



Figured Wood: A Primer for Commercial Production on Small Forestlands in the Pacific Northwest

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Overview

The collection, trade, and artistry around figured wood are ancient and vast. Figured wood has been associated with goods representing value and quality throughout history—from beads in Native American indigenous trade networks to Chinese statues to furniture in French royal courts. The great and diverse forests of the Pacific Northwest are replete with different kinds of figured wood, from curly big leaf maple, to redwood burls, to the highly prized figured myrtlewoods. Harvested figured woods eventually reach an artistic hand and become highly valued specialty items such as paneling for furniture, turned wood vases, or musical instruments. This factsheet provides an overview of figured woods in the Pacific Northwest as a supplemental income opportunity for small forestland owners.



Violins and viola made from figured wood. Instruments made by David Gusset. Photo courtesy of David Gusset.

What is Figured Wood?

Broadly speaking “figured” refers to distinctive patterns and markings on the longitudinal surfaces of wood. “Specialty wood” is often found as a synonym for figured wood, but is also sometimes used more broadly to include other value-added wood products without figures. Figures in wood can be caused by many things, including disruptions in the normal grain, color and form of the wood from injury, molds, insects, and fungi. Most figured wood originates from burls, which are large, tumor-like growths found on trees. In this document

we use “figured wood” and “burl” interchangeably; however, keep in mind that not all figured wood comes from burls. Some common names to describe the patterns in figured wood include ambrosia, angel stairs, blister, bear scratches, bird’s eye, crotch, curly or tiger, dimple, fiddleback, flame, ghost, quilted and spalted. An Internet search for any of these terms will return many good examples.



A few patterns of figured wood: a. curly big leaf maple, b. spalted white oak, c. quilted big leaf maple. Photos courtesy of North Woods LLC.

Common Species of Figured Wood in the Pacific Northwest

The most common species of figured wood from the Pacific Northwest is big leaf maple. Other popular species include black locust, California redwood, madrone, Oregon myrtle and white oak. The rarer the species, the more often the wood will be a central part of the identity of the area (e.g., Oregon myrtle wood).

Identifying, Harvesting and Processing

Marketing figured wood is an opportunistic endeavor. If you come across a tree with a large burl, it may or may not be worth your time and effort to cut it unless it was destined to be cut anyway. The most cost-effective time to cut down a tree for figured wood is during a logging operation or after a blow down, when the tree would otherwise be chipped, burned or left to rot. One way to determine the value of a burl or other figured wood is to contact a local buyer who might be willing to come to your land and give you an estimate, or at least look at detailed photos and a written description. The buyer may offer to remove the burl for a set price or instruct you on how to remove it yourself and pay a higher price. You may discover many options, depending on the time and energy you want to spend harvesting, transporting and processing the wood.



Turned bowls made from figured wood. Photo courtesy of North Woods, LLC.

A substantial amount of time and labor may be needed to remove and process a burl. Most burls under 25 pounds are not worth removing. Some can weigh up to 3,000 lbs. Burls located at the base of a tree must be dug up to access and remove the roots—a task which can be extremely time-consuming, depending on conditions. Those that are located higher up the trunk may be easier to access after felling the tree. Once the burl is roughly cut out, it can be transported by tractor or pickup truck to a buyer or to a central location for further processing. Most burls grow from

the center of the tree in a cone shape, so removal using a diamond-shaped cut is recommended. If you lack experience cutting a burl, do the first few harvests with the help of an expert or attend a workshop to receive proper training. Cutting a burl improperly can decrease its value considerably.

If you wish to further process the burl, consult with a professional or attend a workshop if you are a novice. Some basics steps include pressure washing the burl to remove dirt and bark, allowing it to air dry away from direct sunlight with good circulation to prevent mold growth. Once it is ready for cutting you will want to determine what the end use will be. Figured wood can be used in various sizes and shapes, such as blocks for turning bowls, slabs and veneers for furniture making and musical instruments, or even larger cuts for sculptures and decorative items. Cutting figured wood to meet buyer specifications requires advanced training, so unless you want to invest substantial time and energy learning this trade, it is far easier to sell your bulk wood to a professional.

Marketing Considerations

When looking for markets for your figured wood, the level of processing and quality will determine where you sell your product and the price you will receive. Consolidation buyers and processors will be more interested in purchasing raw, uncut burls and other figured wood for a lower price. Hobbyist and artisans will be more interested in something that has been cut to the appropriate size for the craft and will pay a higher price. Quality of the figured wood also affects price. You will generally receive a higher price for figured wood free of mold, weathering stains, insect damage and cracks. Good quality burls have tight and long needle-like pins on the surface and should be properly cut in a diamond shape. Larger burls are more desirable than smaller ones. Species of wood and figured pattern may also affect price. Table 1 lists sample burls prices in 2011-12.



Maple burl cross-section. Courtesy of Goby Walnut and Western Hardwoods.

Table 1. Sample Figured Wood Prices 2011-2012

Form	Price/Unit	Source
Buyer removes burl from site	\$50-\$100/ton	North Woods LLC
Raw burl w/bark delivered	\$300/ton	North Woods LLC
Clean burl (no bark) delivered	\$400/ton	North Woods LLC
Burly maple blank (block) retail (6x6x3")	\$19	North Woods LLC
Black locust blank (block) retail (5x5x12")	\$50	North Woods LLC

Additional Resources

- For contacts to commercial buyers and sellers visit: www.orforestdirectory.com
- For additional information on figured wood markets and other nontimber forest products visit: www.ntfinfo.us

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