

## Black Acacia—Local Gold

Wells Shoemaker MD, Santa Cruz Woodturners Club

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Reference *Acacia melanoxylon*

In 1974, Sandie and I lost our home in La Honda in a mudslide. After several stints in garages and rec rooms, we moved into the caretaker's cottage on a dormant Girl Scout Camp, trading work for a roof. The owners wanted a sunny hillside cleared of trees, and I had a chainsaw and a 12 pound maul that I could actually swing back then.

I waded into dozens of handsome hardwood trees, identity unknown, growing perfectly straight up to the sky. A number had died, so some of the wood was ready to split. I needed both firewood and some side revenue, but those trees had bigger offerings than just BTU's for poorly insulated dwellings.

The heartwood was chocolate brown and the sapwood light cream...a beautiful contrast that persisted when the wood dried. We had salvaged a few belongings after we lost the house, including a 1950's vintage Craftsman lathe on a home welded pipe frame. Without knowing the name of the tree, I started dilettante spindle turning with this remarkably beautiful and obedient lumber.

The wood split easily, and some hefty firewood baulks turned into rather spectacular rolling pins. Then it got more interesting.



*Black acacia pentagonal design to match 5-point radial symmetry of Sea Urchin lamp, 1975*

Fast forward 30 years, a tree fell across the main fire road in Nisene Marks in a winter blow, and the rangers dutifully bucked it up to get it out of the way. I was running a lot in those days, spied this beautiful, somewhat familiar looking wood, and decided that rotting by the roadside would not be a proper fate. I circled back with my backpack in the evening and salvaged the biggest round I could carry. I turned 4 small bowls, including this pair of 6-7" natural edge ones.



*Natural edge black acacia bowls, 2004*

I looked and looked but couldn't identify the tree from the leaves, bark, or wood, using my California native tree bible. Well, of course, it's not a California native tree. *Acacia melanoxylon* is a native of Australia and apparently happy in Tasmania, too. It has a number of common names, including Tasmanian Blackwood, Sally Wattle, and Mudgerabah. The botany of the large acacia family seems to be undergoing constant revision, but right now, *Acacia melanoxylon* seems to be the active name...the Latin translating to Acacia black wood.

We've had quite a Black Acacia crescendo in the last few months. Bill Arnold scored some rounds from a tree service in the early fall of 2018 and generously shared them. Then Jim Baker brought some pieces in for Tom Eovaldi to use for our demo in December, 2018. Shortly afterwards, thanks to Jim's magnificent connections, several mature black acacia trees became available to us in February if we were willing to pounce before the woodsplitter came into play.

I scored about 50 bucked rounds, ranging from 12 to 18" diameter...a few larger. I slabbed these to delete the fractious center pith (essential for black acacia), and I've starting sealing the end grain. There are about 60 left, varying from 4 to 7" deep.



*Here they are*

When Black Acacia is dead wet, it rough turns easily. However, the wood makes long, stringy fibers which tend to clog up even a freshly sharpened Oneway coring cutter. It can take a half hour to core a 15" diameter blank. However, when it dries even a couple months, provided the ends have been sealed and the wood stored responsibly, it cores rather easily.



It looks gorgeous when rough turned...a preview! The wood is quite stable, doesn't check or warp much unless dried without precautions, turns like butter, and accepts virtually any finish. It dries relatively quickly (6-8 months) and sands easily. Because it's relatively porous, seal it well before using as a salad bowl. The wood has no odor and no irritating features other than fine dust which is a trait for any wood. The shavings and chips are not a problem for mulch and plants (unlike black walnut!)



*Freshly rough turned shallow bowl about 12" diameter*

Acacia grows fairly fast, with growth rings about  $\frac{1}{4}$ " -  $\frac{3}{8}$ " (0.8-1.0 cm) apart...ot that different from black locust. While much of the wood is rather straight grained, burls and exotic figure pop up in the usual places—crotches, bends, and stressed areas.

If you want some of the blanks, you're welcome to them. It might be generous to drop a \$10 bill into the Club Kitty so Larry, Maarten, and John can keep upgrading our video capabilities and arrange ever cooler demonstrations.

Enjoy your revolutions,



Wells  
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