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On Finding and Donating Wood

by Bob Heltman

Some months ago, I wrote an article about how to find wood. This was to help folks new to woodturning. Often, they get a lathe, tools, etc. and then wonder “where do I get wood?” I’ll review that, but herein want to mostly address the more experienced woodturner who wakes up buried in more wood than he can turn in the future, even if he lives on into eternity. I’ve been both without and with too much wood, so I can comment in expert fashion.

The newbie to woodturning can get wood by a number of methods. Go to a local store selling hardwoods, a craft store, lumber yard, etc. This, however, costs money. Better, look around your area for fallen trees, damaged trees about to fall, etc. Talk to the owner. Talk to a tree service company. Look for a “stump dump” where tree surgeons take parts of trees. Keep your eye on the weather --remember, a hurricane, tornado, or other high wind is the woodturner’s friend. However, be considerate and don’t visit a damaged area when the EMS squad or ambulance is there...I mean for goodness sake, curb yourself a bit. Have a chainsaw handy at all times though. Helping a neighbor remove a tree is a service rendered...and you get the wood! In some places, talk to your US Forest Service and get their advice. Look in the paper. As you drive around, look for fallen trees, an old apple orchard being uprooted, etc. Opportunity favors the prepared mind. And, of course, join your nearest woodturning club and let your need be known.

As you get into the woodturning game you will hear of burls and strange sounding woods. Subscribe to *More Woodturning Magazine*, the AAW Journal,

etc. and look in the ads section. If all else fails, wear torn and shoddy clothes, stand on a high traffic street corner, put a sad and downcast look on your face, and wear a cardboard sign around your neck that says, "Have Lathe, Need wood." You'll get all the attention you need.

Now, let's move forward in time 1 to 3 years. What happens is that word gets around that you turn wood and you'll get calls from friends, neighbors, even strangers, asking if you are interested in taking down or cutting up a tree they have. From time to time you'll connect and acquire a large supply of maple, cherry, ash, oak, dogwood, sourwood, hickory, pecan, boxelder, and so on. And you'll have a very large pile of wood, or several such piles. At first this is high-status and you'll feel elegant and proud. "Yes, yes" you'll humbly say, "I'm kinda pretty much devoted to woodturning some." If you turn a good bit, you'll stay familiar with what type of wood is in what part of the pile or has its own pile. And, you'll develop expertise in looking at a piece of a tree and correctly identifying it. Smugness will set in...as will bugs and rot if you leave the woodpile outside, on the ground, uncovered.

As the untouched wood ages, it can lose bark, gather fungus, and you get a little uncertain as to what kind of wood it is. You'll say things like, "I should have painted the cut ends to avoid cracking." And, "Well, if I cut off two inches from the cracked ends I'll still have enough left for a good bowl." If this also happened a few years earlier, you will subconsciously remember, on your next fallen tree wood gathering trip, to cut pieces a little longer just in case you don't get to paint the ends right away. This leads to an even larger woodpile.

Some woods decay faster than others...poplar and apple come to mind along with sapwood of oak, I have to confess. Several years ago, I just had to get rid of a lot of decayed apple I had laboriously gathered a couple years earlier. Guilt ridden, I had trouble sleeping for a night or two, although some guilt can be suppressed with a sufficient absorbing of adult beverages, I'm told. Actually, I had to get rid of a whole bottom row of cut wood that was stored on the ground. Being a part-time turner, I go for extended periods of time between my woodturning sessions.

Recently I had gotten myself into another situation where I just had to admit I had far more wood than I was likely to turn, and noticed some of it was starting to get too split, decayed, or bug ridden. What to do...You could run an ad and sell the surplus to other woodturners. Or add to your firewood pile

(just the bad pieces of course). Or donate it to your woodturning club's annual fund raising auction (but this may mean hauling a lot of wood to one or more club meetings). Being in the world's finest and largest woodturning club (allow a bit of pride, OK?), the Carolina Mountain Woodturners, where we have email and a website, our Internet expert broadcast the following email from me: "I have accumulated more wood blanks than I can turn. New Spalted Maple logs 12" diameter, sassafras ditto, butternut, odd pieces of walnut, chunks of various others. I'd like a CMW member, probably in the Hendersonville area, to come by and take some. A donation to CMW would be a nice gesture on the recipient's part and save me hauling pieces to the September auction. Glad to get a few chunks of osage orange in trade. Call first (my phone #) and will provide detailed directions." Within a day or two I received seven calls/emails, leading to visits and the removal of all the wood I wanted to have moved out. Each visit was very pleasant and allowed club members to see my shop and get their wood. We also greatly enjoyed each other's company and had nice chats. One interesting couple lives six months in Florida and six here in Hendersonville, NC. They needed wood while HERE! Makes sense. Each grand person promised to give money to our club, and this approach saved my aging body from having to load, transport at high gas cost expense, and unload a LOT of wood for our annual club's money raising auction.

There is still a bit of butternut to be retrieved by an out of town member, but the outside storage area is in great shape once again. I can either load in more wood or not. And, the decayed bark under one of the piles made great mulch for the flower garden. It is good to have a happy wife.

What remains is my inside wood on the floor of my basement shop studio. Now, yes, I allowed some of it to escape too, but at this point I can get to my smaller and second table top lathe which got blocked off for months by the inside wood blanks. The current condition allows me to throw out some rugs on which some wood sat and left its fungus marks. The floor can be seen once again. There were a lot of wood chips to vacuum up, dust, and even a few dead bugs. Such is woodturning. I have to go now, the phone is ringing...oh, it was my neighbor Dan, with the portable sawmill. He is slabbing a maple tree trunk and wondered if I wanted a piece near the root area as it is somewhat spalted and has real curly grain. I'd better go take a look.