

# Urbanwood finds creative uses for felled trees

BY JANET MILLER

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Urbanwood wants to make sure that no city tree heads to the mulch pile before its time.

Urbanwood is a partnership project that works to recycle felled city trees in southeast Michigan and route them to small, local sawmills where they eventually become hardwood floors, mantels, shelves, table tops and more. Urbanwood has retail space at Recycle Ann Arbor's ReUse Center along with a Web presence, and offers a range of species not found at conventional stores, from black walnut to hickory to birch.

The potential to reclaim southeast Michigan's dead trees is huge, said Jessica Simons, natural resources specialist with the non-profit Southeast Michigan Resource Conservation and Development Council and lead organizer of Urbanwood. A study concluded that the area produces five million board feet of lumber a

year that could be milled and used for construction, she said.

Urbanwood's reclaimed lumber has been used at a number of area businesses, from an ash conference room floor at A3C Collaborative Architecture in Ann Arbor to the floor at the new Beezy's Café in Ypsilanti, said Simons. Urbanwood is a cooperative project between the council and Recycle Ann Arbor.

The idea to find a better use for dead urban trees sprang from Michigan's emerald ash borer outbreak. As trees around southeast Michigan came down beginning in 2004, most of them became mulch or firewood or, worst of all, headed to the landfill. Simons said her organization, with help from the state and grant money from the federal government, wanted to find more sustainable uses for the dead trees.

"The focus had been on how to eradicate the bug, tree

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removal and tree replacement," she said. "We were advocating the highest and best use of each log."

That sounded simpler that it was: It is expensive to collect and transport single logs in a sprawling metropolitan area. Instead of gathering individual trees, most of the wood for Urbanwood comes from municipal tree crews and some private tree service companies.

And because there are no economies of scale, the reclaimed wood can be more expensive than a local lumberyard or big box store. Adding to the expense is the vetting process: Not all urban trees are large enough, defect-free enough or straight enough to become

lumber and a surprising amount is embedded with metal. All of this means extra time to mill it.

Still, urban trees can produce superior lumber, Simons said, with more texture and character than mass-milled lumber. "There are more unusual qualities such as grain pattern, figuring and knots," she said.

As southeast Michigan was cutting down plenty of dead trees, Simons was surprised to discover the urban area also had a large number of small sawmill operations flexible enough to mill small quantities of lumber. She identified about 10 of them willing to mill the city trees and either sell the lumber directly, through the Urbanwood Web site or at the ReUse Center on consignment.

With a federal grant, Simons began market-

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ing Urbanwood. The Web site was launched earlier this year.

After discovering that Recycle Ann Arbor has used reclaimed urban lumber for a conference room floor at their Environmental House, Simons approached the organization about being a partner in the effort. By early 2007, the conservation council and Recycle Ann Arbor had pieced together a network that allowed the dead trees to make it into the marketplace.

Today, the ReUse Center carries about 3,500 board feet of urban lumber (valued at \$25,000), said Jason Bing, Environmental House manager at Recycle Ann Arbor. Sales doubled in 2008, he said.

Builders purchase the lumber directly with the sawmill. Artists and craftspeople can buy milled wood directly from the ReUse Center

for relatively small projects. Inventory depends on what urban trees have been cut down, Bing said.

One customer was interested in completing the recycle circle. He needed to remove a number of trees to make room to build his Scio Township home, Simons said. He contracted with a tree removal service to take the trees down and transport them to a local sawmill, where they were milled, dried and return to where they had stood for countless years, she said.

"They made an incredibly beautiful oak floor."

For more information, go to <http://urbanwood.org>.

■ Janet Miller is a freelance writer.



ReUse Center associate Alia Kelly with reclaimed wood. | ROBERT RAMEY