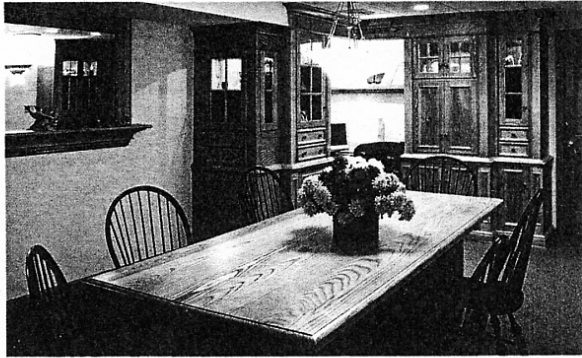


A conference table at Highland Hardwoods in Brentwood, N.H., showcases the beauty of white ash.



Ash remains forgotten as dealers wonder why

Mediocre export sales only positive for ash market

By Brian Caldwell STAFF WRITER

Ash continues to be the hardwood that simply gets no respect. Domestic dealers remain baffled by the

poor sales of the species, which seems to have a better reputation overseas. Although the wood is suitable for cabinets, furniture, flooring and baseball bats, ash sales continue to be slow.

"Ash slips under the radar; people don't think about it a lot and don't talk about it a lot," said Rick Lang of Highland Hardwoods, a retailer and wholesaler in Brentwood, N.H. "I think people don't consider it enough and they don't follow through. People are looking for options and choices of various things but I don't think a lot of people consider ash."

White ash grows in the Eastern United States, and trees reach heights from 80' to 100', with trunk diameters up to 4'. The wood is strong and straight-grained, with a brown to dark brown heartwood, and its sapwood is nearly white. White ash (*Fraxinus americana*), also known as American ash, is the most commercially valuable of the 18 ashes in the United States, as well as the most common.

"Ash has been pretty consistent, I have not seen a lot of movement in ash prices," said Steve Wall of Wall Lumber, a retailer in Mayodan, N.C. "We sell a fair quantity of it. One thing that we have been doing is flooring, which has been pretty popular, using the No. 1 common that has quite a bit of character and color in it. People tend to like that."

Ash is a good turning wood and is somewhat sought-after by the veneer market. But it's hardly the first choice of furniture makers.

"We've created programs for people to make ash furniture, convincing them that they should try it, and any issues that they had we'd work through it with them," Lang said. "Most of the issues were the sapwood-heartwood issue. That's pretty easy to figure out. Number one, you can do color sorting. You can get all sapwood or all heartwood and have it uniform in color, if that matters to you. But the biggest thing is a lot of people don't know how to finish ash. If you want ash to look really rich and beautiful, you have to put a little bit of a stain on it just to neutralize the contrast between the heartwood and the sapwood."

Ash is an excellent steam-bending wood and can be worked satisfactorily by both hand and machine. The wood is fine for nailing, screwing and gluing. It dries fairly easily with little movement.

"I like it better than oak," Wall said.

"We push it all we can and it's still a little under the red oak price. It has a little more flair so it really does look good on the floors. Another thing we do is take our 12/4 and saw baseball blanks for our turning market. If I had to make a project personally, I would use ash over oak. I just like being a little different, I reckon. We get plywood in to match; we make moldings to match, so we have everything that goes right along with it."

Ash wasn't always overlooked. "At one time, ash was one of the premier species that I sold," said Lang. "I love ash. I love the look of ash and if I can convince somebody to use white ash and it's going to help them create a new line that is going to be good for their company, then it is worth the effort."

"There's a really easy argument for people to consider using ash for secondary products," added Lang. "It's available, the supply is there, it grows all over the eastern United States, the price is very, very attractive and it is a beautiful wood that is easy to work with."

Retail prices for 100 bf of kiln-dried 4/4 FAS white ash, surfaced on two sides, ranged from \$2.50 to \$3.00/bf in the Northeast; \$2.60 to \$3.00/bf in the Southeast; \$2.60 to \$3.00/bf in the Midwest; and \$3.75 to \$4.10/bf in the West.

Wholesale prices for 1,000 bf of kiln-dried 4/4 FAS ash, surfaced on two sides, ranged from \$2,255 to \$2,530/mbf in the Northeast; \$2,300 to \$2,550/mbf in the Southeast; \$2,350 to \$2,700/mbf in the Midwest; and \$3,150 to \$3,550/mbf in the West.

White ash's specific gravity: .55 to .60

Specific gravity is the ratio of the density of a substance to the density of water.

White ash's radial shrinkage: 4.9 percent.

Radial or quartersawn boards have a grain running roughly perpendicular to the wide faces.

White ash's tangential shrinkage: 7.8 percent.

Tangential or flatsawn boards have a grain running roughly parallel to the wide faces.

Example: A 12" wide flatsawn white ash board will shrink .196" (about 3/16") from 12 percent moisture content to 6 percent, and a quartersawn board will shrink .133" (about 1/8").