

Choosing Tropical Hardwoods

Rain forest preservation finds an unlikely ally in small-scale cooperatives that harvest wood

by Jason Grant

Concern for the environment is a passion these days, and woodworkers have practical as well as philosophical reasons to care. Alarming stories of widespread timber overharvesting and tropical forest decline appear frequently in newspapers and on television. Already, some premier furniture-making woods have been lost. Cuban mahogany (*Swietenia mahagoni*) lapsed into commercial extinction near the turn of the century, and Brazilian rosewood (*Dalbergia nigra*) has become so scarce that it is now banned from international trade. Others are threatened. Burmese teak (*Tectona grandis*) and Honduras mahogany (*Swietenia macrophylla*) are not as plentiful as they once were, and lumber quality has diminished. Even though both species are available at relatively reasonable prices, highly figured boards and dense, old-growth lumber are harder to come by. Unless more conservation steps are taken (see the photo at right), these popular exotics and others could suffer a fate similar to rosewood's.

Woodworkers who want to do the right thing for rain forests can do two things to help: learn more about the forest management practices for the exotic woods they currently use (see the photo on the facing page), and start using lesser-known species that are abundant and come from sustainably managed sources.

What's on the horizon for mahogany, other exotics?

In November 1994, delegates to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species narrowly defeated a proposal to add Honduras mahogany to a list of species that are potentially threatened by overharvesting. The outcome may be different next time.

Though it's true that uncontrolled logging contributes to tropical deforestation, other factors are at work, such as agriculture, cattle grazing, fuel-wood gathering, oil drilling, mining and dam building.



Logging a sustainable forest—*The Yanasha cooperative, a community-run forestry operation in the Palcazu valley of central Peru, seeks long-term sustainability.*

One promising development is the recent proliferation of community-oriented forestry programs. They are making replacements for mahogany, teak and other exotic woods available, while they attempt to harvest commercial species more sustainably.

In southeastern Mexico, for example, community groups, backed by development agencies and the Mexican government, are attempting to bring more than a million acres under sustainable management. Honduras mahogany in that region grows among about 100 other tree species (most lacking commercial value at present).

Mahogany requires plenty of sunlight to regenerate naturally. When mahogany trees are cut selectively, the resulting holes in the forest canopy don't let in enough light for the mahogany seedlings to grow. Providing enough light involves felling the surrounding trees, many of which are lesser-known species. It costs more to manage forests this way, and the costs cannot be recouped unless markets are developed for the unfamiliar timbers.

As it turns out, many of them are desirable for woodworking.

A number of community-based forestry projects, like the one in Mexico, are scattered across the tropics. At these locations, meeting economic needs and preserving forest ecosystems are seen as mutual goals. As craftsmen become more comfortable with lesser-known woods and the market for them grows, there will be more incentives for rain forest inhabitants to manage their forests for timber production rather than to cut them down. Using lesser-known species can also give troubled woods a chance to recover.

Certification can eliminate guilt

Given the multiple factors contributing to tropical deforestation, boycotting tropical woods alone probably won't save the rain forests. But insisting that woods be grown and logged in a re-



Sawn mahogany, stacked to dry—Mahogany air-dries in tepee-like stacks at a sawmill at the Plan Forestal Estatal, a community-managed forest, on Mexico's Yucatan peninsula. Like teak, mahogany is considered a tropical mainstay for woodworkers.

sponsible manner can make a difference.

How can you be sure that the wood you're buying comes from a well-managed source? One way is to make sure that the lumber is certified as well-managed by a qualified third party. To be certified, a forestry operation must undergo a review by a team of professional foresters and meet a detailed set of social, forest-management and ecological criteria.

After the initial assessment, forests are audited periodically to ensure that sound forest management continues. Most certified operations in the tropics selectively harvest a sustainable yield of lesser-known and more commonly traded species, like mahogany, from the natural forest. In other cases, the focus of the operation is plantation-grown species, like teak.

In the United States, there are two major certifiers of forestry practices: the Rainforest Alliance (65 Bleecker St., New York, NY 10012-2420), which administers the Smart Wood program, and Scientific Certification Systems (The Ordway Building, Kaiser Plaza, Suite 901, Oakland, Calif. 94612), which runs the Forest Conservation program.

To find out which lumber dealers carry certified tropical lumber, contact the Good Wood Alliance, GWA (formerly Woodworkers Alliance for Rainforest Protection, WARP) at 289 College St., Burlington, VT 05401. Ask for a copy of the Good Wood list, which also includes sources of recycled wood.

Bringing unknown woods to the light of day

Of the 20,000-odd tree species found in tropical forests, only a fraction are currently valued for timber. It's possible to find 250 species growing in a single hectare (2.5 acres) of tropical forest, and in most instances, the commercial species grow widely dispersed among lesser-known woods. Because of this, many tropical forestry programs struggle to derive adequate income from their forests to cover management costs. That's why the success of tropical forest management hinges, in part, on woodworkers' willingness to put lesser-known species to good use.

As things stand, lesser known doesn't necessarily mean unknown. Some species have been thoroughly analyzed by forest products laboratories. Others, which are lesser-known in the United States, have a long track record in other countries. GWA has begun a shop-testing program where woodworkers devote their time and skills to discovering how these woods perform and finish. And as lesser-known woods trickle their way into lumberyards around the country, woodworkers are deciding for themselves what the newcomers are like. A few of these pioneering craftsmen present their findings in Scott Landis' article, which begins on the following page.

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