

# Reclaimed HEART PINE

*Treasure harvested from old buildings and river bottoms.*

By David Schiff

There's something about the texture, warm hue and distinctive grain of heart pine that just makes you want to run your hand over the wood. Yes, it's a yellow pine, but don't confuse it with the yellow pine you'll find at the lumberyard, often tinged pressure-treatment green. Heart pine is the heartwood of the longleaf pine tree (*Pinus palustris*), which is no longer harvested for commercial use and is now primarily available only as reclaimed lumber. The lumberyard stuff is slash pine (*Pinus elliottii*), loblolly pine (*Pinus taeda*) or less often, shortleaf pine (*Pinus echinata*).

All southern yellow pines are heavier and stronger than the white pine boards sold at home centers and lumberyards.

But longleaf is the strongest and densest of them all—nearly as dense as red oak.

That's because longleaf grows a lot slower than other pines. It takes at least 45 years for longleaf to reach a harvestable size, while slash pine can be harvested in 14 to 20 years.

## History of heart pine

At one time, longleaf pine was among the most plentiful wood species in the southern United States. Early settlers valued the wood for all kinds of construction, from wagon wheels to sailing vessels. The high resin content of longleaf pine also made it valuable as a raw material that yielded turpentine, pitch, and tar. After the Civil War, the Industrial Revolution fueled a building boom, and heart pine found its way into factories, warehouses and other commercial buildings all over the country.

Historically, woodworkers have preferred white pine to longleaf and other yellow pines because white pine grew in wider diameters and had much less resin.

In the past, heart pine was most often used in rustic

country furniture. But today, reclaimed heart pine has become a popular choice among woodworkers who favor the tawny, bold grain and (in some cases) the added value of using a "green" material that may have been salvaged from an historic structure.

## Selecting the best stock

Its widespread use for flooring, beams and other structural members created an urban forest of prime lumber that continues to be harvested today. Heart pine is also reclaimed from river bottoms as "sinker" logs and are brought to the surface and processed into usable lumber.

Local businesses that sell salvaged building materials are likely to have some heart pine in their selection of reclaimed lumber. But for higher-quality stock and a greater selection of lumber dimensions, you're better off dealing with large-scale suppliers who specialize in reclaimed lumber (see Sources, facing page, bottom right).

A freshly felled longleaf pine log will have pockets of sticky resin that make the wood troublesome to mill and finish. Reclaimed material that has air-dried in a century-old building will have much



*Pinus palustris*



## fastFACTS

Commissioned in 1797, the U.S.S. Constitution has a keel made from a single length of longleaf pine, as well as heart pine decks.

## Heart Pine Quick Take

**DENSITY** 41 lbs./cu. ft.

**HARDNESS** Hard

**STABILITY** High

**ROT/INSECT RESISTANCE** Moderate

**TEXTURE** Fine

**TOXICITY** Moderate

**USES** Flooring, furniture



River-recovered heart pine with curly grain

River-recovered heart pine, select grade

River-recovered heart pine, vertical grain

less resin, but it's still an issue to be aware of (see Working heart pine). If you're buying river-recovered lumber, make sure your boards have been kiln dried to evaporate or crystallize the resin.

Unlike standard lumber, heart pine that has been salvaged from a building is likely to show signs of this earlier use. Reclaimed lumber that hasn't been processed may contain old nails and layers of paint. Material that has been milled can have rust stains where nails and bolts were used. Many woodworkers see this historical evidence as a positive attribute to incorporate in their projects. If you want pristine grain, look for boards milled from river-recovered longleaf pine logs, or be prepared to cut out the defects.

As you might expect, the price range for reclaimed heart pine is huge. Minimally processed material can be had at bargain prices from local salvage yards, while clear grades of river-recovered heart pine can sell for \$40 per board foot. As always, wider and longer boards command higher prices.

### Working heart pine

Heart pine isn't soft and easy to cut and plane like white pine. Dense and heavy, it works more like hardwood. Heart pine is prone to splitting when hand-nailed, and screws require pilot holes. Vertical grain boards are easy to work with power and hand tools, but boards with "cathedral" or wild grain patterns are prone to chipping out. This is especially true when routing edge profiles or planing by hand. Avoid these mishaps by taking shallow cuts or climb-cutting when routing edge profiles.

Even dry stock reclaimed from buildings can contain pockets of resin that

will gum up planers and jointers. When working heart pine on these machines, inspect the wood frequently to check for sticky areas. If you detect them, take a few minutes to remove pitch from wood and machines, using a rag dampened in turpentine or paint thinner.

The resin can also make sanding difficult. Friction generated by power-sanding can melt resin and quickly clog sandpaper. If you encounter this problem, there are three work-arounds: Wipe the wood down as mentioned above, sand by hand (which won't generate much heat), or do your smoothing with a cabinet scraper.

### Finishing heart pine

Freshly cut or planed heart pine will darken when exposed to natural light, attaining tones that range from deep yellow to burgundy. A good way to protect the wood while making the most of its natural color is to use a penetrating oil finish. But if a "show" surface contains a pitch pocket, make sure to seal this area with one or two spot applications of de-waxed shellac or shellac-based sealer before applying any other finish. For greater durability, an oil finish can be topcoated with satin polyurethane.

Heart pine isn't usually stained, unless a more subdued appearance is desired (for a floor, for example). But if you're building children's toys or furniture with heart pine, a bright-colored dye stain will highlight grain patterns, creating a fun, dramatic effect to brighten play time. ■

### Watch out for...

Nail stains

Pitch pockets



### Historic heart pine.

Alaskan woodworker Carl Hartvigson builds miniature desk chests like this from heart pine reclaimed from Chicago's Sears building (demolished in 1996).

### Sources

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