



10 Tips for Mail-Order

The Internet has made it easier to find exceptional wood, but you need to be an educated shopper

BY PATRICK MCCOMBE

Sooner or later, one of your projects will call for a material that's not available locally. Whether you need a deeply figured stack of matched boards, an exotic veneer, or an eye-popping slab for a natural-edge table, there's a supplier somewhere who can help. You can find them by flipping to the back of this magazine or asking friends. The Internet is also an increasingly popular and effective way to find just the right supplier, from small mom-and-pop shops to large wholesalers.

But before you send out a check or offer up your credit-card number, you need a way to tell that the faraway company you found online is reputable and has quality material. To gather some tips and insider advice, I spoke with nearly 50 specialty lumber and veneer suppliers who sell material over the phone and Internet. I asked them about their specialties and how they handle remote transactions. We discussed how the material is shipped and about typical turn-around times. Then, as a test, *Fine Woodworking* editors placed trial orders with five companies. Just to make sure we didn't get preferential treatment, we used cell phones to place the orders and had the material delivered to our homes. In the end, we came away with 10 tips to make ordering material over the phone and Internet safer and more successful.

Patrick McCombe is an associate editor.

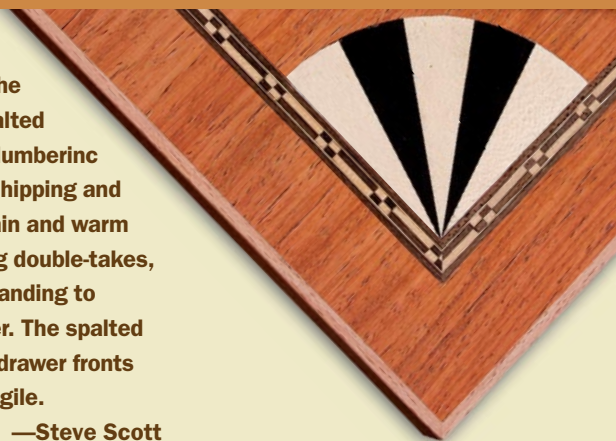
Happy customers



Yew and spalted maple

I was browsing for something out of the ordinary when I found my yew and spalted maple at Exotic Lumber (www.exoticlumberinc.com). The yew is hard and prone to chipping and splitting, but it has fantastic tight grain and warm coloring that had my co-workers doing double-takes, even before I'd applied a finish. Just sanding to 400 grit gave it a terrific, glassy luster. The spalted maple had enough color to make the drawer fronts interesting without being punky or fragile.

—Steve Scott



Lumber

1 Don't mail-order material you can get locally

Nothing can replace actually looking at and feeling lumber before you buy it, and the shipping costs of online lumber can significantly increase what you pay for small orders. Therefore, it doesn't make a lot of sense to buy what you can get from your local suppliers. After finding book-matched white oak at Talarico Hardwoods in Mohnton, Pa., for \$22 per board foot (with shipping), FWW art director Michael Pekovich decided to use the mail-ordered wood sparingly. "The Web site stated that one of their specialties is quartersawn oak, and they had plenty of stunning pictures to back it up," he said. "Unfortunately, their price list was equally stunning, with lumber fetching from \$10 to \$28 per board foot. I decided that I didn't need exceptional wood for every component

of my Arts and Crafts display case (see

p. 30). I opted for book-matched, mail-order stock for the top, sides, and drawer fronts, and purchased the remaining material locally."

Use mail-order material sparingly.

Rather than shell out \$22 per board foot for his entire Arts and Crafts display case, Pekovich reserved the expensive mail-order white oak for places where the boards' ray fleck would be most visible.

\$5 bd/ft

\$22 bd/ft

2 Start with a small order

Perhaps the best advice is to start with a small order and pay with a credit card. This allows you to test the supplier without investing too much money. As a last resort, you can always call your card issuer to stop payment if the deal turns sour. You can stop payment on checks, too, but not all suppliers accept them. And those that do will ship the material only after the check has cleared.

To those who have reservations about using credit cards over the phone or Internet, Jesse Schechter of Pine Creek Wood Co. in Friend, Ore., said, "You have less risk with a credit card than you do with a check or money order, because the card issuer is on your side if there's a problem."

Charge it. Most suppliers are honest and will work hard to ensure you're satisfied, but it's better to use a credit card for payment rather than a check, as card issuers are usually willing to help out if there's a problem.



3 Ask for recommendations

Almost every supplier we spoke with cautioned woodworkers to deal with a reputable company, but it's often hard to tell from a phone call or a Web site if a company is on the up-and-up. It's a good idea to ask your woodworking friends which companies they like, but unless they have ordered the same material from the same vendor, their experience may not be a good litmus test. Another option is to ask your peers in Internet discussion forums.

Suppliers' Web sites offer feedback from happy customers, but it's tough to put a lot of stock in a list of handpicked anecdotes. I would look for comments that indicate an order wasn't exactly right the first time, but then the supplier worked hard to please the customer. You also can ask the vendor for names of regular customers who can vouch for the quality of material and service.

Holly

I bought my holly from Groff and Groff Lumber (www.groffslumber.com) to use for stringing and inlay. I had never used holly before, but it cut easily with both a veneer saw and a knife and it cleaned up nicely with a scraper plane, regardless of the direction. A low-angle block plane worked great for trimming the fan sections. Overall, I'm delighted with the holly I purchased.

—Mark Schofield

Quartersawn white oak

The mail-order oak that I got from Talarico Hardwoods (www.talaricohardwoods.com) was more even in color and lighter in weight. It also milled easier and handplaned with less tearout. The local lumber was heavy, brittle, and dense, typical of my past experience. I did some research and found that slower-growing oak has tighter rings, which makes it lighter and easier to work.

—Michael Pekovich



4 Stick with suppliers close to the source

Try to buy from vendors who are relatively close to the source of lumber they're selling. Sawyers often have relationships with local hardwood suppliers and will give them a better deal than lumberyards that are hundreds or thousands of miles away.

5 Research unfamiliar species

If you're considering a wood you've never used before, be sure to find out about its woodworking properties, and what kind of variety to expect.

That way you'll know if the material you're getting is extraordinary or run-of-the-mill. FWW's Mark Schofield wasn't

surprised by the shrinkage cracks in the holly he ordered from Groff and Groff Lumber in Quarryville, Pa. "I can tell there was considerable shrinkage as the boards dried, but that seems to be typical with the species," he said. "Overall, I'm very happy with the quality of the wood."

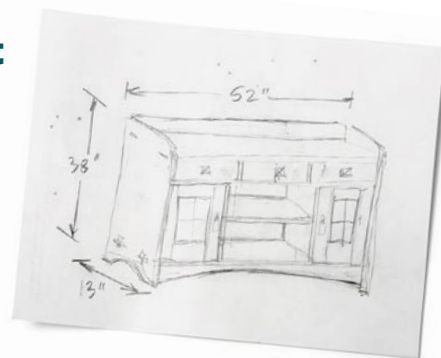
Do your homework.

If you're buying an unfamiliar species, learn as much as you can before purchasing.

6 Know what you want

Many suppliers suggested having a material list or measured drawing available so they can help you find the perfect wood for each part of your project. Pekovich reinforced this point: "When I spoke to the salesman at Talarico, it helped that I had created a scale drawing and cutlist of the parts. He asked me to email the information so he could get a better idea of what I needed. Later, he suggested the book-matched boards."

James Heusinger of Berea Hardwoods said it's also a good idea to steer clear of industry jargon because the terms often are loosely interpreted. "If you need finished stock that's $\frac{3}{4}$ or 1 in. thick, say exactly that, don't say $4/4$ or $5/4$. If you need curly or bird's-eye maple with one really eye-popping side, say that." At a minimum, tell the salesperson how you plan to use the material and the rough sizes of boards you're seeking.



Start with a drawing. If they know what you're building, many salespeople will go out of their way to find appropriately sized boards with color or figure that complements the design.

7 Check moisture content

You can't tell moisture content from a Web page, so ask the supplier about the moisture content of the boards, or at least whether the material is air- or kiln-dried. If you have a moisture meter, checking the stock when it arrives can alert you to a supplier's optimistic readings or improper handling by the shipper, as well as how long the stock should sit in your shop until it's ready to use.

Before you sign for the order, measure its moisture content. Kiln-dried stock should be between 8% and 12%. Air-dried material should be close to what was promised.



Happy customers (continued)

Madrone

The madrone I bought from Cook Woods (www.cookwoods.com) is beautiful and works extremely well. I am especially pleased with how it looks after a few passes with a sharp plane. It ends up as smooth as glass—better than cherry. But I do have one gripe. To make the grain, figure, and color visible to online buyers, the company planes the boards. One 8-ft. board was planed very poorly and had a $\frac{1}{16}$ -in. to $\frac{1}{8}$ -in. step running along its length, making one side thicker than the other. But admittedly, this is a small quibble and the quality of service makes up for it. I would gladly buy lumber from Cook Woods again.

—Matt Kenney



8 Be wary of online photos and inventories

Some large retailers with big Web sites have staff members dedicated to photographing and keeping an inventory of nearly every board in their warehouse. If you select a piece of lumber based on a Web-site image, make sure they're sending the exact board shown

in the picture—some suppliers show photos that are “representative” of a particular board or species. Also, while most small suppliers don't have the resources for on-line photos, you can and should ask for a digital photograph of anything highly figured or exotic that you're considering.

Know what you're getting. While some Web sites show the exact inventory, others show boards representative of the species, so make sure you know which method your vendor uses.

It's also a good idea to ask about the mix of board sizes, as some suppliers send out mostly 3-in.- and 4-in.-wide boards, which won't work well for tabletops or large panels.

Last, don't put a lot of faith in inventory lists, as FWW's Steve Scott found out. “My first attempt at buying wood on the Internet taught me a lesson about on-line inventories,” he said. “I ordered several board feet of spalted maple and quartersawn sycamore through a supplier in western New York. Their Web site made it easy to order online, but a full week after placing my order, no lumber had arrived. When I called, I was told they were out of both types of wood.”

9 Consider your shipping options

Small orders are generally shipped by parcel carriers like UPS, FedEx, and the U.S. Postal Service. With these methods, package size and weight are limited, but some suppliers will trim boards or split orders so the package size is within the maximums.

Larger orders are generally shipped by trucking companies, which sometimes charge extra for home delivery. You should ask about any extra charges for residential service.

No matter how your order is sent, make sure to take a careful look at the material before you sign for it.



Shipping methods vary. Long and heavy packages incur extra charges, so cutting boards or splitting the order may lower shipping costs.

10 Nothing beats a phone call

By now it's probably apparent that the Internet is an invaluable tool for tracking down who has what, but almost every lumber dealer we spoke with said that nothing beats a phone call to ensure you really get what you want. A good salesperson will ask questions to help you get the right material for your project, and might even give you a good deal on some uniquely figured or unusually sized boards tucked away in the warehouse.

Make the call. One salesperson even sent a picture to Matt Kenney's iPhone, so he could see the actual boards he was considering while he was traveling for the magazine.



Mahogany

I contacted Irion Lumber (www.irionlumber.com) about the Honduran mahogany I needed for this lowboy. They gave me a few different options, depending on ease of carving or the amount of figure I was looking for. I ended up with a single 22-in.-wide board with stunning figure for the top. I was able to get the sides and drawer fronts from a second wide board, ensuring excellent grain and color match in those parts. That board also had more moderate grain that made the shell carving a little easier. The legs were all from the same riftsawn 12/4 board.

—Michael Pekovich