

Lumber from Mini-Mills

Unusual woods at bargain
prices might be closer
to home than you think

BY MARIO RODRIGUEZ

As the name suggests, a mini-mill is simply a small sawmill, typically run by a single person. You find them almost everywhere across the United States. Some of them cut with a monster-size circular sawblade, while others do the work with a gi-normous horizontal bandsaw.

But it's not the machinery that gives mini-mills their appeal. Unlike the big mills that supply lumber to your local hardwood dealer or lumberyard, mini-mills are likely to be a source for unusual and interesting boards—the ones that can make a woodworker's pulse spike.

Some of these finds will be “exotic domestics,” locally grown woods that show unusual figure or color. Such woods aren't normally carried by hardwood suppliers because the supply is limited and the demand is light. On the other hand, this is exactly the stuff a mini-mill values the most.

At a mini-mill, you just might discover a gorgeous length of crotchwood for a door panel, a board with exceptional wild grain



WHAT LOCAL MILLS HAVE TO OFFER

Large boards. Unique boards, like this stately book-matched pair of 2½-in.-thick walnut crotch slabs, are what you might find at one of these small, independent mills.



Boards from the same log. At mini-mills, it's not uncommon to find a log that has been flatsawn into boards and then restacked in the order cut. A log cut and stacked like this is a good way to get boards with matching color and grain.

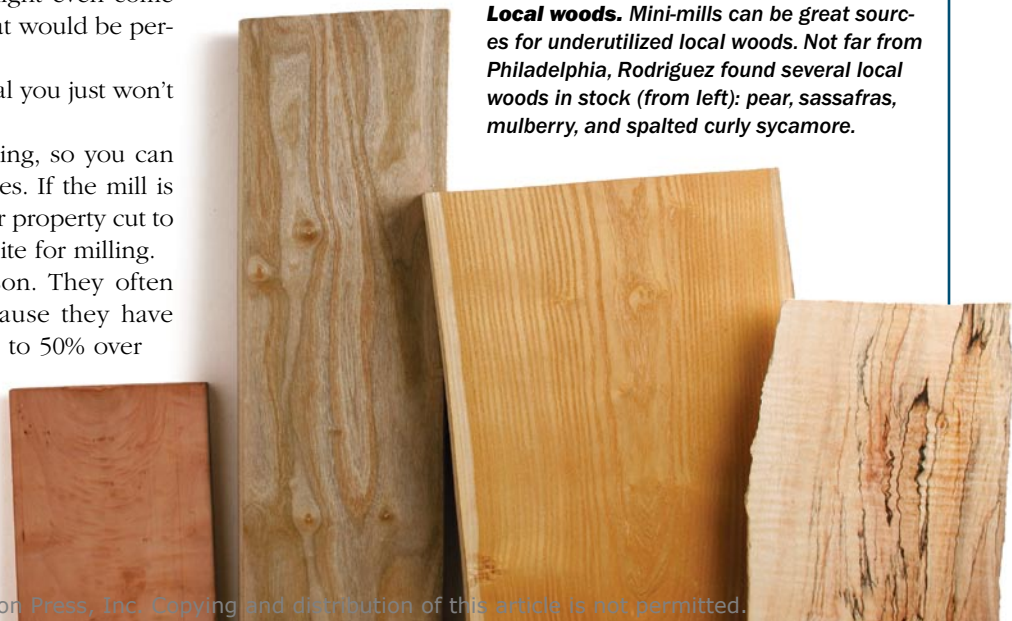
for the top of an end table, or a stack of rarely available local wood such as apple, buckeye, or pecan. You might even come across a 3-in.-thick slab of your favorite wood that would be perfect for a long-planned dining table.

That's why I go to mini-mills. They have material you just won't find anywhere else.

Many of these little sawmills offer custom cutting, so you can request quartersawn boards or special thicknesses. If the mill is mobile, and many are, you can have a log on your property cut to your specs. Or, you can transport a log to their site for milling.

Mini-mills appeal to me for yet another reason. They often offer their stock at bargain prices. Mainly because they have low overhead, you generally can save from 10% to 50% over prices charged by hardwood dealers and lumberyards. That's partly because small sawyers aren't competing with larger mills for premium logs. Much of their wood comes from

Local woods. Mini-mills can be great sources for underutilized local woods. Not far from Philadelphia, Rodríguez found several local woods in stock (from left): pear, sassafras, mulberry, and spalted curly sycamore.



landscapers and property owners who are happy to get a felled tree off their property.

Potential problems

Because mini-mills tend to be mom-and-pop operations, most won't have a drying kiln. That means the wood might not be adequately dry for furniture making. It might even be green, or close to it. You'll need to air-dry the wood further when you get home. Basically, that means stacking it so air can flow freely around it, and sealing the end grain to avoid checking (cracks). A moisture

meter comes in handy here; one costs around \$100. (For more information on how to dry wood, see p. 88, or go to www.fpl.fs.fed.us, click "Publications," and "Drying hardwood lumber.")

Trees that grow near houses, barns, or fence rows can have embedded metal, typically old nails, bullets, or barbed wire. Some mills flat-out refuse to saw such trees.

Should you supply the log, many mills require a signed waiver stating that you are responsible for the cost of repairing or replacing the blade if it is damaged by an encounter with steel.

That said, before they saw a log into boards, most mill operators use a metal detector to check for steel. A metal detector not only helps them avoid problems, but it also helps you by ensuring that the board you buy won't likely have an unpleasant hidden surprise waiting for your tablesaw blade.

Finding a mini-mill

Little mills can be hard to find because they often fly just below the radar. Usually, they don't run ads in the Yellow Pages or the local paper, and they don't hang signs out front. So don't be surprised if you have a mini-mill in town and don't know about it.

The best way to find one is simply to ask around. Landscapers sometimes have mini-mill contacts. If you belong to a woodworking club, raise the question

at a meeting. Your hardwood lumber dealer or lumberyard just might be able to help. So, too, might any local furniture builders or wood turners.

You also can use the Internet. One good source is www.woodweb.com. Another source is a list of owners of Woodmizer portable sawmills, as some have wood for sale. To find out if there's an owner in your area, you can call 800-553-0182.

If you like unusual woods, I suggest you make an effort to track down and visit a mini-mill or two. That special board you've had in mind might just be waiting there for you, ready to speed up your pulse rate. □

A former contributing editor, Mario Rodríguez teaches woodworking at the Philadelphia Furniture Workshop.

Three mini-mills

Mini-mills can be as different as the wood they cut. To get a general idea of what you can expect in your region, Rodríguez located three mini-mills, all within an hour's drive of his home in southern New Jersey.

Have mill, will travel



Dave Peregmon of Pennsville, N.J., works full-time as a physical therapist at a rehabilitation clinic. His passion, however, is milling wood. He parks his portable Timber Harvester mini-mill on a lot owned by a busy landscaper, where he cuts whatever they drop off. He can mill logs up to 36 in. dia. and 20 ft.

long. The morning I visited, there were about a dozen logs stacked to the side. Peregmon and Bill Curnow, his 93-year-old assistant, were about to load and saw a poplar log.

In order to get the most from a log, each sawyer performs various rituals, double checks, and adjustments. I was surprised at their efficiency. In about 30 minutes, they had moved the log to the mill, hoisted it onto the carriage, and cut it into a neat pile of boards.

Peregmon's inventory varies from month to month, depending on what the landscapers bring. Locally grown woods are most common, but landscapers sometimes leave some interesting non-native species.



Lumber maker. Peregmon pulls a log up to the mill with a tractor. The log is held stationary as the bandsaw moves on rails (above), cutting a board from the top.

Furniture maker to lumber maker

Dan Hudock finds wood fascinating. You can tell that from the furniture he builds. “I’ve always been excited about the material,” he said. “Often, I put as much effort into selecting the wood for a furniture piece as I do building it.”



Although he still builds furniture, most of his time these days is spent running Hudock’s Hardwoods in Perkiomenville, Pa., on the site of a former dairy farm (www.hudocks-hardwoods.com).

Hudock is in touch with every local source for newly felled wood: contractors, landscapers, developers, property owners, and even the municipal services department. While I was visiting, he was cutting a huge elm tree cleared from a large estate nearby.

The centerpiece of his operation is a custom bandsaw mill he designed and built. It can cut a log up to 55 in. dia. He also has a kiln that handles 2,000 board feet of lumber. It takes between



Setting up. Hudock adjusts his bandsaw mill to cut a 2½-in.-thick sycamore slab.

five and 10 days to dry a load. Hudock’s inventory includes some of the more common native woods, among them cherry, walnut, red and white oak, hard and soft maple, and poplar. But it also includes a most-wanted list of rare domestics: apple, catalpa, elm, spalted elm, spalted curly maple, butternut, curly red oak, black locust, hickory, holly mulberry, aromatic red cedar, pear, sassafras, and sycamore.



Woodworking education. At Dave Spacht’s mill in Worcester Township, Pa., it’s not uncommon to see a school bus arrive with a bunch of children, there to learn how lumber is made. Each visitor gets a sample.

Keeping history alive

Dave and Carol Spacht’s sawmill has been a part of Worcester Township, Pa., since 1928. When they purchased the mill in 1983, however, it had long since fallen on hard times, reduced to little more than a collection of decrepit buildings and rusting equipment. Ever optimistic, the Spachts saw it as a business opportunity.

Since buying the property, the Spachts have turned the abandoned mill into a hive of local activity. They maintain the property as a rural sawmill, selling local hardwoods to local craftsmen and woodworkers, and welcoming student tours. Today, the mill is a manicured collection of barns and sheds, housing an amazing 1950s circular saw, drying and storage sheds, wood kilns, an office, and a woodworking shop. On weekends, professional and amateur woodworkers visit, looking for a deal on wood or the perfect plank for a pet project.

Spacht has plenty of ash, oak, maple, poplar, and walnut. And the barn holds several dozen wood slabs averaging 8 ft. long and 3 ft. wide.



Raw material. Rodriguez looks over some of Spacht’s inventory. Custom cutting isn’t an issue at most mini-mills.



No-nonsense sawblade. Spacht uses a 48-in.-dia. circular sawblade that can cut a log up to 30 in. wide.