**Spotlight on Cherry**

Cherry (botanically called “black” cherry, *Prunus serotina*) has long been ranked second only to walnut by makers of finely crafted furniture. Once you’ve worked it, you’ll understand why: great color, fine grain, a wonderful luster, and it even smells good.

By Pete Stephano

Cherry still ranks near the top with today’s American makers of traditional-style furniture. It’s also among the high-end options for kitchen cabinetry, architectural paneling (as veneer) and Fortune 500-grade office furniture.

Where it comes from

Cherry grows throughout the eastern half of the United States, with the largest trees in the Appalachian and Allegheny mountains of Pennsylvania and New York. Trees there can attain a 100’ height and a 4’ diameter.

What you’ll pay

On average, a board foot of 4/4 FAS (First & Seconds, the best grade), riftsawn cherry lumber surfaced on two sides (SSS) costs about $5. Wide and thick stock is available at higher prices.

Cherry has long been used as a premium fine furniture wood.

Curly and other figured stock will cost double that of plain. Veneer sells at $2 per square foot—more for figured sheets. And you can expect to pay $100 for an A2-grade sheet of ¾” veneer-core cherry plywood.

Choose top-quality wood

As with all highly desirable furniture woods, the logs with the fewest defects become veneer. So even the highest grade cherry lumber can display bands of light-colored sapwood as well as dark gum pockets. That’s why it’s important to be picky:

- **Check for color.** Look at both faces of each board you pull. A board with one face displaying all clear heartwood may look quite different than when turned over. Also, because cherry’s color varies from light brown to pink, matching color can be challenging. Stand boards next to each other to check for uniformity. And keep in mind that cherry will darken to a mahogany-like reddish brown.

- **Limit gum pockets.** Try as you might, gum pockets prove difficult to avoid (see the photo below). Lumber graders don’t see these dark spots and streaks as defects in small quantities, but you should seek boards with the fewest.

- **Minimize knots.** Knots aren’t a real problem because the highest graded boards have few. Be sure, though, that they’re small and tight. Looking for figured stock? Your chances of finding some from other than a specialty wood dealer are slim. However, quartersawn and riftsawn boards can display ray flecks and even curly figure. Occasionally, a fiddleback-type figure occurs, too.

Cherry Quick Take

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Working cherry in the shop

You’ll find that cherry works well with sharp hand tools. With power tools (sharp cutting edges here, too), be aware of the wood’s tendency to burn. To avoid it, follow these tips:

- **Ripping and routing.** Use your sharpest blades and bits, and maintain a steady feed rate (slowing down causes the edge to heat up). You also can cut the stock wide, then use your joiner to clean up the saw edge. With a router, take off wood in light passes.

- **Avoid burning.** Don’t use a course abrasive like 80-grit sandpaper on cherry if you can avoid it. Start with 120-grit to prevent excessive surface scratching. For staining, remember that the denser the grityou end up using, the darker the stain will be (and vice versa).

- **Wipe clean.** You can remove excessive gel stain (if it gets too dark) with a cloth dampened in paint thinner.

Cherry Finishing Secrets

- **It’s best to remove any glue squeeze-out with aputty knife or chisel after it thickens.** Waiting until it dries may remove wood, too. Wiping it off wet can spread glue into the wood.

- **Dont use a course abrasive like 80-grit sandpaper on cherry if you can avoid it. Start with 120-grit to prevent excessive surface scratching.** For staining, remember that the courser the grit you end up using, the darker the stain will be (and vice versa).

- **Burnish the wood.** You can remove burn marks. Use 100- or 120-grit sandpaper, or a hand scraper, to get rid of them. Stubborn ones require dampening with mineral spirits to soften the area before removal with a hand scraper.

- **Sanding cherry.** Because cherry has a tight grain and is hard, don’t skip a grit or you’ll leave tiny scratches that show under a finish. Sand the faces through 180 grit. For end grain, sand through 220 grit to burnish the wood if it’s going to be stained or finish-coated.

- **Deciding on the right finish.** Cherry is easy enough to work. Finishing is another story. That’s because new cherry simply doesn’t look like old.

To obtain the darkened hue of aged cherry, most woodworkers turn to stain. But cherry doesn’t take stain well. It often blottches. And even if you achieve a pleasing, uniform color, age will darken it.

If you’ve selected your cherry boards for matching color, you’ve won half the battle. Simply apply a clear film finish (or oil-varnish blend) and let nature take its course. Or, you can tone a sprayed finish, such as lacquer, with dye or pigment. If you feel you must stain, use a tone penetrating one. (A gel stain works best, but so will aniline dye if you’re willing to experiment.)

No matter how color the wood, don’t be heavy-handed.

* Frontier folk boiled black cherry bark and drank the liquid to treat bronchitis.

* “Cherry bounce,” a fermented concoction brewed from wild cherries, enlivened many a pioneer hoe-down.

* According to American Forests’ National Register of Big Trees, the tallest of the three co-champion black cherry trees grows in Great Smoky Mountains National Park (Tennessee). It stands 132’ tall and measures 169’ in circumference at breast height. Such a trunk could yield as much as 2,000 board feet of lumber!
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