.

Outlaw Studios in Pittsburgh often uses glass tile as a design element in its studio-cast, polished concrete countertops. For one recent job, they placed 2,000 metallic 1-inch glass tiles in a random pattern in the graphic-gray countertop of an outdoor kitchen.

"It's such a different material, but it still looks right at home," says co-owner Paul Kubis.

Other pluses: Glass tile doesn't stain, won't fade and requires little maintenance. A solution of vinegar and water or commercial glass cleaner does the job. The environmentally conscious, meanwhile, will appreciate that it's a sustainable material. Several glass tile companies, in fact, make it from recycled bottles.

The downside? Price. Glass tile can run from \$28 to \$60 a square foot, depending on size and style, plus installation. One way to cut the cost, of course, is to simply use it as a decorative accent.

Architect Mary Cerrone,

who used glass tile in two of the Youngs' bathrooms and their kitchen, agrees that the sky's the limit when it comes to devising patterns.

However, beautiful things don't come easy. Glass tile can be tricky to work with, and its installation is not for do-it-yourselfers. Installers must lay everything out in advance and with great care to reduce the number of cuts, especially at recessed niches and outside corners. They also must frequently bevel outside corners to avoid sharp edges.

Because grout can change the color of the tile, you also have to be careful about which thin-set you use, especially if the tile is transparent or translucent. Some tiles look completely different once they're installed, notes Cerrone, so you always want to see your selections grouted on a board. Glass can look different in a photo, so it's also wise to get a sample from a showroom.

If the tile has no backing and you use a notched trowel, adds Kathy Hravovsky of KAH Architects, you will see the swirls behind the tile. To allow light to reflect off of the inner surface of the tile, she insists on unsanded grout, used sparingly so it doesn't scratch the tile when it's wiped off.

Although some manufacturers claim highly skilled do-it-yourselfers can take on a glass tile project, architects say it's best left to a professional. That's especially the case if you're looking for an unusual arrangement.

Some glass tiles get their character from bold relief patterns or raised surfaces, Oceanside offers a raised basket weave pattern called Elevations. The company says glass tiles are its most popular product right now.