

Ash Under Fire—A Sad Reality and a Turner's Perspective

Turners live in a world of wood...and some of our members also live studiously in a world of trees. Ash wood has been commonly available for all the lives of the elder statesmen in our club, but it generally wasn't one of the craved species for turning. Just like elm and chestnut trees, the ash tree is facing a dire and probably unavoidable extinction in America...and elsewhere. The scourge of the emerald ash borer has not reached our side of the Sierras yet, so this is a time to keep your eyes peeled and try your hand while you ash can. The link below describes this threat in excellent detail, and I'll add some perspective from a Santa Cruz woodturner.

[Are Ash Trees Doomed to Extinction? Discover the Truth About America's Beloved Urban Tree and its Top 15 Species! \(msn.com\)](#)



Robert Penn, whose literary ode to the versatility of ash in "The Man Who Made Things Out of Trees," practically worships the tree, with dozens of good reasons. It's a "read" that will delight any woodworker who has laid sharp steel on hard wood.

It will also invoke nostalgia for the days of wooden handles.

The ash tree has a prominent place in the history of forests in North America...not only for sheer prevalence but for human applications starting before the dawn of recorded history. It bends and springs back without breaking under stresses and jolts that would deform or fracture most hardwoods. The tall ash trees afford long lengths without knots, and it grows very straight...avoiding the quirky twists and warps of tension and compression wood when drying. That combination of traits plus wide availability made ash the perfect wood for tool handles, arrows, paddles, and the spokes and wheels of carts and carriages. Talk about impact resistance and rebound...Louisville Slugger baseball bats made white ash famous over 100 years ago...in time for the exploits of Ruth, Gehrig, Williams, and Mantle. The wood is odorless and non-allergenic. The shavings and dust are non-irritating. The color is a versatile cream or pale tan, sometimes with darker central heartwood, and it takes stains easily.

It turns too! The increasing number of Santa Cruz Woodturners who have taken formal courses at Craft Supply have likely made a mallet or turned a calabash bowl with ash.

Our California ash comes regularly from "urban forestry" where municipally planted trees have matured beyond the "stately" status and need to come down for safety...or road widening...or housing. Our Chain sawyer-in-Chief, Woodfinder, and club Treasurer, Dan Aldridge, introduced many of us to Modesto Ash, one of 15 species

mentioned in the article link above. Dan has scored some that made 16" diameter bowls from tree work over the Hill. One modest ash example is pictured below!

Because ash used to be plentiful but not really exotic, it has been quite affordable for both woodworkers and turners when purchased commercially. It's a wonderful furniture wood, too...similar open pore grain to oak and nearly as hard, quite dimensionally stable, and affordable. We may have taken it for granted...just like we did for vertical grain fir last century. Those happy days are ending.

The emerald ash borer is killing most of the ash species around the world. An infested tree can't cure itself. Glenn Lucas' legendary turning studio in Ireland has long featured ash and spalted beech...but those choices are not for keeps. The emerald ash borer is scorching across Europe and North America, and while it has not yet arrived in California, that's a little bit like the naive comments in early March, 2020, about COVID in Santa Cruz: "*Well, it probably won't get here....*" Yeah, right.

Prices are going to skyrocket when the supplies suddenly collapse from the ashless forests of Eastern and Midwestern states.

My advice follows the incantation of Janis Joplin: *Get it While You Can*. Use your best talents to make an ash vessel that your grandchildren can use with pride and claim to be one of the last in history.



Modesto Ash...about 12" X 5" deep...thanks, Dan!



It doesn't have to be round.
Ash sideboard w pigmented heartwood. It now has a matching ash bowl...

Wells Shoemaker

Past President, Santa Cruz Woodturners