You may never have worked ash in the shop, but you’re sure to have had contact with the wood at some time—it’s the traditional material for the handles of hoes, rakes, shovels, and most other non-striking tools. And even though highly utilitarian, ash makes great-looking cabinets and furniture. As a plus, the durable blonde wood readily steam-bends or can be bent-laminated.

Although it grows throughout the world’s Northern Hemisphere, ash’s family ties are to the Mediterranean olive tree. North America alone supports 18 ash species, led in quantity and commercial value by white ash (Fraxinus americana).

History in woodworking
Native Americans pounded and peeled freshly-cut ash into weaving strips for their baskets. Because ash also absorbs shock and bends without breaking, it became the mainstay for canoe paddles and spear shafts. Perhaps it was these traits that led ash to the forefront as a sporting wood; it’s the preferred material for hockey sticks, polo mallets, traditional snowshoes, and the bats used in major league baseball.

Ash was and can still be found in the kitchen. Because it imparts no odor or taste, it became food containers, turned bowls, and serving utensils. As furniture, especially chairs with bent parts, ash’s use has been unlimited. Although not rot-resistant like white oak, with a protective exterior finish, the wood can be used for outdoor furniture as well.

Where the wood comes from
White ash and its relatives — green ash, blue ash, and pumpkin ash (all sold as white ash), range from New England and Nova Scotia, west to Minnesota, and south to Texas and Florida. Black ash (Fraxinus nigra), marketed as brown ash, likes the northern part of the range. Oregon ash (Fraxinus latifolia) grows in the Pacific Northwest. Note that at the time of this writing, the ever-spreading emerald ash borer (EAB) infestation is a growing concern, although it has not had a commercial effect on ash lumber (see the sidebar at right).

What you’ll pay
The best flatsawn white ash (FAS) sells for $3 per board foot in 4/4 thickness. Brown ash costs less. Plywood and veneer are available, as are banding and turning blanks for bats.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ash Quick Take</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cost</strong> - Average&lt;br&gt;(approximates red oak)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Weight</strong> - Average&lt;br&gt;(approximates ash)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hardness</strong> - High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stability</strong> - High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Durability</strong> - High (indoors)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strength</strong> - High&lt;br&gt;(same as sugar maple)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Toxicity</strong> - None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tool type</strong> - Sharp hand tools and power tools with carbide cutters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Common uses</strong> - Cabinets, chairs, flooring, food containers, tool handles, sporting implements</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How to select the best stock
Ash has straight, coarse, open-pored grain of even texture. It also exhibits a pronounced difference between latewood and earlywood so matching boards requires care. Flatsawn stock may occasionally display bird’s-eye and curly figure. Some ash can have darker “bug tracks” that are not considered defects except in veneer logs. For most woodworking, the lighter-colored sapwood takes preference. Brown ash is darker, and presents a challenge when mixing with white ash in a project.

Working ash in the shop
White ash closely matches red oak in density and hardness. However, it burns more readily from dull cutting edges or a slow feed rate. These marks are hard to sand off.

- Jointing, ripping, routing. Feed ash to the jointer in the direction of the grain (“downhill”) or chipping results. Take shallow passes with a router to avoid burning. And always use a backing board with end-grain and cross-grain passes to avoid tear-out.
- Assembly. All adhesives work well with white ash. Don’t skip sanding grits, or scratches will result.

Deciding on the right finish
Unlike maple, ash won’t blotch when stained, and the wood’s open pores make it a good candidate for pickling. All topcoat finishes work well on the wood, but keep in mind that under a clear finish, white ash yellows with age much like sugar maple.

Battling The Emerald Ash Borer
Ever since the discovery in Michigan of the Asian emerald ash borer (EAB) in 2002, the invasive beetle has killed more than 40 million ash trees from the Midwest to the Mid-Atlantic States and southern Canada. At risk is not only the annual $25 billion worth of white ash commercially harvested in the U.S. but also all the varieties of ash trees growing along city streets, in parks, and on private property.

At present, little can be done on a large scale except to locate infested areas, quarantine them, and destroy dying and dead trees. But you can help control the EAB’s spread by heeding the following guidelines:

- Get to know what an ash tree looks like (shape, leaves, and bark).
- Detect EAB infestation by closely examining an ash tree’s bark (log and firewood bark as well). Look for the D-shaped adult exit holes about 1/8” in diameter (above). Adults emerge from infested trees in mid-May and reach their peak by early July. Report your findings to authorities. If you own the suspect tree, call a tree service for possible insecticide treatment. (Trees with less than 40% canopy die-off can often be saved).
- Don’t transport firewood. Buy it locally.
- If you collect ash for turning or buy it from a local woodlot, make sure it doesn’t retain any bark and the first inch of sapwood under the bark. It’s this part of an infested tree that harbors beetle eggs and larvae.
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