

Wood of The Month

Wood. — As wood turners, one of our greatest interests and affections is the object of our craft itself; wood. We love its feel, its appearance, its aroma, its challenge, its character, or even its flaws. It has so many colors, textures, patterns, densities, workability and varieties. Even if you see wood just as a piece of wood to be used, or, if it draws you unto itself with passion and feeling, the question usually comes up; “what kind of wood is that?” The intent of this series of articles is to help us understand the object of our attention and, dare I say, affection. We will attempt to cover some type of wood in each article. In this introductory article we will cover a small part of wood identification and terminology and perhaps some resources.

Wood identification to most of us is a matter of recognizing some characteristic of the wood, be it color, weight, grain pattern, texture or some memorable feature based on our experience and frame of reference. That is a valid approach in a general sense and is very useful and often the solution. However, specific wood id is more complex than that and for reasons that may become obvious a little later. I don't want to get into that subject in detail because very few of us are that interested in the process. I simply want to point out that wood identification is a matter of looking at the wood in a very detailed manner, specifically the cell structure as well as the physical characteristics.

Wood names. Herein lies the biggest reason for the need of wood identification, one of the largest hurdles, and one of the most confusing areas of wood identification. It is estimated that there are between 20,000 and 40,000 species of trees of which 5,000 to 10,000 are used for the wood used by crafters and in commerce around the world. Of that, between 1,000 and 4,000 different species may provide wood that is sold in commercial markets throughout the world. Out of that comes probably not more than 300 different “kinds of wood”. Therefore, you can see that many species may be mixed down to one or more common names. Throw in the creativity of commercial brokers and sellers to name a wood so it will be attractive to a prospective buyer, and the names have no relation to the actual species of the wood, thus you have built in confusion. So, we have; common names, commercial names, vernacular names (local names) and botanical names. It should be safe to say and understand that the only true name of a species of wood is the botanical or scientific name. For example; from the book “*The Book of Wood Names*” by Dr. Hans Meyer, published by Linden Publishing, which lists over 30,000 names of woods, the name “Silky oak” is given to 27 different species of wood and not one of them belongs to the species “*Quercus*” which is the species of oak we are accustomed to around here. When you say; “white oak” you could possibly be referring to up to eight different species of the white oak group from just here in Missouri.

Enough said about wood identification at this point. Future articles will attempt to focus on one species or group in order that we may better select a wood for turning or enjoy it and its properties and even be aware of its dangers or toxicity. One of the best quick reference resources of wood is; <http://www.wood-database.com/> .

As wood turners, we are not restricted to the commercial ‘lumber’ sold on the market, but often our wood source is simply a fallen tree or one removed for construction or the sake of

safety. For that reason, we will begin with our local native woods to see what they might hold in store.