

Know Your Woods: Characteristics of Popular Wood Types

When it comes to high-quality furniture, nothing rivals the inherent beauty and enduring strength of wood. Not all woods are created equal, and not all furnishings that stake the claim are actually crafted from solid wood. Manufacturers of less expensive, mass-produced furniture often use synthetic wood veneers, which are thin sheets of wood that are glued onto particleboard backing. Because particleboard is engineered from wood particles rather than solid wood, it's prone to discoloration, warping, and crumbling, making it likely that these types of cheaper furnishings will need to be replaced within a few short years. Many of these imitations can seem remarkably realistic at first. Check closely to ensure that the furniture you're considering is built from solid wood. A genuine wood piece will likely have unfinished "stud pieces" on the underside, rather than being covered all over like veneer furniture. Solid wood will also have a grainy feel to its surface before finishing, and may be adorned with carved detailing that is not possible with veneers.

While it may cost more in the short-term, solid-wood furniture is a higher-value investment in the long run. Engineered to endure for generations of elegant service, Amish wood furniture is distinguished by long-lasting durability and non-wobbling stability. Since all components are crafted from solid wood lumber, each one-of-a-kind piece displays a wholly unique grain pattern. Some other advantages of solid-wood furniture:

- Beautifully withstands everyday wear and tear
- Can be easily repaired, sanded, or refinished without compromising the inherent strength of the wood, making nicks and scratches easy to fix
- Can be easily finished to your specifications to match your existing furniture pieces (as opposed to veneers, which usually come pre-finished)
- Won't warp or split under the stress of screws or nails

When investing in a piece of permanent furniture that will be handed down for generations to come, the most important decision you'll make is the type of wood used to construct it. There are a wide array of wood types for furniture-making, each with its own unique grain structure, hardness level, and coloration.

Wood Types & Characteristics

All solid wood falls into one of two categories: softwood or hardwood. Hardwood is derived from one of the groups of broad-leaved deciduous trees. Characterized by a sturdier, more stable, and more resilient composition, hardwood is a preferred choice for the building of furniture. Harvested from coniferous trees, softwood is generally less dense and more pliable.

Each piece of natural wood is truly one of a kind, and offers its own unique grain structure that will never be identically replicated. All woods will alter somewhat in shading and texture when exposed to sunlight and moisture.

Cherry: Harvested from trees in the eastern portion of the United States, cherry is a strong and heavy hardwood that has been used in American furniture construction since the colonial days. Resistant to shrinking and warping, its tight grain takes color thoroughly and evenly. With age and exposure to sunlight, the natural reddish-brown color of cherry wood darkens over time.

Maple: One of the hardest and strongest domestic woods, maple is ideal for use in the building of Amish furniture. It is extremely resistant to scratches, nicks, and other traumas. A tight-grained wood with a smooth surface, traditional maple is straight-grained, although there are other species, such as curly maple or birdeye maple, that have naturally intricate patterns in the surface of the wood. Because it doesn't stain uniformly, maple wood is at its best when stained with lighter shades. Brown maple is derived from the same trees as standard maple, but boasts a deeper, richer heartwood that is more suited to darker staining or painting.

Walnut: A highly preferred material for fine furniture, walnut is a relatively hard wood that combines admirable strength and durability without excessive weight. Its natural color can vary from a light golden brown to a darker, almost purplish shade. Walnut's close-grained surface takes color well, with its open pores often creating a unique dappled appearance after staining or painting. Resistant to shrinking or warping, the wood's grain varies according to the section of the tree from which it's harvested. Although walnut is strong, it's not quite as resistant to dents and pings as oak wood.

Oak: This classic wood was originally used in the mid-17th century for lining dresser drawers, quickly gaining popularity in furniture building during the Victorian times. Today, oak is one of the most predominant woods used to build Amish furniture. A strong, sturdy hardwood, oak possesses reliable durability while also exhibiting a surprising ease of bending. This type of wood is highly resistant to moisture, warping, and decay, making it suitable for outdoor furnishings. Inherently pale in color, oak's surface readily takes stain and paint. There are two different grains of oak wood grown in nature: red oak, the more commonly used variety, and white oak, which has a slight tinge of green. Due to its extremely resilient surface, oak is more suited for clean, simple lines and angles rather than ornate detailing.

Quartersawn White Oak: Quartersawn white oak is considered a luxury material for furniture building. As its name implies, the oak log

is cut into quarters and then sawn diagonally from the center. The resulting grain is distinguished by unique stripes and speckles. Quartersawn oak is exceedingly stable and sturdy, making it a prime choice for furniture construction. Boasting the same favorable properties and upscale look as its white oak equivalent, quartersawn red oak is differentiated by larger markings and a looser grain. Infused with a unique pink/red tone, this type of wood is favored for its elegant appearance and enduring stability. Because of the lush, “tiger-striped” appearance caused by the rays and flecks across the surface of the wood, quartersawn oak imparts a more unconventional, “designer” appearance than standard oak.

Beech: Harvested from trees in the Northeast and Canada, beech is an open-grained wood with a unique, very light coloring. Its tight grain makes beech highly conducive to staining and painting. Favorable bending properties make beech ideal for forming intricate wood designs, such as those found on wood chairs. Its pliability makes beech more vulnerable to dents and dings, rendering it more suitable for chairs than for tabletops or bureaus that see a great deal of everyday surface use. European beech serves as an exception, with its harder, more resilient composition.

Pine: A softwood that hails from multiple locations throughout the world, pine is frequently used in the building of Amish wood furniture. Pine is extremely conducive to finishing, staining, and painting, and is highly resistant to warping and shrinking. It’s available in multiple varieties, including Eastern white pine, ponderosa pine, and sugar pine, all with creamy yellow coloring contrasted by rich brown wood knots. Pine’s softness makes it somewhat more vulnerable to dents, pings, and abrasions.

Cedar: Resistant to decay and emanating a fragrant aroma, cedar is often used as a preservative wood when constructing dresser drawers and wood chests. Reddish in color, it has good bending properties and a uniform texture. Classified as a softwood, cedar has a relatively low resistance to shock and trauma, making it an infrequent choice for major furniture components.

When it comes to choosing a furniture piece for your home, you simply can’t beat the advantages of solid hardwood. Exhibiting admirable strength, sturdiness, and durability, fine wood furniture also exhibits an unrivaled beauty and timeless elegance.