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WHAT IS MEANT BY "HARDWOODS" AND "SOFTWOODS"

No definite degree of hardness divides the "hardwoods" from the "softwoods." In fact, the only absolute distinction which can be made between the two classes of wood has nothing to do with their hardness or softness. The terms are simply one of several pairs of popular descriptive names in use for referring to trees of the two great groups botanically known as the Angiosperms and the Gymnosperms.

The botanical distinction between these groups, which is that the seeds of the Angiosperms are enclosed in pericarps and the seeds of the Gymnosperms are exposed, is in itself of no commercial importance. But there are numerous general differences which make it necessary for wood users constantly to refer to Angiosperms and Gymnosperms by some name or other. Differences in structure, appearance, properties, size, and quality of the timber and in regions of growth keep the woods of the two groups more or less separated, from the logging operation down through the manufacturing process to the ultimate use.

The terms "hardwoods" and "softwoods" are the most generally accepted popular names for the two classes of trees, although they are perhaps the most misleading. It is true that many Angiosperms, such as oak, hickory, sugar maple, and black locust, are notably hard woods, and that many Gymnosperms, such as most pines and spruces, are rather soft woods. But there are a number of outstanding exceptions. Basswood, poplar, aspen, and cottonwood, which are all classified as hardwoods, are in reality among the softest of woods. Longleaf pine, on the other hand, is about as hard as the average hardwood, although it is classified as a softwood. Yew, another so-called softwood, is about three times as hard as basswood and considerably harder than most oaks.

Another common name for the Gymnosperms is "conifers." This is more accurate than "softwoods," as all native Gymnosperms except those of the yew family are cone-bearing trees.

Gymnosperms are sometimes spoken of as "the evergreens" and Angiosperms as "the deciduous trees," from the fact that most trees in the former group keep their foliage the year round and most of those in the latter group lose their leaves during the fall or winter months. The exceptions among the softwoods are bald cypress and tamarack, which have no leaves in winter. With hardwoods it is more or less a matter of climate. Many tropical hardwoods are green the year round.

The most accurate popular descriptions of the two groups are "trees with broad leaves" for the Angiosperms, and "trees with needles or with scale-like leaves" for the Gymnosperms. These are the definitions generally given by dictionaries for hardwoods and softwoods, or hardwoods and conifers. They divide woods almost exactly in accordance with the botanical grouping. The few Gymnosperms, such as the ginkgo, which have broad leaves are not native to this country.

A difference in cellular structure which has been found to exist between the commercial Angiosperms and Gymnosperms is a very reliable means of distinguishing between the two groups -- the hardwoods being called the porous and the softwoods the non-porous woods. The term "porous" refers to the presence of certain comparatively large open-end cells or pores in the wood, in addition to the small closed-end cells, or fibers. These large specialized cells are found in practically all Angiosperms, their function being to conduct sap from the roots to the leaves. The Gymnosperms have developed no pores for this purpose, but use their tracheids to elevate sap.