

Wood of The Month

Cottonwood – Populus deltoides



Cottonwood, so named because of the white fluffy fibers on the female seeds that fill the air in the spring, is in the same populus family as aspen and the commonly known poplar. The state tree of Kansas and Nebraska, cottonwood, is sometimes called the pioneer of the prairie. During the trip on the Oregon Trail, the pioneers would look for such trees because their shade and firewood were welcome, and their presence usually meant that water was nearby. The cottonwood tree is one of the fastest growing trees in Missouri but does not live long. A 75 year tree is already old and at 125 years a cottonwood tree is exceptional. And it sprouts easily from seed, stumps and even green twigs stuck in wet soil. Therefore, there is an abundant supply of cottonwood for the woodturner.

Cottonwood is not commonly used for lumber and is generally regarded as a low-value wood. It is generally straight grained and sometimes slightly irregular or interlocked, has uniform medium texture with a low natural luster. The heartwood tends to be light brown and the sapwood is pale yellow to nearly white and gradually blends into the heartwood. The green wood of cottonwood has some odor, which disappears when thoroughly seasoned. It has no taste. It is a light weight wood and is tough and strong when its light weight is considered. It is difficult to season as it can warp severely during drying unless carefully dried. Eastern cottonwood is not very durable but can be treated with preservatives.

In use, a majority of cottonwood is used for boxes and crates, packing cases and paper pulp. It is favored for crates because of its ability to take printers ink easily. It is also used for the inexpensive parts of furniture, poultry and apiary supplies (bee hive and honey sections), kitchen cabinets, food pails, butter tubs, veneer, kite and ice cream sticks. Thin stock also adapts well to painted or stenciled scrollsaw projects. Approved by the FDA for food containers, cottonwood works well for bowls. And, with qualities similar to basswood, cottonwood fulfills carvers' needs and can actually be an inexpensive substitute. The Native Americans gave inner-bark tea to women about to give birth and it was also taken for scurvy, heartburn, and for general discomfort.

Cottonwood is soft for a hardwood but is surprisingly strong and works well with both hand and power tools. The main fault of cottonwood is its tendency to “fuzz”, the hair like fibers rising on the surface. The fuzzing effect is best avoided by using very sharp tools, using shearing cuts and cutting with a higher speed. Although, cottonwood finishes well, sanding can cause fuzzing which may require the application of a sanding sealer after the first sanding then re-

sanding. Since it takes ink well, coloring with dyes is an effective option of making an otherwise plain piece quite attractive. Some cottonwood boards may have blueish-gray streaks. Under a clear finish, the streaks can look attractive. However, a pigmented stain will turn the streaks into a dark, unsightly discoloration. Note, too, that some cottonwood won't accept stain evenly without first applying a wood conditioner.

You can read more about cottonwood at; [*Cottonwood on the Wood-database*](#) and at [*Wood Magazine*](#) .

Written by – Mel Bryan