



HOME IMPROVEMENT

Sofa savvy

Before you make that big purchase, do your research

By Pam George,
contributing writer

Buying a new sofa can make you feel a lot like Goldilocks. You must inspect umpteen styles and patterns in numerous stores before you find one that's just right. "It's a big decision," said Kristen Axtell, a designer at Somethings Unique, a furniture and home accessories shop in Greenville. "You're spending a lot of money."

No doubt you know where you want to put the sofa. Perhaps it's a family room or living room. Measure that room before you leave the house. Take large windows and door openings into consideration. You want a sofa that will complement the room's scale. Stores like Somethings Unique offer on-site design services to make sure the furniture doesn't overwhelm a room and that you can maintain a good traffic flow.

The room's size will also affect the sofa's style. Because sectional sofas can accommodate several people at once, they're understandably popular. But they consume a good deal of space, Axtell noted. Both she and Jeff Pala, president of Pala Brothers Furniture in

Wilmington, recommend sofas with a chaise element. You get the L-shape without losing too much space.

Consider everyone who will use the sofa: young children, teenagers and their friends — even Fido or Fluffy. The list will help determine your material. "You're not going to put linen or silk in a family room with two young kids and a black lab," Pala said. "In the family room, you want durability."

He recommends leather for high traffic areas. Ask the salesperson about the grade of the leather. Top grain leather comes from the part of the hide with hair follicles. It's denser and therefore more durable. Protected leather allows you to wipe up soda spills with a damp cloth.

Top grain is only one of the many terms you'll encounter when you consider leather. Bicast leather, for instance, is made from a split-grain hide that's painted, embossed with a pattern and laminated. It's usually used for less-expensive leather sofas. Do your homework before you buy.

It's nearly impossible to keep leather totally scratch-free, and that's fine by Axtell.

"That's the beauty of it," she said. It develops character.

If you want a highly durable print or pattern, there are numerous outdoor fabrics on the market that look just as good indoors; yet they're much more resilient than traditional indoor materials, she said. Depending on the color, fabric with a pattern is often better at hiding stains than a solid color.

Admittedly, the large number of fabric choices can make your head spin. "We recommend that you have a 'jumping off point,'" Axtell said. "Maybe there is a rug that

you love that's staying in the room, or you just painted and you want to keep that color. You can take fabric swatches and hold them near the rug or wall to see how they flow with the rest of the house."

When you inspect a patterned sofa, make sure the pattern matches, from the cushion to the base and from the back of the sofa to the arm. As with wallpaper, you shouldn't see any jarring disruptions. Don't forget to check the back, especially if you plan to "float" the sofa in the center of a room, Pala said. "Better quality sofas have fabric that matches all the way around."

Cushions are another consideration. You can still find sofas with cushions partly or fully attached, which will keep you from constantly having to retrieve them after Fido and the kids get done bouncing around.

Many sofas today have three seat cushions, although that may depend on the sofa's length. Yet even some longer sofas are sporting two cushions.

Keep in mind that the larger fabric cushions have a greater chance of wrinkling, Pala said. If you're obsessive about wrinkles, go with three cushions.

Some Web sites maintain that down-filled cushions indicate a higher quality. Not so, Axtell said. It's more a matter of how soft you want your cushion to be. "Some people want to sink into a sofa and some people want a much firmer experience," she said. (Down is more expensive.)

The cushions and the fabric are only as good as the construction, Pala said. Better sofa frames are made of oak and maple. Poplar may also be in the hardwood mix. A soft wood, such as pine, may indicate a less expensive product.

Pala is keen on an eight-way, hand-tied coil system. "It's the best seat support you can buy," he said. To check on the support system, put your hand under the sofa and thump the bottom. If you hear the sound of your hand hitting fabric, the sofa may have polyester straps.

Sinuous springs, which

look like rows of the letter S running back and forth, are another common support system. The main downfall, Pala said, is that they can bow, leading you to think your saggy cushions need replacing when actually it's the support system.

Before you buy, all the adults in the family should sit on the sofa. Ideally, the end of the cushion should hit the back of your knee, Pala said. If it doesn't touch your knee, the sofa isn't deep enough. If your feet don't touch the floor, it's too deep. The pitch of the seat is as important as the depth.

Finding one that pleases all the adults may present challenges if one person is tall and the others are short. You may need to compromise.

Taking the sofa for a "test seat" is just one advantage of buying from a local store. "We never recommend buying a sofa or chair online," Axtell said. "You need to sit in it, touch it and feel it. And if there's something wrong, you need someone to talk to about it and resolve the issues."