

Wood of The Month



Alder – *Alnus rubra*.

Although the natural habitat of Red Alder, *Alnus rubra*, is the Pacific Northwest from Southeast Alaska to Northern California, it also grows around here in Missouri and the Mid-west. In the Northwest it is the most abundant hardwood tree in the area. Red alder is considered the most important commercial hardwood in the Northwest. It is in the Birch family and sometimes when freshly cut is confused with birch. When it is first cut it is light colored but darkens to a russet brown color darkening and reddening with age. It is a common substitute for cherry and/or mahogany in appearance. The catkins of the tree (reproductive flowers) are woody cones that are often covered with gold, silver or painted for jewelry.

The tree can grow up to 90 feet tall and grows around the banks of rivers and waterways. It is often planted to help control erosion and is also used as a “farming” tree to build up the soil from its copious litter and enrich it with nitrogen from the bacteria that lives in the little nodes on the roots. It is an important restoration ‘crop’ for disturbed forests because of this nitrogen fixing in the soil plus the leaves fall early and decay rapidly creating nitrogen-enriched humus.

Along with being a beneficial tree, the wood of alder is a very good woodworking wood. The color of alder ranges from white through pinkish to light brown, has a relatively soft texture, minimal grain, and has medium luster. It is becoming used more and more in furniture making because of its workability and ease of finishing. It is now becoming one of the more popular hardwood alternatives as it is economically priced compared to many other hardwoods. Because alder is softer than traditional furniture hardwoods, it is often used as a ‘core’ wood much like poplar. Alder is valued by some electric guitar / electric bass builders for its balanced tonality. Alder works easily, glues well, nails and screws well (with pre-drilling), and finishes well. It is an excellent turning wood. Alder is a light and soft wood, which many like and some dislike. Sharp tools are needed to get good finishing cuts and it sands easily polishing up well. Avoid using standard twist-drill bits. They tend to wander in the wood and cause breakout. Instead, use brad-point bits. It is not a durable outdoors wood but holds up well under water. For example, much of the city of Venice Italy is built on alder pilings. Because of its oily smoke, alder is the wood of choice for smoking salmon.

As a carving wood, alder has an even texture, straight grain, and relative softness (similar to butternut) which makes red alder easy to carve with both hand and power tools. And for turning, be sure to use sharp turning tools to avoid tear out, otherwise expect red alder to turn with the ease of cherry, only softer.

Native Americans of the Pacific Northwest extracted a red dye from the inner bark of red alder, which was used to dye fish nets, making the net "invisible" to fish. Red alder contains salicin, which chemically is closely related to acetylsalicylic acid (commonly known as aspirin). This is probably why Native Americans used various preparations for medicinal purposes.

You can read more about Alder at; [Alder on Wikipedia](#) , [Wood Magazine](#) and on [The Wood Database](#).

Written by – Mel Bryan