

Acoustic Guitar Buying Guide (Full Version)



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Purpose and Budget

First and foremost, you should consider what your plans are for your new **acoustic guitar**. Then you should decide how much you can afford to spend on one. Are you an experienced player looking to move up to a higher-quality instrument? Perhaps you are a beginner who wants an inexpensive instrument to learn on. Most likely, the more you invest in an acoustic guitar, the higher the quality of the instrument will be. This doesn't mean that all inexpensive acoustic guitars are low quality. Thanks to modern manufacturing techniques, you now have a wide selection of highly playable, low-cost acoustic guitars to choose from. By knowing the most important elements that contribute to a playable, nice-sounding acoustic guitar, you can maximize what you get for your budget.

Construction

Before you purchase an **acoustic guitar**, it's important to have some knowledge of the instrument's parts and what goes into building one.



Body » The body consists of a back, sides, and top. The types of construction and woods that go into the body have a major impact on the way the instrument sounds. Different body styles and sizes also impact a guitar's sound. The body of an acoustic guitar can also be looked at with regard to its upper and lower **bouts** and the **waist**.

Bridge » The bridge on an **acoustic guitar** anchors the strings to the body, and transfers vibration and energy from the strings to the guitar's top. Bridge pins keep the strings anchored to the bridge on most acoustic guitars. An integral part of the bridge is the saddle. Most often made of bone or plastic, the saddle spaces the strings at the bridge and helps transfer the strings' vibrations to the top.



The Epiphone DR-100 acoustic features a laminate spruce top.

Top » Perhaps the single most important element in the way an acoustic guitar will sound is its top. As the strings are strummed, the vibrations are transferred through the **bridge** to the top. As the top vibrates, so does the air within the body, amplifying the sound of the strings. Acoustic guitar tops are either solid or **laminated**, sometimes with "**flamed**" or "**quilted**" figuring in the wood.



The Martin D-15 Custom Spruce and Rosewood acoustic features a solid Sitka spruce top.

A solid top typically has two single-ply pieces of wood. Most often a single chunk of wood will be butterfly-cut (split down the middle) and the two pieces matched up down the middle of the guitar (lengthwise). A laminate top is created with several thin plies of wood that are pressed together. Laminate tops tend to be less affected by changes in temperature and humidity, and generally an [acoustic guitar](#) with a laminate top will be more affordable than one with a solid top. A solid top might cost you a bit more but will offer greater resonance and projection.

When selecting an acoustic guitar at Sattva, solid-top guitars will always be described as such. If a description reads, for example, "maple top," you can assume it's a laminate top.

Neck » The neck of the guitar is attached to the body at the neck joint. Most acoustic guitars use a set neck, meaning it is glued to the body. Few acoustic guitars use a bolt-on neck. The neck is an important part of an acoustic guitar's feel and playability. Neck components include the [fretboard](#) (or fingerboard), [headstock](#), tuners, and an internal [truss rod](#). The metal truss rod runs the length of the neck and is adjusted to eliminate the bow caused by string tension or environmental factors. The truss rod is typically adjusted with an Allen wrench either at the headstock or just inside the body at the base of the neck

Fretboard or fingerboard » The fretboard is a long, thin piece of wood that is glued to the neck. Thin pieces of metal called frets are embedded in the wood. This divides the fretboard into half-step increments of the 12-tone scale so when the strings are held down at certain frets different notes are sounded. The most common woods used for [acoustic guitar](#) fretboards are rosewood and ebony. Sometimes the fretboard will not be an overlay but fashioned from the same piece of wood as the neck.

Tuning keys (aka tuners, machine heads) » Located on the [headstock](#), the tuners adjust the tension of each string, thereby changing its pitch.

Common Acoustic Guitar Woods

When shopping for an acoustic guitar, you'll find that there are a number of different woods, as well as different species of the same wood, that are used in the various parts of the instrument. It's beneficial to understand the tonal qualities of these woods, and where they are often used in [acoustic guitar](#) construction.



The Cordoba 20 Solid Top Nylon String acoustic features a cedar top.

Cedar » Cedar is a soft wood that emphasizes the sparkle of the upper registers, and tends to favor a lighter playing technique. For this reason, it is used mostly for classical or fingerstyle acoustic guitars, for the top as well as the back and sides.

Ebony » Known particularly for its use in pianos, ebony is an excellent wood for acoustic guitar [fretboards](#). Ebony is very strong and has a slick feel to it, which is why it is the preferred fretboard material for many players.

Koa » Koa is a Hawaiian wood with a distinct golden color. Tonally, it resembles mahogany, with a focus on the middle range of the spectrum. Koa is typically found on more expensive acoustic guitars due to its scarcity, and is used for tops as well as backs and sides.

Mahogany » In acoustic guitars, mahogany is most often used for backs and sides. Occasionally mahogany is used as a top wood as well. When used for the back and sides of an [acoustic guitar](#), mahogany adds snap and a general boost to the middle range of the spectrum while reducing the boominess sometimes found in [dreadnoughts](#). As a top, mahogany tends to emphasize the high end. Mahogany is also used frequently for acoustic guitar necks and [bridges](#).



The Washburn D10CEQ Quilted acoustic features a stunning quilted maple top.

Maple » Maple tends to generate a dry tone that emphasizes the upper end of the tonal spectrum. In acoustic guitars, maple is often used for the back and sides, allowing the top to generate its natural tone without added coloration from the rest of the body.

Ovangkol » Ovangkol is an African wood that is increasing in popularity among acoustic guitar makers. Used primarily for the back and sides of an acoustic guitar, ovangkol's tone resembles the warmth of rosewood with the sparkling midrange of mahogany or koa.

Rosewood » Rosewood is typically used for the back and sides of an acoustic guitar, as well as the fretboard and bridge. Due to the diminishing supply--and subsequent higher cost--of Brazilian rosewood, Indian rosewood has mostly replaced it in the market. Though they have a slightly different appearance, tonally they are virtually identical. When used for the back and sides of the guitar, rosewood provides warm low end, enhanced mids, and added resonance.

Sapele » Sapele is another African wood that is being used more often in acoustic guitar-making. Also known as African mahogany, sapele is often used for the back and sides of an acoustic guitar. Like mahogany, it adds to the midrange and overall projection of the top wood.

Spruce » Spruce is the most common wood used for acoustic guitar tops. While there are a number of species of spruce (Engelmann, Sitka, and German, for example), usually only more expensive acoustic guitars will denote the type used. Spruce is a lightweight yet strong wood that is easy to work with for [luthiers](#). Tonally, spruce is resonant and provides good sustain and clarity.

Walnut » Walnut is frequently used as an alternative to mahogany in [acoustic guitar](#) bodies. Its tonal properties are comparable to mahogany with a focus on the midrange, and it enhances projection of the top wood's tone.

Body Style Characteristics



Examples of three common body styles (left to right)...

Dreadnought: the Martin D-28;

Jumbo: the Gretsch Rancher;

Grand Concert: the Taylor 30th Anniversary Limited Edition.

Attempting to apply strict definitions to acoustic guitar body styles can be difficult since many styles are manufacturer-specific. The most important thing to remember is that you should find a style that is both comfortable for you to play and produces the tone you desire.

A good rule of thumb to follow is the larger the **soundboard**, the more low-end tone and volume the guitar will generate. The traditional **dreadnought** body style provides a large soundboard, while narrow-waisted styles such as **grand concert** and **jumbo** combine a large soundboard with increased playing comfort. Most manufacturers make acoustic guitars to accommodate smaller players, as well as travel or backpacker guitars that are more convenient to transport.



This Babicz Identity Series Acute Auditorium illustrates the upper bout cutaway.

Another important body feature is the cutaway. An **acoustic guitar** with a **cutaway** in the upper **bout** allows the player to easily reach above the 12th **fret** of the instrument. If you plan to do a lot of lead playing on your acoustic or are used to playing an electric guitar, you may prefer an acoustic with a cutaway.

One guitar brand, **Ovation**, has had amazing success with a completely different take on the acoustic guitar. After years of research, Ovation released the Balladeer in 1969. Hailed by some as revolutionary and criticized by guitar purists, the Balladeer broke with traditional acoustic guitar-making.



This Ovation Celebrity Deluxe Acoustic-Electric (detail) illustrates Ovation's innovative bowl-shaped back.

The first radical change was rather than using a flat back for the guitar, Ovation developed a rounded, bowl-shaped back. In addition, rather than constructing the back from wood, Ovation developed a special type of fiberglass called Lyrachord. Lyrachord is strong, has good reflective properties, and resists changes in temperature and humidity. Despite their differences from traditional acoustic guitars, Ovations are still very popular today, more than 35 years after the Balladeer debuted.

The 12-String Acoustic Guitar



12-string example—the Peavey Briarwood DR-112 (detail).

A 12-string acoustic guitar offers its own unique sound. Though 12 strings may seem intimidating, in reality a 12-string guitar is played exactly like a 6-string. On a 12-string, each open string (E, A, D, G, B, E) has a second string right next to it. On the four top strings (E, A, D, G), the second strings are tuned to the same note but one octave higher, while on the bottom two strings (B, E), the second strings are identical in pitch. This creates not only a doubling effect of every note and chord you play, but an increase in the higher tones thanks to the one-octave-higher bottom strings.

Acoustic-Electric Guitars

Players who anticipate playing live with their acoustic guitars and want the freedom to move about while they play may want to consider an acoustic-electric guitar. Acoustic-electrics use a pickup system that allows you to simply plug into an amplifier or mixing board rather than having to stand stationary behind a microphone.



Acoustic-electric example—the Ibanez AEL20E Acoustic-Electric with onboard tuner (detail).

Traditionally, acoustic guitars were amplified by placing a microphone near the soundhole or by a standard magnetic pickup that spanned the soundhole. While the former method worked well enough, it limited the performer's range of movement. The latter method created problems with feedback and didn't always convey an accurate reproduction of an acoustic's natural sound. In the 1960s Ovation Guitars, at the behest of Glen Campbell, created an acoustic guitar pickup system that solved both problems--the piezo pickup.

A piezo pickup is a crystalline structure that senses changes in compression and emits an electrical signal accordingly. When placed under the saddle, the piezo detects the vibrations from the strings. Since the electrical signal the piezo creates is

not very strong, a preamp is necessary. Today, most acoustic-electric guitars employ a setup just like that first [Ovation](#). The preamp is typically located on the side of the guitar that faces up when playing, and often includes volume and tone controls. Some preamps even offer built-in tuners.

Other amplification methods are used as well, such as magnetic soundhole pickups, condenser microphones, and ribbon transducers. While these are gaining in popularity, piezos are still the most common amplification systems used in [acoustic-electric](#) guitars.

Playability, comfort, and tone

The final things to consider before purchasing an [acoustic guitar](#) are personal decisions. Be sure that the guitar you select is one you're comfortable with, whether you're sitting or standing while playing. Find a guitar that responds best to the way you play. And most of all, buy an acoustic guitar that sounds best to your ears. Whether it's a \$3,000 [Gibson](#) or a \$300 [Rogue](#), you're going to get a lot more enjoyment from an acoustic guitar that produces the sound you want.

Glossary

Abalone » The hard, internal lining of the giant sea snail's shell. Used for decorative and ornamental purposes on acoustic guitars, such as fretboard and headstock inlays.

Action » The distance between the frets and the strings of an acoustic guitar.

Attack » The initial sound a note makes when struck, between silence and when the note reaches maximum volume.

Binding » Strips of wood, plastic, or other material used both to strengthen and enhance the look of an acoustic guitar's body, neck, and/or headstock.

Bolt-on neck » A guitar neck that is attached to the body with bolts.

Bookmatching » The process of matching two pieces of wood for an acoustic guitar's back or top. Normally a single piece of wood is butterfly-cut down the middle and the two pieces are joined down the center of the instrument.

Bout » The curved areas above and below the narrow waist of an acoustic guitar. The curves above the waist are called the upper bout and those below are called the lower bout.

Bracing » The internal wooden support structure inside an acoustic guitar that gives the instrument integrity. Well-designed top bracing maximizes the ability of the top to vibrate.

Bridge » On most acoustic guitars, the bridge is a piece of wood placed below the soundhole. It is used to anchor the strings and transfer their vibrations to the soundboard.

Bridge pins » Fit into the holes on the bridge where the strings go in to anchor them in place. Most often made of plastic; some are made of ebony.

Capo » A device used to raise the overall pitch of an acoustic guitar. A capo attaches to the neck at a chosen fret and bars all of the strings. It allows guitarists to play songs in different keys without changing chord structures.

Cutaway » A guitar body style with a contoured upper bout that allows the player to reach the upper frets of the guitar more easily.

Decay » The level of volume loss from a note's maximum volume to silence.

Dovetail » A type of interlocking joint used in guitar-making, most often to attach the neck to the body.

Dreadnought » A large-body acoustic guitar originally designed by the Martin guitar company in the early 20th century, named after the large dreadnought battleships of the day.

Figuring » The pattern of a piece of wood's natural grain.

Fingerboard (aka Fretboard) » The playing surface of a guitar neck. Typically a thin piece of wood that is glued onto the neck, with thin metal strips called frets placed at intervals that divide the neck into half-step increments.

Finish » The final coating applied to acoustic guitar woods. Flame and quilt are two examples of figuring.

Flame » A characteristic of a wood's appearance that appears to shimmer and move as light strikes it from different angles. See figuring.

Frets » Thin metal strips placed at intervals on the fretboard to divide it into half-step increments.

Fret markers » Fretboard inlays on an acoustic guitar that serve as a visual reference of the player's position.

Gig bag » A lightweight, soft, padded case used as a more convenient, temporary way to transport an acoustic guitar than a hardshell case.

Headstock » The uppermost portion of a guitar neck, where the tuning keys are placed.

Heel » The lowest point of the neck, where it widens to attach to the body.

Inlay » Designs on the fretboard, headstock, or body of an acoustic guitar. Typically the inlay design is carved into the wood, then filled with one of many materials such as mother-of-pearl, metal, abalone, or plastic. For purely aesthetic purposes.

Intonation » The relationship of tones on different parts of the fretboard. The note of each string on the 12th fret should match the note of the 12th fret harmonic on the same string. If not, the guitar's intonation should be adjusted.

Laminated » As opposed to a solid piece of wood used in acoustic guitar-making, a laminated surface is created by gluing several thin plies of wood together.

Luthier » A woodworker who specializes in making stringed instruments.

Marbling » Often used to describe the natural patterns and color variations of ebony.

Mother-of-pearl » The inside lining of certain mollusks' shells. Typically used for inlays and other decorative enhancements.

Moustache bridge » A bridge whose shape is reminiscent of a handlebar moustache.

Neck joint » The point where an acoustic guitar's neck joins the body.

Nut » Located at the top of the fretboard, the nut serves to evenly space the strings as they approach the tuners and transfer vibrations to the neck of the guitar.

Pearloid » A synthetic alternative to mother-of-pearl.

Pick (aka plectrum) » A thin piece of (typically) plastic used to strike the strings of an acoustic guitar.

Pickguard » A thin plate located below the soundhole that protects the guitar's top from scratches that may occur as a result of picking or strumming the strings.

Pickup » An electronic device that senses the vibrations of the strings and converts it to an electrical signal for amplification.

Piezo pickup » A crystalline structure that senses changes in compression and converts them to an electrical signal. Often placed under an acoustic guitar's saddle, the piezo senses the changes in compression when the strings vibrate. The most common pickup used in acoustic-electric guitars.

Quilted » A visual characteristic of certain tone woods that give it a wavy or folded appearance.

Rosette » A decorative inlay around the soundhole of an acoustic guitar.

Saddle (aka bridge nut) » Like the nut, the saddle spaces the strings at the bridge and, along with the bridge, transfers the vibration of the strings to the top.

Scale » The total length of the vibrating portion of a string.

Set neck » An acoustic guitar neck that is glued to the body.

Soundboard (aka top) » The piece of wood on the front of an acoustic guitar that is largely responsible for an acoustic guitar's tone and projection.

Soundhole » The hole in an acoustic guitar's top that aids in projecting the instrument's sound.

Truss rod » A thin, internal rod that runs the length of the neck. Used to adjust the curve of the neck depending on the tension of the strings being used.

Waist » The narrowest portion of an acoustic guitar's body.