REDHEART

Hardwood in Technicolor

By Ken Burton

Redheart really lives up to its name. Its scarlet heartwood resembles something Walt Disney would have dreamed up. To those accustomed to the subdued tans and browns of North American lumber, redheart’s vivid color may seem garish. But to those intrepid woodworkers who embrace the bright hue, the wood has a lot to offer. As tropical hardwoods go, redheart accepts finishes readily and is easy to work with both hand and power tools. Its density is midway between hard maple and cherry. The only real drawback is that the color drastically fades with exposure to sunlight.

Where the wood comes from
Redheart comes from three botanically unrelated trees (Erythroxylum havanense, Cosmocalyx spectabilis, and Sickingia salvadorensis), all of which grow from southern Mexico down through Brazil and Paraguay. The trees are small, reaching diameters of 1½’ and barely 60’ tall. Despite their genetic differences, these trees share the distinct red hue with similar grain and working characteristics. As of this writing, none of these trees are listed in the CITES Appendices, meaning their current populations are in good shape.

History in woodworking
Redheart certainly has been a part of human activity for several centuries, the Mayan’s called it chakte kok (“Chock-tee cuck”). But redheart doesn’t play a significant role in western woodworking, possibly because the supply has never been that big or consistent. These days, you’ll find the wood used mostly as an accent, or as the primary wood in small projects and turnings. Redheart is tricky to dry properly, even with modern technology, which may contribute to its limited popularity.

Selecting the best stock
Much of the redheart that makes it to North America is processed into turning blanks – 1 × 1s, 2 × 2s, and even 3 × 3s, as well as pen blanks. But boards suitable for furniture making are available from several online wood merchants, though in limited quantities. Most pieces are about 4” wide. These boards are usually 4/4 S2S with thicknesses varying from ¾” to ¾¾”.

Red alert. The name redheart is no exaggeration. Freshly cut pieces look like they were dipped in cherry Kool-Aid.

Redheart Quick Take

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Property</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DENSITY</td>
<td>40 lbs./cu. ft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HARDNESS</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STABILITY</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROT/INSECT RESISTANCE</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEXTURE</td>
<td>Fine-Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOXICITY</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USES</td>
<td>Turnings, boxes, small gift items, accents in furniture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Coming from smaller trees, the boards aren’t very wide or long; a 1 × 9 × 60” board is a BIG piece of redheart. Most sites list individual boards for sale with their dimensions. Smaller pieces thinner than ½” thick are ideal for boxes, inlay, or musical instruments.

As with any species, it’s best to select your stock in person, but if you’re shopping online, search for sites with plenty of photos and clear descriptions. You
may be able to call the merchant so they can help you purchase pieces appropriate to your project. The drying process may leave many boards with checks and other defects, so inspect carefully or ask pointed questions, especially if you need larger pieces. Expect to pay $20/board foot and up.

Working redheart
Once it’s properly dried, redheart is well-behaved; it saws, planes, turns, and sands nicely. If not for the radiant red, you’d think you were working a fine-grained species like cherry. Redheart also glues well and accepts fasteners provided you drill pilot holes. The only thing to note is the wood does give off a distinct odor as it’s cut.

Finishing
Redheart accepts most common oil and water-based finishes. However, it will quickly lose its crimson color when exposed to sunlight, fading to a dull brown. The trick is to forestall that fade as much as possible. Faded redheart isn’t unattractive, but it’s certainly not as eye-catching as when freshly worked. To preserve the color, you’ll need to use a finish with a UV inhibitor built in such as Epifanes gloss varnish, or Minwax’s Helmsman Water-Based Spar Varnish. (The latter is crystal-clear, so it won’t darken the wood as other finishes tend to. Even with such precautions, the color will eventually shift with exposure to UV light. Perhaps redheart is best saved for projects that aren’t intended for permanent display—candle holders that get stored in a cabinet between uses, or a box that comes out in time for the holidays.

Redheart working notes

Obviously, the reason to use redheart is the color. My sample boards came out of the box looking like plastic. I thought there might be some kind of coating on them for shipping, but it was the wood itself. I wondered for a while what to make from such a brightly colored wood and eventually decided on the lamp below. One of the sample pieces was a 3 × 3 × 12” chunk that I split in half to cut the wire channel. The piece glided through my table saw blade with only a minor problem.

In one of the Harry Potter books, author J.K. Rowling describes a botched potion as smelling like burning underpants. I’d always wondered about this description, but now I understand. As you machine redheart, an acrid stench fills the air. Some online forums liken the odor to scorched rubber, but I’m sticking with burning underpants. Smell for yourself but wear a dust mask.

Aroma aside, redheart is a nice wood to work. It is hard, so you’ll want to use sharp tools. My jointer knives are due to be replaced and chattered when tapering the lamp’s center column. I cleaned up the machine marks with my block plane, and a freshly sharpened card scraper left the surfaces smooth. The wood sanded well without loading up the paper, and polished to a nice sheen using 220 grit. Even redheart’s detritus is striking. The dust looks like some exotic spice, and shavings seemed like the packing material you might find in an expensive gift box. I’m not sure I’d make an entire piece of furniture from redheart, but I look forward to accenting future projects with its bright hue.
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