



Paul L.
McClure

Wood technologist; lecturer; owner of Wood World, a retail hardwood store in Tempe, Arizona; woodworking instructor, and former exotic hardwood buyer.

Brief history

During the 1700s, a cabinetmaker named Rock manufactured "Rock's Hard Maple Furniture." The name stuck, and the terms "rock maple" and "rock-hard maple" remain popular today.

For generations, in fact, hard maple has been used for furniture and other items that take abuse: desks, workbenches and butcher blocks, for example.

Wood identification

Twenty-three species of maple grow in Canada and the U.S. They form two broad commercial groups: soft maple and hard, or "sugar," maple—which is tapped each spring for its sap.

Hard maple flourishes west and south from southeastern Canada and Maine to Minnesota, Missouri, and Alabama. The largest quantities of hard maple are found around the Great Lakes, and Michigan and New York produce the most trees in this country. Soft maple follows the same range, but grows in damper ground—lowlands, swamps, and stream banks.

Maple sapwood has a clean, white appearance, is free from defects and is typically 3" to 5" thick.

MAPLE

hard, soft... and sweet



Straight
grain

Fiddleback
grain

Bird's-eye
grain

Burl
grain



Sugar maple

Probably our most useful domestic hardwood, maple produces syrup for pancakes, school desks to scribble on . . . and much more in between.

These qualities make it more valuable than heartwood, which is uniform in color and runs from light reddish brown to dark brown.

Generally straight-grained with a consistent texture, maple also can have a bird's-eye or curly (also called fiddleback) pattern. Many wood-

workers find the unique grain patterns of maple burl particularly appealing.

Soft maple, although similar in appearance to hard maple, produces lighter wood with more pronounced grain. Although not as tough, stiff, or heavy as hard maple, soft maple tends to resist warping and twisting

better. Its color ranges from pale brown to almost white with brown streaks.

Working properties

Hard maple remains strong when bent, absorbs shock well, works nicely with both power and hand tools, and resists wear. It also turns well and requires no filling before finishing. Hard maple takes a high polish and has substantial screw-holding power.

Soft maple works even more easily than hard maple. It glues, stains, and finishes well but doesn't take as high a polish as hard maple.

Uses in woodworking

Soft maple, used principally for lumber, paper pulp, and other industrial applications, continues to be suitable for cabinet frames, unseen parts of upholstered furniture, and jigs and forms used in woodworking shops.

Hard maple applications include bowling alley surfaces, chopping blocks, piano frames, turnings, furniture (particularly figured-wood pieces), ladder rungs, rulers, tool handles, even clothes pins.

Cost and availability

Hard maple comes in average lengths of 6' to 12' and average widths of 6" to 10", while soft maple trees tend to produce somewhat wider boards. Both types are widely available and can be bought as lumber, veneer, and turning blocks. Maple is a relatively inexpensive hardwood, although bird's-eye, curly, and burl varieties can be expensive. ■