

Specialty Wood & Wood Products For Handicraft Markets¹

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ABSTRACT Specialty woods for handicraft markets can be almost anything and are limited only by the innovation of the crafter. Nearly any tree or shrub species could be recognized for a specific trait or set of characteristics which may be desirable for a specific product. This paper focuses on a few examples which are representative of a broad range of products. A brief discussion of the harvesting, manufacturing, and marketing processes will be presented for each product group.

Introduction

When I was given this title, I was immediately faced with two questions: (1) What are specialty wood products? And (2) What are handicrafts? Let's take a look at how I answered those questions and see where the rest of the talk goes.

Also I would like to note that these comments are prepared from the perspective of the private forest landowner and their position of being the primary source of these materials.

What are specialty wood or wood products? Could be either trees or shrub or something that grows on trees & shrubs. For the purposes of this presentation, it doesn't even have to be wood.

Some may be used in their "natural" state or processed into a secondary raw material for further processing into a final product:

- A by-product of traditional wood processing - *Slabs, cut-offs, end trim, cull logs*
- Limbs, branches, twigs, bark, burls, grafts, knot holes
- Fruiting structures - *Conks, witch's broom*
- Flowering Structures-*Seed heads*
- Foliage-*pine needles (baskets & weavings)*
- Roots (including "knees")- *some large vines might also be included.*
- Anything unusual, unique, or scarce
- Unusual color, texture, growth form, or density
- What is "special" in one place may have little or no value in another.

The second question still had to be answered, What is a handicraft? For this one I went to the dictionary and found that it is defined as "skill with the hands" or "work requiring skill with the hands." Needless to say, the definition did not help me to narrow the scope of this paper.

Following is a discussion of a few examples of what I think are somewhat unique products (handicrafts) made from non-typical raw materials of the forest.

Hut Products-Sturgeon, MO

Hut Products is a family owned company in Central Missouri that produces blanks for pen, pencils and other small wood turnings. The owner of the company had a background in the jewelry business until starting Hut Products about 7 years ago. He was an experienced wood worker as a hobbyist. His son (and partner) is a machinist and has several years experience as a tool designer.

They purchase burls, spalted wood, and unusual species of wood throughout the world and cut them into 5/8" x 5/8" x 5-1/2" blanks. A significant portion of their wood is cut from city street trees and collected for them by urban foresters. This is not just an opportunity for rural landowners! They also produce larger turning squares and some non-wood blanks of acrylic acetate. They do not produce and finish products other than samples for new product design or photographing for their catalog. They employ 7 full-time employees.

Hut Products markets all their products through an annual catalog, special flyers, and through an Internet web site. The business generates over \$1 million annually and supports 7-8 local craftsman who supply various gigs, lathe attachments, and catalog items. Hut sells Sherline lathes and their own designed attachments, all pen making hardware, and their own brand of finishes. You can view some of their catalog items at <http://www.hutproducts.com> on the Internet web site.

Bark

Bark of thick-barked species like cottonwood,

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sassafras, and walnut is used by woodcarvers to produce a variety of handicraft items. Cottonwood bark, as you see here, needs to be a minimum of 2" thick and is more desirable in thicker pieces. It is best harvested from standing dead trees or cut logs of old growth trees. It is easily removed after the log has dried slightly and shrunk causing the bark to loosen. A chain saw can be used to make a starting cut lengthwise to the log and then the bark is simply loose from the remaining wood and cut into sheets. Most bark is sold directly to carvers at shows and demonstrations, but many wood carving supply houses also stock supplies. Wood carving clubs are also potential markets. Cottonwood bark normally sells for \$5.00 to \$15.00 per square foot making it potentially more valuable than the log itself.

Other handicraft uses of bark include floral arrangements utilizing twigs with winged bark such as this "burning bush," or other twig having bright colors (usually green or red). Birch bark in the Lake states is, of course, used for decorative baskets, birdhouses, packaging, artwork, model building and many other handicrafts.

Individual handicrafters should be aware of sustainability issues when collecting the necessary raw materials. It is always best to collect bark from dead or dying trees, or trees that will be harvested for other purposes. Large-scale bark collection should be carefully coordinated with other uses to insure as complete as possible utilization of trees.

Vines

Grape vines love trees, although trees (and foresters) probably do not share those sentiments. Timber stand improvement operations commonly include removal and herbicidal treatment of all vines. However, in the past few years, the popularity of grape vine wreaths has caused many of us to consider the marketable value of this material. There is even talk of some applied research projects to develop management scenarios which include encouragement of vine growth in timber stands for the purpose of providing both wildlife food, wild edibles, and vines for the handicraft market. The idea would be to grow the size and type of vines desired for wreaths without

negative impacts on the crowns of desirable species of trees such as walnuts, pecans, etc. Since grape vines have a fairly long "shelf life" for the handicraft/ florals market, harvesting could occur at the time of year which would insure regrowth from sprouts. (Of course, this is just the opposite of currently used practices.) At wholesale prices of \$.05-\$.15 per lineal foot, vine production has the potential of yielding significant annual or bi-annual income for landowners. Although I haven't really talked with any of them, I believe craft supply wholesalers would love to find reliable local suppliers of vines.

For the large vines and clumps of vines that are common where vines have resprouted for years, I have seen them used for beautiful carvings and bases for coffee tables, decorative lamps, book-ends, etc. Large vines are very woody and may be utilized in applications where wood would normally be the material used.

Summary

Materials from the forest that can be used for handicraft products are almost limitless. Human innovativeness has continued to recognize possibilities for desirable products from forest-grown raw materials for thousands of years. There is no reason to believe this will not continue. Handicraft products will continue to be dominated by part-time entrepreneurs making and selling products to local markets. However, in this age of mass marketing, there is always potential to develop large-scale markets for a very wide variety of materials. It is probably not feasible to develop a complete list potential handicraft raw materials that could be produced from forests. I hope the examples I have mentioned will stimulate you to think of potential raw materials that grow in forests in your own part of the country. I feel there will always be individuals who will recognize uses for the most unlikely things growing around them. Many of you are in attendance today precisely because you have already reached that point. Workshops like this will stimulate all of us to look at our woodlands with a newly developed eye and appreciation for their wonderful versatility and potential economic value beyond traditional forest products. In the general field of forestry, I believe advocates of non-traditional forest products are the real innovators of today. Thank you for the opportunity to be a part of fun!