

American hardwood lumber grading Q&A series: article no. 7

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by Bob Sabistina, Grading consultant to the American Hardwood Export Council

The Grading Rules for North American hardwood lumber were established 100 years ago by the National Hardwood Lumber Association (NHLA), which is now headquartered in Memphis, Tennessee. I have been writing a series of articles for the last year, answering a variety of questions pertaining to the application of those grading rules. This month's article will deal with grading issues that originate at the sawmill and the procedures that shipping inspectors must go through before the lumber is loaded in to a container for shipment.

We learned that the Appalachian region is the best producing area for quality hardwood. We always request that the hardwood supplier is from this area. How can we make sure that the supplier keeps their commitment and only sends us lumber from this region?

Most importantly, when purchasing American hardwoods, you need to build a relationship with your supplier. This begins with a trip to the United States and visiting the areas you want to buy from. The Appalachian region extends through most of the eastern third of America and covers the vast majority of the US hardwood resource. Buying from a reliable supplier, such as a member of the American Hardwood Export Council (AHEC), doesn't always guarantee success, but these are suppliers who are committed towards export markets. What truly guarantees a profitable transaction is doing business with a company who you have established a relationship with and they in turn have a keen interest in your company.

As far as the Appalachian region being the best source for American hardwoods, it very much depends on the type of product you are producing, or if reselling, the type of end-user you want to target. For example, if you are a manufacturer, and you are making a line of maple kitchen cabinet doors, where colour is critical, you will probably have more success buying from a northern company, as this is where hard maple is more consistently white in colour. Conversely, if you are producing maple kitchenware, such as butcher blocks, cutting boards, or wooden utensils, colour is not as important and price will be more of an important consideration.

As a buyer of US hardwood, you really need to invest some time and money and visit the USA in order to get a good feel for what is available and from where. Most importantly, you need to establish some good relationships with potential suppliers. Oh, and by the way, with the current weak dollar, it is an extremely good time for you to come and visit!

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How can the supplier make sure the grade is consistent? We have been told that certain mills produce lower quality than others and sometimes we need to make specify which mill the lumber comes from. How can we be confident that we end up getting the correct lumber?

See **Question 1**. It sounds from both your questions that you have had difficulty getting consistent hardwood shipments. I don't know where you are located, but I would assume that you have been approached by several very good companies. However, if price is more of a factor in your buying decisions then the quality shipped will vary greatly according to price. You also mention that your supplier is sourcing wood from various mills. This suggests to me that they are commissioned to supply you at a more or less fixed price. If this is the case, they are simply working at that price level and trying to meet that objective. Hardwood suppliers are all working with the relatively same operating costs to produce their products. Your price will reflect the quality you receive. One suggestion I could make is to buy directly from a sawmill. There is a relatively centralized origin for the timber thus producing a fixed regional product. Again I cannot stress enough how important it is for you to build a relationship with your supplier and to focus on a producing area rather than just the price.

We purchased some ash logs from the USA for veneer production. After we opened several of the logs, we ran into some brown discolouration. Is this permitted?

The brown flecks sound like what we describe in AHEC's *Illustrated Guide to American Hardwood Lumber Grades* as glassworm. This is not a worm at all but a discolouration of the wood caused by certain insects

living in the ash tree. When grading ash lumber these are not considered to be a defect. When dealing with logs, they would be virtually impossible to detect through the bark. Occasionally, if the end of the log hasn't been waxed or painted, you can see these brown flecks between the growth rings, similar to the gum streaks found in black cherry. The only suggestion I can offer you is to go back to your supplier and see if he can help. As far as log grades, well they are virtually non-existent.

We bought some No. 2 Common tulipwood and some of the bundles were very dark. My supplier claims they are from mineral water from the soil. Is this correct? Can we ask the supplier to leave these pieces out of our next shipment?

No. 2 tulipwood is a combination of No's 2A and 2B, but most importantly a medium quality utility-type grade. The colour you describe sounds like it could be a couple things, neither of which is considered a defect in this grade. Tulipwood gets a purple-blue mineral colour that is typically left out of No. 1 and Better. It is a result of the trees growing conditions such as soil type and geography. The discolouration could also be a result of sap stain, which is fungal in nature. This gray-black colour is not a defect in No. 2 tulipwood, because it is generally not detrimental to the boards structure or strength. Of course you can ask your supplier to leave these boards out, but be prepared to pay for this service. I am curious, what are you using this material for?

I need a supplier to cut me 20mm hardwood for our flooring factory. Why can't US producers supply me with this size?

The typical production sizes for US supplier are one inch and thicker, or at 25.4mm and thicker. The problem with cutting this uncommon size you ask for is that out of a typical run of logs through the mill, all grades will be produced. If you were prepared to 20mm lumber in all the grades that are generated in the mill, then I am sure you could get what you are looking for. However, the problem I have seen is that the buyer wants only certain grades and this leaves a load of 20mm lumber for the mill to try to find a buyer for, which, inevitably, is all the high grade lumber that was generated.

As the US hardwood industry becomes more and more entrenched with the global market, the whole concept of metric sizes needs to be considered. If the overseas buyer cannot get US sawmills to furnish the sizes both in width and thickness they need, there could be even more of a move towards buying logs from the US.

Post Script: If you have any questions regarding the NHLA grading rules or terminology pertaining to American hardwoods you can contact me at: [Dit e-mailadres is beschermd tegen spambots. U heeft Javascript nodig om het te kunnen zien.](#)

I will try to answer all in upcoming issues. For more information on available literature pertaining to the grades, as well as species and upcoming seminars, please contact AHEC directly.

American Hardwood Export Council

The American Hardwood Export Council (AHEC) is the leading international trade association for the US hardwood industry, representing the committed exporters among US hardwood companies and all the major US hardwood product trade associations. AHEC concentrates its efforts on providing architects, specifiers, designers and end-users with technical information on the range of species, products and sources of supply.

AHEC produces a full range of technical publications which are available free of charge by visiting www.ahec-europe.org , www.sustainablehardwoods.info & www.americanredoak.info or by faxing (44) 20 7626 4222.

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