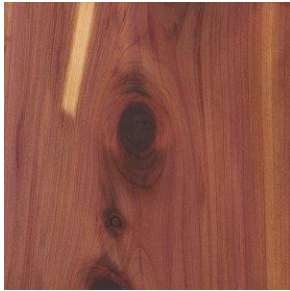


Wood of The Month



Eastern Red Cedar – Juniperus virginiana

Although Eastern Red Cedar, *Juniperus virginiana*, goes by the names; cedar, red cedar, aromatic redcedar, and pencil cedar it is not actually a cedar but is a juniper. Other names that it goes by are; juniper, Virginia juniper, and eastern juniper. It probably gets its cedar nomenclature from the characteristic cedar aroma and its fine grain which made it good for pencil production.

The tree usually grows from 20 to 50 feet in height with a short trunk 1 to 2 feet in diameter. It grows quite slowly, living up to 300 years of age. Some gnarled cedars living on the bluffs of the Ozarks have been aged at over 1,000 years old. Dark purple-blue berries grow on the small leaf sprays and are relished by many forms of wildlife including; at least 20 species of birds, gray fox, opossum, and raccoon. Cedar waxwings earned their name from their preference for the fruits. It grows on glades and bluffs; open, rocky woods, pastures, old fields, roadsides, and fencerows. Its range covers the eastern half of North America from Maine, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, southern Quebec and Ontario to southeastern North Dakota, southward to eastern Texas and eastward to northern Florida. An interesting fact is that the French Acadians, deported from Nova Scotia by the British in 1755 to what is now Louisiana, found a familiar softwood growing in their new land. For its red bark and red wood, they called it *baton rouge*, meaning "red stick," the name the French settlers adopted for their capital city. Ancient Egyptians used a juniper to make chariot wheels in 1300 B.C. And the Dutch, who first distilled gin in the 17th century, flavored their concoction with juniper berries, a practice that continues today.

As the name implies, the wood of Eastern red cedar ranges from bright pinkish-red to a purple-red tinge and often streaked a deep reddish-brown. The sapwood is nearly white or a light cream color and can be streaked throughout the timber produced from it. The wood is highly aromatic with a distinctive aroma. That property is a feature that causes it to be used in chest linings (hence cedar chests) and cedar closets and cabinets because it is disagreeable to the moth and buffalo bugs that tend to attack stored clothing. If you have ever done any traveling here in Missouri, especially in the Ozarks, you know of its popularity for souvenir novelties of all kinds. Because of its durability, it is desirable for buckets, shingles, small boat construction, posts, poles, and in the past, pencils. Cedar leaf oil distilled from the leaves is used in medicine. Oil distilled from the wood finds a place in perfume and resin is refined to produce an oil that is used for ointments, liniments, soaps, and shoe polishes. The Native Americans used fruit tea for colds, worms, rheumatism, coughs and to induce sweating.

Eastern red cedar has a fine grain, but a soft texture. It works easily with hand or power tools, despite the fact that it is somewhat brittle. It has good carving and whittling properties and takes a beautiful natural finish. However, if you want the wood to remain fragrant, don't cover it with a finish. Otherwise, use anything but polyurethane or plastic finishes-oil in the wood makes it difficult for them to adhere. Note: Unfinished eastern red cedar eventually becomes less fragrant as its oil hardens in the wood surface. The wood contains many knots and must be considered when turning or working.

You can read more about Eastern Red Cedar at; [Eastern Red Cedar on the Wood-database](#) and at [Wood Magazine](#) .

Written by – Mel Bryan