

Wood Characteristics of Common Urban Trees

There are many myths associated with using trees grown in an urban setting for woodworking. Often times people believe urban trees contain foreign objects, are of low quality, or that no one wants them for processing into lumber. While some of these myths can be accurate in certain scenarios, the trees in urban areas are well cared for and offer a great source of quality lumber. This document explores different types of lumber commonly found in urban settings, and some of their basic uses. More information about urban lumber and the location of sawmills in Iowa can be found at www.iowadnr.gov/urbanwood.

Ash

Uses: Furniture; handles for tools or shovels; boxes; baseball bats; cooperage (barrels & casks); boat oars; ladders; chairs.

Workability: Easy to work; good nail & screw holding properties; glues & finishes well; excellent steam bending properties.

Black Cherry

Uses: Cabinetry; furniture; tool handles; novelties; musical instruments; woodenware.

Workability: Easy to work; machine & turn; holds screws & glue well; finishes very well; turns darker with age.

Black Locust

Uses: Fence posts; handles; boxes; crates; woodenware; poles; novelties; natural decay resistance.

Workability: Difficult to work with hand tools; machines well; very smooth finish; high polish; hard to nail.

Butternut

Uses: Furniture; interior trim; paneling and carving; traditionally- church altars.

Workability: Easy to work with sharp cutting edge; finishes well.



Eastern Redcedar

Uses: Chest linings; interior woodwork; souvenir novelties; buckets; shingles; posts & poles.

Workability: Easy to work; carves & whittles well.

Elm

Uses: Cooperage staves; hoops; baskets; shipbuilding; boxes; crates; flooring; veneers; toys; woodenware; furniture.

Workability: Difficult to split; excellent bending properties; hard to polish; sawn surfaces can be “woolly”; dulls tools; nails, screws and finishes well.

Hackberry

Uses: Woodworking; carving; farm implements; boxes; crates

Workability: Easy to work; stain and finish.

Hard Maple (Sugar Maple or Black Maple)

Uses: Furniture; paneling & cabinetry; flooring; wood with figure is prized for decorative cabinetry & musical instruments; turning (table legs, other round things)

Workability: Machines & finishes well; good glue, nail & screw holding properties; prone to splitting; excellent bending properties.

Hickories

Uses: Best wood for handles- axes; hammers; ladder rungs; golf clubs; agricultural parts; archery bows. Traditionally used for spokes, wheel rims and buggy shafts.

Workability: Excellent workability with sharp tools; prone to split; finishes very smoothly; excellent bending properties.

Honey Locust

Uses: Home woodworking projects, fence posts and rails, upholstery frame stock, pallets and blocking

Workability: Machines well; hard wood similar to oaks

Kentucky Coffeetree

Uses: Specialty wood for woodworkers and custom shops, railroad ties, fence posts and rails, pallets

Workability: Machines well, relatively hard, porous wood, comparable to oaks

Red Oaks

Uses: Cabinetry; furniture; veneer, flooring; millwork (trim, doors & crown molding); pallets

Workability: Machines well; can be steam bent



Sycamore

Uses: Butcher blocks; boxes; crates; truck slats; slack cooperage; furniture; fruit & vegetable baskets; interior finish; woodenware

Workability: Turns with ease; finishes smooth with sharp tools, nails, screws & glues well.

Walnut

Uses: Cabinetry; gunstocks; furniture; novelties; crown molding.

Workability: Easy to work; good nail & screw holding properties; finishes well with filling.

White Oaks

Uses: Fine cabinetry; millwork (trim, doors & crown molding); flooring; heavy construction- mats; bridges; liquor barrels & other containers; natural decay resistance.

Workability: Machines well; tannic acid causes discoloration so avoid metals containing iron fasteners.