

Wood of The Month



Osage orange
end grain view

Maclura pomifera – Osage orange

Fence posts, hedge rows, hedge apples and flat tires are my memories of Osage orange as a kid growing up on the farm in eastern Kansas. Memory takes me to several cold winter days working in the hedge row cutting fence posts for the spring fence repair and stalking rabbits and quail in the underbrush of the natural fence created by the hedge trees. That is one of the primary things that helped spread Osage orange throughout the Midwest and southern states. It provides a natural “barbed wire” fence which actually played a part in the inspiration for barbed wire. It is well suited for that purpose because it will grow just about anywhere.

Other names for Osage orange besides hedge, include; hedge apple, bowwood, bois-d’arc, dodark, bodock, mock-orange, naranjo chino and horse apple. The French name, “bois-d’arc” means bow wood and thus the other names; bodark, bodock and bowwood. Osage orange is one of the most desirable woods for making bows for hunting and weapons. In fact, Osage orange was used in woodturning much more than actually being turned. It was the prime “spring pole” on the bodger’s spring-pole lathes to help drive the lathe. It was the force to return the lathe by ‘springing’ to the starting position for the next power stroke of the foot pedal. Typical uses of *Maclura pomifera* (Osage orange) include; turning, posts, stakes, railroad ties, insulator pins, tobacco pipes, wheel rims and hubs of farm wagons and dyestuffs. The wood is so durable that it can withstand ground contact for decades without any rot or damage. As a matter of fact, that is another of my memories of when I helped my grandfather pull out a corner post by his barn that he remembered helping install at least 50 years earlier and when we got it out, the part that had been underground was in better shape than the part above ground. It is used as the insulator pins in telephone and power lines because it will not shrink, swell or decay and cause the wire to fall. The wood makes excellent firewood that will burn hotter than most any other wood. I also remember my dad warning that putting too much hedge in the stove could cause it to melt the metal sides of the stove.

Needless to say, Osage orange is tough, heavy, very hard and resilient and rates highly in all strength categories. Therefore, it is a particularly difficult wood to work because of its

hardness, and tools require frequent sharpening. It also has a tendency to split and splinter if not 'cut' properly. Osage orange belongs to the mulberry family (*Moraceae*) which can be seen in the appearance of the wood. Osage orange, when freshly cut is a golden yellow, sometimes with reddish streaks, but becomes russet-brown after exposure. It surpasses white oak in strength but not in stiffness and ranks very high in strength properties compared to other North American woods.

The availability of Osage orange wood for turning is pretty well limited to tree trimming and clearing because the tree generally grows so irregular it does not make very much "lumber".

You can read more about Osage orange at; [Forest Products Laboratory](#) and [Wikipedia.org - Osage orange](#) or on the [Wood Database](#). A fun article to read about Osage orange may be found at [Great Plains Nature Center](#).

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