

Chapter 7—Decorative Wood

Description of the Product and Its Uses

Many marketable items can be fashioned from unusual parts of trees or from trees that are unique to a given locality. Burls from redwood, maple, buckeye, madrone, manzanita, red elm, and many other species may be valuable. Spalted wood and any of the woods with curly grain or bird's eye figure are in demand. Trees such as tulip poplar that have been struck by lightning have been used as decorative wood. Red-heart box elder; diamond willow from Bebb willow (*Salix bebbiana*) and from feltleaf (*Salix alaxensis*), littletree (*Salix arbuscoloides*), Park (*Salix monticola*), and Scouler (*Salix scoulerana*) found in Alaska; bald cypress wood and knees; stump butts from tupelo gum and black gum; grafted fruitwoods; and even old knots and stumps of pine have market niches (table 7-1).

Table 7-1. Decorative woods or tree parts from which marketable items can be crafted

Bigleaf maple	Oregon myrtle
Cypress knees	Pecky cypress
Diamond willow	Redshank
Hazel whips	Redwood burls
Juniper	Sitka spruce roots
Madrone	Walnut crotches
Manzanita	Wormy chestnut
Mountain mahogany	Yew
Oregon ash	

Examples of local woods that have enjoyed popularity in the decorative wood market include bigleaf western maple, madrone, manzanita, mountain mahogany, oregon ash, black walnut, oregon myrtle, yew, black locust, persimmon, and pecky cypress.

Burls are typically the best single source of decorative wood because they have the best figuring. A burl is produced in a tree where an injury or other external stimulus has affected the growth pattern of the tree, causing it to grow a deformity which results in a beautiful wood. It may be found on the trunk, as in the case of a redwood, or from the root part of the tree and up around its base, as in the case of a maple. The resulting patterns may be wavy, swirled, marbled, or feathered; they may have eyes or be spotted. All of these characteristics are valued by wood crafters and wood turners.

Crotch wood of any tree that has a fancy "flame" or "feather" appearance in the grain pattern is also of interest to wood turners or furniture makers. Some of the more spectacular effects are found in walnut trees. Gun stock manufacturers, for example, will pay very well for the perfect "feather."

Spalted wood is in very high demand within decorative wood markets. Spalting occurs when some hardwood trees, notably maple, birch, and beech, begin to decompose. Bacteria will sometimes create "ink lines" or "zone lines" in the wood during this decomposition, and these lines create a very decorative appearance. When properly dried, wood that would not even have made good firewood can become a valuable piece to the right person. The wood must be cut before the decomposition process goes far enough to actually weaken the wood, however.

The possibilities for decorative wood products are limited only by imagination and ingenuity. Some of the largest markets are for musical instruments, decorative boxes such as jewelry boxes, and wood turning materials for artists, sculptors, and craftspersons. Tabletops, gun stocks, table and floor lamps, table legs, candleholders, ashtrays, bowls, platters, cutting boards, vases, plaques, centerpieces, planters, birdhouses, carved animals and birds, matchbox holders, note pad or napkin holders, Christmas ornaments, letter openers, and religious figures are all made from decorative woods.

Market and Competition Considerations

There is plenty of demand for this kind of material. Most hardwood stores have no trouble selling figured wood. Over the past 10 years or so, many more opportunities have opened to market decorative woods nationally, since there are many people looking to purchase unusual woods for craft products and special wood products.

The major U.S. markets are established wood turners, hardwood retail stores (especially in metropolitan areas), craftspersons, and special wood product manufacturers. Most of the burl products and many of the decorative woods are marketed both wholesale and retail through classified advertisements in woodworking magazines. These include *Woodshop News*, *Woodworking Magazine*, *American Wood Turner*, *The World of Wood*, *Wood Magazine*, *Fine Woodworking*, or *The Woodworkers Journal*.

While the real markets in the future may well be export markets, (particularly Italy and Japan), few new entrepreneurs would have the experience or the dependable supplies to export. The experience is critical because it is very easy to lose money in the export trade: some people will take advantage of anyone in the wood business who they think does not know what they are doing. Dependable supplies are critical because a minimum of about 1,280 cubic feet of burl wood, for example, is required to fill an oceangoing container. Most people who want to sell burls would be better off just to collect a few and sell them either to someone who is accumulating them for export, sell them themselves, or, if they are located near a major urban area, sell them to local hardwood stores or through classified ads.

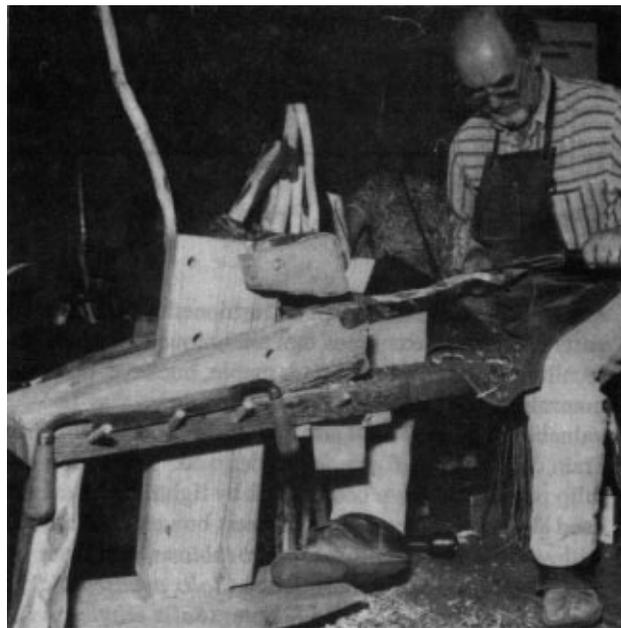
Anyone wanting to learn more about the local woods and the market for these woods would be advised to contact area hardwood stores and any local or State wood turning association. A professional wood turner might purchase several tons of a certain type of decorative wood, especially if he/she owns the gallery or store. Most wood turners work with a number of different woods and are interested in experimenting with new woods.

Decorative wood can be sold as burls, turning squares, and occasionally as lumber. Burls are generally bought and sold by the pound. Frequently, craftspeople making a living in wood turning will want to purchase an entire burl if they find the wood they are looking for. A 2-foot diameter burl or one weighing as much as 5,000 pounds may be purchased if it is exactly what the craftsperson has been wanting. For this reason, it is important to leave burls as large as possible, for the wood turner who designs the final products to be made from the burl will want to cut certain sections in a certain way and will generally want the largest chunk possible. It would also be critical to be experienced in "cutting for figure," that is, identifying where and how to cut the wood for market.

Decorative wood is typically obtained either from private individuals who harvest the trees from their own land or through local sawmills and individual loggers. Someone wishing to market a burl or other decorative wood should begin by visiting local mills and other sources to become familiar with the local woods. They should contact local woodworking stores or one of the 43 local chapters of the American Association of Wood Turners.

Prices vary according to the type of wood and its quality. For example, in the case of Pacific Coast maple burl, it may be worth anywhere from 10 to 50 cents a pound to the harvester. An average price would be between 25 and 35 cents a pound.

Dealers in decorative wood typically run advertisements in local papers describing what they are interested in buying and place advertisements in special woodworking



Holace Nelson, astride a shaving horse, using a draw-knife to remove bark and shape a grip on a walking stick of diamond willow. Photo courtesy of Holace Nelson of Holly Industries, Inver Grove Heights, Minnesota. (SFP -18)

newsletters to find buyers for their wood. Amounts from small sizes up to tons may be of interest. Green, fresh-cut wood may be desired. Other people prefer seasoned wood (although it is probably impossible to completely dry a large burl).

Working through sawmills to selectively purchase decorative wood requires close and ongoing coordination. Once a log arrives at the sawmill, it is usually destined for the chipper. To save a few logs because they have value as decorative wood is often not perceived as being worth the trouble for the sawmill operator. Ideally, such logs should be identified by the loggers in the area where the harvest is occurring and the logs set aside in the sorting area.

It may be desirable to work with loggers to help them identify figured wood. There are frequently instances in which people do not appreciate the value of a section of figured wood and it is cut off and disposed of. Other times, the wood may be set aside but the dealer is not contacted for several months, during which time fungi can practically destroy the wood. Many times, a dealer or a wood turner can get a good deal because loggers just want to get rid of the burl. Someone with his or her own self-loading short logging truck would be in the best situation to buy direct from loggers in this way.

Promising logs can easily yield eight times their cost when they are purchased in the field, after they are harvested but before they go to the sawmills. For example, out of the best logs of bigleaf western maple, it



Diamond willow handmade products. Foreground: walking sticks, stools, cribbage board, match holder. Background: letter openers, vases, key chain fobs, pen and candlestick holders. Photo courtesy of Holace Nelson of Holly Industries, Inver Grove Heights, Minnesota. (SFP-19)

would be possible to net over \$1,000, or about \$10 a board foot for green wood. A prime specimen of “redwood lace” would sell for \$12.50/board foot, green. Figured material can be sold rough sawn.

The possible inconsistency of supplies of decorative woods is a factor that must be carefully considered by a potential entrepreneur. For example, preparing a catalog of woods could be a risky affair if supplies were not ensured. Also, it would be wise to consider secondary markets for quantities of unsold decorative wood. For example, some dealers in decorative woods convert unsold supplies to home construction items such as flooring or trim.

Distribution and Packaging

Distribution varies greatly according to the type of wood. Some are sold through woodworking magazines. Others are sold at county fairs and exhibitions.

Shipping is usually done by Consolidated Freight if over 70 pounds; under 70 pounds, UPS is used. For the very large burls, special hoisting equipment and shipping arrangements are needed. Even a small amount of burl wood is cost-effective in shipping.

For the highest quality wood destined for the export market, demand is high enough that the high cost of shipping is less of a consideration than one might think. The cut surfaces are waxed with a sealant or emulsified paraffin, and the wood is pressure-washed and tagged for inventory.

Equipment Needs, Costs, and Suppliers

A company entering the decorative wood business could either purchase wood from the mills already cut or do the cutting itself. Doing the cutting allows much greater control over the cut but requires a band saw mill, 18-inch planer, table saw, radial arm saw, kiln, and space to store several thousand board feet to air dry. The kiln can be just a dehumidifier, heater, and fan, and the space to do a slow 6-week to 6-month drying process. Small logging trucks can be used to pick up and deliver the logs in many locations.

Quality used machinery can be purchased through *Woodshop News*, other trade magazines, and market bulletins published by State forestry agencies.

Resource Conservation Considerations

Burls should only be taken from trees that are being harvested for other purposes. In the future, it will become increasingly important that buyers know the source and supplier of decorative woods. An environmentally aware public will become increasingly discerning that “rare” woods, for example, teak, should not be harvested except under sustained yield management plans. As another example, in the case of bald cypress knees, this same public is beginning to question the desirability of disfiguring or harvesting a tree that is such an integral part of many wetland areas, given the national concern over the rapid disappearance of so many of our wetlands. A “clean green” tag or some identification of woods harvested on a sustainable basis would be a wise marketing approach in such cases.

Profile

In Minnesota and some neighboring States, a few species of northern willow are susceptible to fungal diseases that cause the formation of a diamond-shaped scar in the wood where the fungus kills the cambium layer and the growth occurs around the scar. The scars that result leave very attractive and interesting reddish, concave

diamond shapes of various sizes, anywhere from a foot to a quarter of an inch, in the white wood. The fungus also causes the wood to twist and grow in unique, distorted shapes to overcome the fungus. The wood remains lightweight and strong and is ideal for novelty items because it is not hard and can be readily carved.

Holace Nelson of Holly Industries in Inver Grove Heights, Minnesota, is a retired fire fighter from St. Paul who has taken advantage of this decorative wood to develop a number of products, including hiking and walking sticks, wall and table vases for dried flowers, candlesticks, cribbage boards, letter openers, and hat racks.

Nelson harvests his willow from open, unfenced land that is unposted. The willows are generally considered to be scrub trees of little value, and the ones that have the diamond markings are trees that were diseased in the past. The harvesting procedure does not kill the tree, since willows regenerate readily. The diamonds are readily apparent through outward appearances of the bark, and the stems that are harvested are those that are most interesting. Both straight and crooked wood is useful. The wood is generally gathered in the winter when the ground is frozen, the swamps are accessible, and the moisture content of the wood is at its lowest. But the best time to harvest it may be during the growing season, before the growth has been slowed by hot weather and the bark has adhered to the wood. During this time, the bark can be readily stripped off.

The objects are worked and carved using small power tools—hand grinders, high-speed drills with small burrs, palm-held sanders, a pneumatic sander, drill press, etc. Novices can readily remove bark with a pocket knife, however.

There is a lot of variation in the pieces, and, hence, in the cost of the items produced. For example, 4- to 4-1/2-foot finished hiking sticks would range from \$15 to \$60. A cribbage board might be \$20 to \$30.

Nelson does not advertise or actively market his products. His main marketing activity entails traveling to the State fair each year, where he sits on his shaving horse and roughs out his hiking sticks using a two-handled draw knife. The fair draws over a million visitors a year, and Nelson has been going long enough to have a loyal following of repeat customers. He also goes to a few festivals. He receives a lot of requests to market his diamond wood objects through retail stores, but has generally chosen not to do so because the prices would become too high in a retail shop. He prefers the independence of his own approach to his business and marketing.

His single greatest source of sales comes from these partially finished hiking sticks. He provides a sheet of instructions and some sandpaper, and the buyer finishes

the stick himself or herself. These sell for between \$6 and \$12 apiece. In 12 days at the State fair last year, he sold about 800 unfinished sticks as well as about 150 finished sticks, 25 vases, 100 letter openers, 20 to 30 small stools made from the diamond willow and slab oak, and numerous other small items such as key chains and cross-section curio pieces of the wood.

There are a number of small companies and individuals that produce decorative diamond willow for retail sale, plus many hobbyists who produce diamond willow art for their own use.

Considerations for a Rural Development Strategy

The decorative wood market ties in well with tourism and the design of touring routes. Woods that are unique to a region have tourist appeal.

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Bibliography

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Bingham, Karen. 1982. Carving diamond willow canes. *Creative Crafts*. June: 49-50.

Hoadley, Bruce R. 1980. *Understanding wood*. Newtown, CT: The Taunton Press Inc.

Nish, Dale L. 1980. *Artistic woodturning*. Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press.

Peck, Dave. 1986. Diamond willow. *Alaska Magazine*. March: 82-83.

Resources

Art Bennett, Oregon Crafted Fine Wood, 282 West Everett Street, Sutherlin, OR 97497. 503-459-4601. Specialty processor of root burls for ornamental uses, clocks, and furniture.

American Woodworker, Rodale Press Inc., 33 East Minor Street, Emmaus, PA 18098. 215-967-5171.

Fine Woodworking, Box 5506, Newtown, CT 06470-5506. 203-426-8171.

Bruce Forness, Sr., International Wood Collectors Society, P.O. Box 1102, Chautauqua, NY 14722. 716-753-7944.

Casimer Grabowski, 19705 Southwest 134th Avenue, Miami, FL 33177.

Gil Lynch, Handcrafted Oregon Hardwoods, P.O. Box 1628, Myrtle Creek, OR 97457. 503-863-3042. Artisan who specializes in carvings and turned designs from spalted wood and aged material found at old logging sites.

Dale Nish, Craft Supplies, 1287 East 1120 South, Provo, UT 84606. 801-373-0917. Sells tools for wood-working. Familiar with world-renowned wood turners. Has a series of videos.

Popular Woodworking, E G W Publishing Company, 1320 Galaxy Way, Concord, CA 94520. 415-671-9852. For subscriptions, address is Box 6086, Concord, CA 94524.

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Woodshop News, Pratt Street, Essex, CT 06426. 203-767-8227.

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