

# ON THE SURFACE

A BUYERS GUIDE TO WOOD SPECIES

*Editor's Note: This is the second of a two-part look at wood species. Last week's installment covered commonly used veneers in furniture.*



A forester inspects a tree ready to be harvested.

## Solid wood sources tell quality, durability story

BY THOMAS RUSSELL

**HIGH POINT** — Solid wood furniture often commands a higher price point because of the materials story.

For example, a four-piece veneered bedroom priced from \$1,299 to \$2,499 might garner \$3,499 to \$4,999 — or more — for a solid wood version, particularly if it's made in the U.S. or Canada.

So for consumers who are considering those higher price points, it pays to know what they are paying for and why it's different from the lower-priced veneered sets.

Solid wood furniture typically means that the furniture is solid wood through and through, from the tops of tables to the tops, end panels and drawer fronts of case pieces such as buffets and sideboards.

On the bedroom side, veneered headboards and footboards are replaced with solid wood panels and frames. And as with dining room furniture, the companion case pieces in the bedroom have solid wood components such as tops, drawer fronts and end panels. While some drawers have solid construction, they are more often made with plywood sides and backs.

Because of such construction methods, the category is often considered a niche in the market that applies largely to domestic producers, but also to some importers such as A-America and Intercon.

Much solid wood used in furniture comes from the Appalachian region, stretching from southern New York and central to western Pennsylvania to western Virginia and the Carolinas as well as parts of Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, Ohio, Maryland and West Virginia.

Some of the wood also is grown in western North America including **p24**



The Appalachian hardwood region is home to a variety of species.



A truck gets ready to haul freshly cut timber to a sawmill.



Logs are ready to be cut into lumber at Gilkey Lumber Co. in Rutherfordton, N.C.

The Appalachian hardwood area spans 344 counties in 12 states, as defined by the Appalachian Hardwood Manufacturers Inc.





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**87%** of consumers would pay **more** for solid wood furniture.

## How much more?

Less than \$50	4%
\$50 to \$99	18%
\$100 to \$199	29%
\$200 to \$299	21%
\$300 to \$499	13%
\$500 or more	15%

Source: FurnitureToday and Apartment Therapy Consumer Survey

**"Years ago people wanted solid wood furniture and would pass it down to their kids, or refinish it. Now, the younger generation wants to go to Walmart and buy it cheap and replace it. To me it's just throwaway furniture." — MIKE PARTON, GILKEY LUMBER**

## Solid wood sources tell quality, durability story

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the Pacific Northwest and parts of Canada. Other commonly used solid wood species such as teak, mahogany and rosewood are grown and harvested overseas and used in furniture that's either imported or made in North America.

According to the U.S. Forest Service, red and white oak are the most commonly commercially harvested hardwoods, accounting for about 25% and 13% of the total, respectively. This is followed by poplar (11%), soft maple (10%), hard maple (6%), sweet gum (5%), hickory (4%), ash (4%) and walnut and cherry (3% each).

According to the 2013 Hardwood Market Report, timber consumption has been down in the U.S. over the past eight years based on use in products from railway ties and flooring to millwork, pallets, cabinets and furniture. This means consumers are finding less domestically produced products with U.S. hardwoods.

Furniture accounted for 1.2 billion board feet in 2005 but only 372 million board feet in 2013, a 69% drop. Other categories such as flooring, cabinets and millwork also fell significantly — 57.6%, 75.8% and 75.9% respectively — figures that are likely due to drops in domestic manufacturing, but also to the added use of some higher quality veneers and laminates in these products.

Still, hardwood exports rose 10% in the period, which is due to largely to the overseas manufacture of furniture and other products that use U.S. woods.

North Carolina suppliers such as Rutherfordton-based sawmill operator Gilkey Lumber and Hickory-based lumber distributor W.M. Cramer have seen much of their business shift to exports in recent years. Gilkey began exporting around 1990 and today nearly 80% of its sales are for export. Of that, about 75% is used in furniture, company officials estimate.

W.M. Cramer has been exporting for about 40 years, but only in small amounts until about four years ago, said Wendell Cramer, president. Today exports account for at least 50% of his business, with most of that going into furniture that's made in China, Vietnam and Europe.

Proponents of solid wood furniture say that it may not have the same visual appeal as some fancy face veneers. But



Logs are processed at the Gilkey Lumber sawmill.



Lumber is stacked in a predrier unit at Gilkey Lumber.



An inspector at Harden Furniture checks the straightness and quality of boards at the company's rough mill. These boards are ready to be used in finished product.

for consumers looking for a well-built product that can be handed down from generation to generation, solid wood furniture passes the test in many ways. One is that the construction can't be

duplicated by the use of higher quality laminates that are said to be the aesthetic equivalent of some veneers.

"Years ago people wanted solid wood furniture and would pass it **p26**



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## Solid wood sources tell quality, durability story



Boards are glued up at the Harden Furniture plant in McConnellsville, N.Y.



A Harden Furniture employee assembles a table at the McConnellsville plant.



A furniture assembler puts together solid wood boards with dovetail joints at Harden. Such pieces are typically used in drawer construction.

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down to their kids, or refinish it," said Mike Parton, an executive at Gilkey. "Now, the younger generation wants to go to Walmart and buy it cheap and replace it. To me it's just throwaway furniture."

Others point out that new high quality laminates that are bringing competition to veneers won't likely affect the appeal for solid wood furniture due to the construction and physical properties of solid wood.

"Veneers can offer a picture perfect look that can be duplicated by film," said Tom Inman, president of the High Point-based trade association American Hardwood Manufacturers Inc., adding that solid wood continues to offer a quality and durability story that can't be matched by veneers or laminates.

Even some nontraditional resources for solid wood furniture are catching on including Ikea, which announced it is selling a line of solid wood furniture made with wood grown in northern Sweden. Up to this point, most of its furniture products have been made with particle-board and high grade laminates.

### Sources

Appalachian Hardwood Manufacturers Inc. was a primary source for this report, providing data and photography. It has about 200 members that largely include wood processors and distributors in the 344-county Appalachian hardwood region. Its goal is to promote logs, lumber and related products from the area.



This table is part of Harden Furniture's Cabinetmakers Cherry collection. It is made with solid cherry.



This dresser is part of the Lansing collection by Borkholder Furniture. It is made with solid brown maple and is shown in a chocolate finish.



The Adeline dining set by Simply Amish is shown in solid cherry and solid maple. It is available in seven woods and some 100 finish options.



# Common solid woods

Note: Sapwood is the outer growth of the tree, while heartwood is at the center of the tree, highlighting earlier growth.

## Domestic varieties

### 1. American alder

**Where it's grown:** West Coast USA, especially Pacific Northwest

**Characteristics:** Wood is almost white when first cut, but changes to light brown with a yellow or reddish tone when exposed to air. Wood has a straight grain and a uniform texture.

### 2. American ash

**Where it's grown:** Eastern USA

**Characteristics:** Sapwood is light to nearly white and the heartwood varies from grayish brown to light brown to pale yellow streaked with brown. It typically has a straight grain and a coarse uniform texture.

### 3. American cherry

**Where it's grown:** Eastern USA

**Characteristics:** Sapwood is creamy white and the heartwood is red to reddish brown and will darken with exposure to light. It has a straight grain and smooth texture.

### 4. American red elm

**Where it's grown:** Eastern to Midwest USA

**Characteristics:** Sapwood is grayish white to light brown and heartwood is reddish brown to dark brown. Features straight grain that also can be interlocked. It can be coarse in texture.

### 5. American hard maple (also called sugar maple and black maple)

**Where it's grown:** Eastern USA, including Mid-Atlantic

**Characteristics:** Sapwood is creamy white with a slight reddish brown tinge and heartwood varies from light to dark reddish brown. Wood has a close, fine texture and is generally straight grained but it can also feature fiddleback and birdseye figuring.

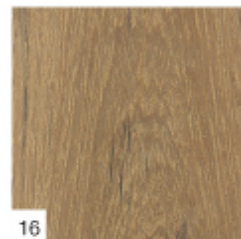
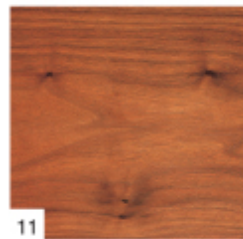
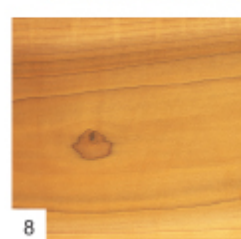
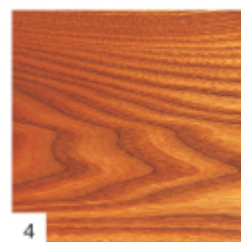
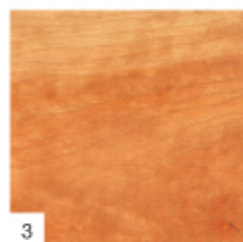
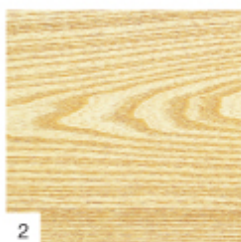
### 6. American hickory

**Where it's grown:** Eastern USA, including central and southern states

**Characteristics:** Hickories are split into two groups, true hickories and the pecan varieties, which are fruit bearing. The wood is the same for both and features white sapwood that is tinged with brown, while the heartwood is pale to reddish brown. Both have a straight grain that can be wavy or irregular.

### 7. Eastern white pine

**Where it's grown:** Eastern USA and Canada (knotty pine is grown in



western Canada and USA)

**Characteristics:** Wood is pale yellow to light pink and reddish brown with resin ducts that form narrow brown lines parallel to the grain, which is relatively straight. With knotty pine, sapwood is light yellow to creamy white while sapwood is reddish brown.

### 8. American poplar

**Where it's grown:** Eastern USA

**Characteristics:** Sapwood is creamy white and may be streaked, while the heartwood is pale yellowish brown to olive green, which tends to darken upon exposure to light and turn brown. The wood has a medium to fine texture and has a uniform straight grain.

### 9. American red oak

**Where it's grown:** Eastern USA

**Characteristics:** Sapwood is white to light brown and the heartwood varies from pinkish to reddish brown. It has a mostly straight grain with a coarse texture.

### 10. American soft maple (also called red maple and silver maple)

**Where it's grown:** Eastern USA

**Characteristics:** Sapwood is grayish white with sometimes darker colored

pith flecks. The heartwood varies from light to reddish brown. The wood also is usually straight grained.

### 11. American walnut

**Where it's grown:** Eastern USA as well as the central states

**Characteristics:** Sapwood is creamy white and the heartwood varies from light brown to dark chocolate brown. Wood is generally straight grained but is sometimes wavy or has a curly grain pattern.

### 12. American white oak

**Where it's grown:** Eastern USA

**Characteristics:** Similar in appearance to European oak, this species has lightly colored sapwood and heartwood that varies from light to dark brown. It is mostly straight grained and has a medium to coarse texture and more figuring than red oak.

### 13. American yellow birch

**Where it's grown:** Eastern USA and northern/lake states

**Characteristics:** Sapwood is white and the heartwood is light reddish brown. It has a straight, uniform grain and fine texture.

## Imported varieties

### 14. mahogany

**Where it's grown:** Central Africa and Honduras, Brazil and Caribbean Islands

**Characteristics:** In African variety, heartwood is light to dark red to reddish brown with a medium coarse texture and interlocked grain, which appears to be striped. Where the grain is absent, it may contain well defined cathedral shapes in crown-cut veneers. Central and South American relative is similar, with interlocked grain patterns that produce a ribbon-striped appearance.

### 15. rubberwood

**Where it's grown:** Asia, but indigenous to Brazil

**Characteristics:** Heartwood and sapwood are a light blond to medium tan with some medium brown streaks. Color tends to darken with age. Grain is straight with a coarse, open texture.

### 16. teak (aka Burmese teak)

**Where it's grown:** Southern Asia

**Characteristics:** Heartwood is golden or medium brown, with the color darkening with age. Grain is straight but it can be interlocked. Wood has a coarse, uneven texture.