

Wood of The Month



*Face grain – finished
and unfinished*

End Grain View

Juglans nigra – American black walnut

Black walnut, *Juglans nigra*, also called, American black walnut and eastern black walnut, grows in every county of our state. Therefore, it is very familiar to us and is easily available. It is a fast growing tree that grows in well drained neutral soils and does not grow in groups but can be mixed with many other species of trees. It is one of the best known and valuable trees of the region. In fact, many woodworkers treat it as an exotic using it only for accent and smaller components in larger pieces. The wood is moderately heavy and very strong for its weight. It works and machines well and takes an excellent finish polishing to a high sheen or even a very pleasing soft luster when finished with just an oil finish.

Walnut turns easily and in fact some caution might be warranted to avoid cutting it too aggressively. Some turners can have a reaction to the sawdust and shavings in the form of skin and eye irritation although it is not common. If you work with fairly fresh or oily walnut it can turn your hands purple as do the hulls of the ripe nuts from the tree. Another “bad habit” black walnut has is poisoning trees and shrubs around it, particularly fruit trees as a result of a substance called juglone in its roots. By the same token, you should not use walnut sawdust and shavings as a mulch around other trees and flower beds or use it in your horse stable because it causes the hoofs of horses to rot. Walnut is a rich dark brown to purple in color and the sapwood of walnut is a creamy white but can be turned color to match the heartwood by steaming.

The American black walnut has been cultivated here in the United States since the 1600's. Its cousin, European walnut, *Juglans regia*, which is native to Eastern Europe has been cultivated for over 2000 years dating back to the ancient Greeks. European walnut is lighter and more variable in color and gets lighter with age while American walnut darkens with age. Another local cousin, *Juglans cinerea*, butternut is fairly common and is called ‘white walnut’. It is a chestnut brown and resembles black walnut in many characteristics.

Walnut is highly prized and is used in gunstocks due to its light weight, strength and ability to absorb the recoil of the gun shot. It is an excellent cabinetry wood and is used in high end furniture, is an excellent carving wood and turning wood. Even the nuts of the walnut tree have many uses including the nutmeat as a savory treat, dyes from the husks, and the hulls are

used in glues, cleaning solutions and make an excellent abrasive used in air blasting. Also, walnut oil is a very popular food safe finishing material.

There is as threat and danger to the walnut trees that bears caution. That is the thousand cankers disease (TCD). It has killed thousands of walnut trees and has been found in five eastern states and nine western states. Missouri has more walnut trees than any other state and could be seriously in danger. The walnut twig beetle, *Pityophthorus juglandis* and the fungus *Geosmithia morbida* are involved in the disease and causes a canker under the bark where the beetle infests and these cankers grow together and eventually kill the tree. Therefore, to avoid infecting walnut trees, DO NOT MOVE FIREWOOD. Please read more on this at; [Missouri Conservation on Thousand Cankers Diseases](#) and [TCD at Penn State Extension](#).

You can read more about walnut at; [Walnut on the Wood-Database](#) or [Walnut at Wikipedia](#)

Written by – Mel Bryan