

Woods suitable for carving

The list of woods given below is aimed at the inexperienced beginner. Clearly any wood can be carved but there are reasons why you should exercise caution. Some woods, particularly the sawdust from them, are positively dangerous and can give rise to breathing problems and severe reactions. Other woods can have physical properties which make carving a sustained conflict rather than a satisfying hand, eye, brain exercise in coordination. The Guild has members who are aware of the good, the bad and the ugly and they can advise you if you want to use a wood species outside this limited list. The order of the list is not significant.

- 1) Lime, Linden, Basswood** (*Genus Tilia*): As used by the German masters and by Grinling Gibbons. Bland, some grain, trees can grow large so can sometimes be obtained in large blocks. Expensive to purchase from Europe but *Tilia cordata* (small-leaved European linden) grows to small sizes in Canberra.
- 2) Huon Pine** (*Dacrydium franklinii*, Tasmania): Because of its slow growth its properties are consistent and it carves well. It may have some colour variation and has a characteristic pleasant odour. Expensive and relatively scarce but available in Tasmania.
- 3) Jelutong** (*Dyera lowii*): Bland, almost no grain. Used extensively by pattern-makers for precision moulds. It absorbs sweat, etc so handle with cotton gloves. Less useful for the beginner as the lack of grain does not give the experience that you need to acquire. Indonesian source, so is not cheap.
- 4) Boxwood** (*Buxus* sp. Europe & Central America): A slow-growing hardwood used for rulers, chess pieces and Netsuke. Not available in large sizes. *Buxus sempervirens* (common European box) is planted in Canberra.
- 5) Oak** (*Quercus* sp., mostly northern hemisphere): Much used by Medieval carvers BUT probably in a green state. Long term stability is good as evidenced by many surviving church carvings. It is a relatively hard timber when dry with large pores and prominent ray figure on the radial face. A number of European and North American oaks are planted in Canberra and can grow to large sizes.
- 6) London Plane** (*Platanus x acerifolia*): A hybrid of Sycamore (*Platanus occidentalis*) from North America and Oriental plane (*Platanus orientalis*). It is also called Lacewood from its delicate ray figuring. It is grown extensively in Canberra as a street tree.
- 7) Walnut** (*Juglans* sp.): The heartwood has beautiful colouring and it finishes well. Grain not a problem and it is used extensively for furniture. *Juglans regia* (English walnut) has been planted quite widely as a nut tree in Australia. However, the timber of *Juglans nigra* (Black walnut from North America) is considered superior. There have been limited plantings in Canberra.
- 8) Claret Ash and desert ash** (*Fraxinus oxycarpa*): Desert ash is native to southern Europe and claret ash is horticultural selection of it which originated in South Australia. Timber is pale to cream with clear growth rings and large pores. It cuts cleanly and density helps with cross grain cuts. A number of *Fraxinus* species are planted widely around Canberra so trees are often available in large sizes.

9) Mahogany (*Khaya* sp.): There are many trees known as 'mahogany' but the African mahogany (*Khaya ivorensis*) is probably the best known. The timber works well and often has a 'lustrous' finish.

10) Fruit woods (Pear, apple, cherry etc): Pear has a close grain and little colour. It carves well and can sometimes be obtained in large sizes. Cherry can have interesting colouring. The sapwood of many of the fruitwoods can split badly on drying so they should be slabbed soon after the trunk is cut.

11) White Beech (*Gmelina leichhardtii*): Is a native of coastal NSW and southern Queensland. It has been recommended in Aust. Woodworker as the best Australian carving wood. It is easy to work and is somewhat oily, hence has poor gluing properties.

12) Kauri pine (*Agathis* sp.): *Agathis australis* was originally sourced in large quantities and very large sizes from New Zealand. This source has largely been cut out or reserved but some kauri comes from Queensland (*Agathis robusta*) and Pacific islands.

13) Box Elder (*Acer negundo* from North America): It is actually a maple, not a box or an elder! It is relatively soft, has a fine grain and carves well. It has been quite widely planted around Canberra and grows well so trees become available from time to time.

Woods to be avoided

1) Brush Box (*Lophostemon confertus*, previously *Tristania conferta*): Native to NSW and Queensland. It has dense, close-grained, often curly and interlocked timber that contains silicon which quickly dulls your tools. This is less of a problem these days with modern high-speed steel tools but would still be a challenge.

2) Desert Acacias (*Acacia* sp.): Many dry-country acacias are extremely hard but can have beautiful dark grained heartwood. Some have tendency to break away. It would be best to use files on them.

3) Many eucalypts (*Eucalyptus* sp.): Many of the native eucalypts have very dense, hard timber that can also have interlocked grain. These difficult woods are often found in groups including iron barks, boxes and bloodwoods. While with perseverance, they can produce items with interesting colour and grain, they are probably best avoided until some experience has been gained.