

From Wood Chunk to Chuck

The best way to process logs into blanks and avert future headaches.

Ideally, your turning wood comes to you in one of two ways: as fresh, sound green wood, in reasonably sized sections that you quickly rough-turn into bowls and/or cut into smaller, sound pieces to suit your particular needs; or as nicely cut-up, already dry (or wax-coated and therefore stable), sound pieces in sizes that suit your particular needs.

In real life, however, you'll most likely end up with a hodgepodge of wet, damp, semi-dry, somewhat-damaged, dry-but-with-cracks, and other categories of wood, some of it in nice tidy logs or squares, but more of it in odd chunks and shapes that don't even make sense as firewood. In consideration of the fact that you don't necessarily know right now all of the types of turning you will ever want to do, you may legitimately choose to leave some of this wood in its original format, just in case you might someday want an odd-shaped piece, or one with bark on one side and a saw cut on the other, or whatever.

But generally speaking, it's a good idea to go ahead and cut up most of this wood into somewhat standard pieces, which you can then dry and store properly. "Properly" means in a way that preserves the material from further deterioration, and allows you to easily find what you are looking for when you need it.

Because your needs are probably different from mine, you may make different cutting choices as you process your own wood, but a few principles will almost always apply. Usually you will want to keep pieces as large as possible because you may need a large piece in the future. That is, don't cut a 2" x 2" x 20"-long square into 2" lengths; perhaps you are making a lot of bottle stoppers now, but you might want to make a tool handle later on and you'll want that length. You can cut the piece shorter any time, but it's hard to put it back together.

A large piece of log that has been sitting for a long time should probably be cut up when



Photos by Al Parrish

The large size and weight of this beech log make it stable enough to cut without additional support. Slice a piece off of one end to find out how deep the checking goes. Sometimes there are many cracks that go the whole length of the piece, rendering it useless. More often, it's possible to cut past some of the cracking and salvage useable pieces.

you acquire it. Either it is still fairly wet, in which case you should process it as green wood (see "Preparing Green Wood," February 2006, Issue #153) before it begins to deteriorate; or it is fairly dry, in which case it will have at least some cracking, and you may as well cut it up

and see what's in there. If it's ruined, you can burn it or discard it and you will never again have to stumble over it. If it contains sound wood, you'll know what you've got and can prevent further loss.

You may not always know what to do with an odd-shaped piece, and if it's stable there's no intrinsic reason to cut it immediately. But getting in the habit of processing most of your found wood quickly will save you time, trouble and wasted wood in the long run.

Keep in mind the sawyer's job is the most

by Judy Ditmer

Judy, author of two turning books and many articles, has been turning since 1985. She teaches and demonstrates her skills throughout the United States and Canada.

skilled one at the mill. As the sawyer in your mill, you have to take into account many factors, including the nature of the material, loss prevention, types of stock needed or possibly needed, how much space you have for storage, and others. With experience, you'll gain confidence about how and what to cut, based on a growing understanding of what is in the log to start with, and what kinds of things you expect to do with the wood later. **PW**

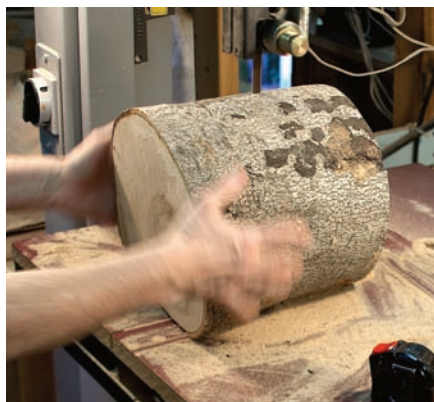
Assorted wood piled near the band saw, ready to be cut. I often acquire the odd chunk of wood that has been sitting for some time. Most of these have some splitting and aren't suitable for bowls of any size, but often they yield a lot of useful wood for smaller projects.



Small round pieces, such as limbs, need to be stabilized before running them through the band saw, or they may twist when the blade enters the wood. This can ruin a blade or, worse, injure you. A simple way to do this is to clamp the piece in a large handscrew clamp. Notice the saw's large table; the extra room provides a convenient "staging area" for cutting up large pieces.



The inside surface of this 2"-thick slice shows quite a few cracks, so I'll take off another slice before cutting the piece lengthwise. The idea is to get past most of the cracking.



Cutting the piece lengthwise. A second slice off the end revealed a fairly clean surface; I then cut off the other end to leave a piece as long as its diameter. This will make two good-sized bowl blanks if the inside of the piece is sound.



This half has a large split along the center, so I'll cut it into smaller pieces. It will still provide lots of nice squares for tool handles, boxes, candlesticks, bottle stoppers and many other items.



I'm cutting a small slab from half of the piece. This could be used for small bowls, or further cut into squares for spindles.



I cut still smaller squares and slabs from the scraps of the larger pieces, and pile the cut wood to the right.



Typically, I slice off at least 2" from a large limb or log, because I find I can often cut around any cracks to get a number of bottle-stopper blanks from such a piece. These short squares can also be used for boxes, tops, ornaments and so on.



Even quite small slices ($\frac{3}{4}$ "") can be useful if the wood has nice color and/or grain. Don't forget pens, fan pulls, tops, etc.



A decent supply of sound wood cut from a log that appeared quite damaged. If wood prepared like this isn't completely dry (i.e., dry enough to be stable in the conditions in which you will store it), you should coat the end grain with green wood sealer before storage, to prevent new cracks.

ORGANIZATION AND STORAGE

As a turner making a wide variety of items, from large wall pieces to tiny finger tops, I use a huge variety of types and sizes of wood. It's important to be able to find what I need for a given project without wasting a lot of time rooting around in amorphous piles of material. Toward that end, a few years ago, I embarked on a summer project to upgrade the mishmash of block-and-board shelves, bins, boxes and piles of wood to a reasonably concise storage system. The heart of it is a number of industrial wire shelving units, along with cardboard boxes purchased to fit exactly on those shelves. Also important are wire-drawer carts for the initial drying of any wood that is too wet to be boxed or closely stacked.

It's not a terribly strict system. Things are grouped in ways that make sense to me; a shelf for dogwood, one for local exotics, one for Florida roadkill wood, another for exotic exotics, etc. This allows me to find suitable pieces very quickly for just about any project I have in mind, and to notice if I am running low

on something that I use regularly.

Of course this organization project took longer than I had anticipated, possibly due in part to my excessive delay in starting it.

You may wish to undertake a similar venture before 15 or 20 years of accumulation – if it's not already too late for that. — JD



Wood that is dry (or very nearly so) goes into labeled boxes. Wet wood goes into wire carts for a time before storage. When the boxes are full, or when I have no more wood of that type to be cut, I move them to shelving in another room.



A view of part of my wood storage room. These wire shelves are the cat's pajamas. They are very strong and allow for air circulation. The boxes contain smaller pieces of wood that are dry (or at least dry enough not to mold). Rounds and short boards are shelved like books. Longer boards are slid in from the ends.

Thick, short slabs are shelved like books and labeled. This saves me a lot of time when I'm looking for a particular species. (I won't say how long it took me to get around to the labeling.)



Very large or long boards are stored upright in racks. (The really long 4/4 boards, left over from my past days as a cabinetmaker, are stickered on the left.)