One glance at antique Colonial furniture and you might wonder how the pine it’s made from could be named “white.” Yet beneath its aged pumpkin-color lies wood perhaps once as creamy white as cow’s milk.

That’s because eastern white pine (*Pinus strobus*), the lightest colored of all pines, darkens in time to a golden-orange hue. The same holds true for its slightly darker near-twin, western white pine (*Pinus monticola*). Besides color, the two species have comparable characteristics. They also offer stock that’s significantly lower in pitch (resin) and more stable than any of the other pines.

**History in woodworking**
In the New World, eastern white pine grew 200’ tall with trunks free of branches for at least 80’. Light, yet strong and easy to work, the tree provided the ideal material for ship masts. The tree’s rot-resistant old-growth wood became homes, furniture, utensils, even wagons and bridges. Today’s use of eastern white pine isn’t as extensive, but woodworkers employ it for everything from boats to millwork, cabinets, and furniture.

Across the continent grows the western white pine. The tree’s size, wood quality, and workability made it worth the extra effort to fetch it from higher elevations for use in light construction, millwork and furniture during the West’s development. Unfortunately, since its days as “King Pine,” the last 50 years have seen blister rust and bark beetles reduce the once-enormous stands to 10% of the original! Hopefully, new disease-resistant strains will replenish this great western species.

**Where the wood comes from**
Today’s eastern white pine is harvested in New England and the southeastern Canadian provinces. It does, however, grow throughout the Lake States and as far south as northern Georgia.

Western white pine, known mostly as Idaho white pine, comes from the “Inland Empire” mountains of northern Idaho, eastern Washington, western Montana, and British Columbia.

**What you’ll pay**
Don’t expect to find white pine at your local home center. Specialty wood suppliers and small local lumberyards will have it, or can order for you.
Eastern white pine grades start with C-Select, the highest, which allows minimal pin knots on one face; the back will be D-Select with more knots. Boards are often combined into D & Better Select. Lower grades include Finish Common, a knotty grade, and Premium Common, rougher with more knots, sometimes combined into Premium & Better. Expect to pay at least $3 per board foot for the best.

Western white pine grades are also based on appearance and are priced similarly. Stick with the two top grades: Choice & Better (few if any tiny pin knots) and Quality (more and larger knots). White pine premium quality plywood costs about $65 per 4 × 8 sheet, and veneer is available.

*Note: White pine isn’t typically dried to 6-9% moisture content (MC) like most hardwoods. The mark MC-15 or KD-15 in the grade stamp indicates a maximum 15% MC.*

**How to select the best stock**

Because white pine is graded by appearance, you’ll want to pay the same attention to it when selecting stock. First, try to pick boards with uniform color. Second, look for stock that’s relatively knot-free, unless you’re seeking a more rustic look for your project.

**Working white pine in the shop**

Let your stock acclimate in your home or a temperature/humidity controlled shop for a few weeks to ensure stability later. Then keep the following few points in mind.

- **Ripping and routing.** Eastern and western white pine contain far less pitch than other pines, but if you’re going to machine a lot of it, switch to a coated saw blade and router bit to avoid burning caused by gummy buildup. Clean the blade and/or cutters with a nylon bristle brush dipped in solvent.

- **Assembly.** Drill pilot holes for screws, especially in the much harder western white pine.

**Deciding on the right finish**

The small pin knots found in even the best grades of white pine will remain tight, yet they can bleed through a finish. To prevent this, seal them with shellac.

Remember, white pine will gradually darken to a pleasing yellow-orange color no matter what clear film finish you choose (it takes all, except penetrating finishes, very well). The preference is to leave the wood unstained. If you do decide to stain the wood, first put on a commercial conditioner or a wash coat of shellac (1 lb. cut) thinned with denatured alcohol to prevent blotching. Gel stain also works and won’t blotch, because it doesn’t penetrate.

**Be an informed buyer**

At home centers you’ll see boards labeled “white wood.” This generic term refers to a grouping of woods that share similar appearance and working properties but are of lesser quality than white pine, such as balsam fir, Engleman spruce, etc. A Western Wood Products Association (WWPA) stamp of “western woods” means the same thing. So does the Northeastern Lumber Manufacturers Association (NELMA) stamp “eastern softwoods.” Don’t confuse these labels with white pine!

Big-box retailers also generally use the simple shelf label “pine.” Closely check the grade stamp (on one face of each board near the end) to see what the wood really is. The species may be spelled out or abbreviated, e.g. PP-LP for ponderosa pine/lodge pole pine, Hem-Fir for hemlock/fir, etc. Imported pine, like radiata, will not have grade stamps.
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