Shopping for Wood Furniture

Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service
Shopping for WOOD FURNITURE

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Consider:
1. The wood
2. Construction
3. Finish
4. Any special care
5. Style
6. Usability
SHOPPING

FOR WOOD FURNITURE

Can you recognize the different woods? Few shoppers are able to, after the woods have been stained, etc. A piece may be labeled "Mah." or "Wal.", but be of an entirely different wood. Some labels only indicate the finished color.

The Federal Trade Commission has established these rules in cooperation with the furniture industry:
1. Furniture, in which exposed parts are one wood, shall be designated by the name of that wood.
2. Furniture, with exposed parts of more than one wood, shall be labeled naming these woods. However, not all manufacturers observe these rules on labels for consumers to see.

Common Kinds of Wood

Walnut --- Walnut is almost perfect for furniture making, for it is durable and beautiful as well as workable. Butternut, sometimes known as white walnut, is also prized. Walnut passed through an ugly period when it was stained dark and was highly ornamented; now it is more commonly found in a natural finish.

Oak --- This wood is rather coarse but has interesting grain. Oak is returning in popularity, as it appears in modern finishes. It is a hard, heavy wood, which makes a strong durable piece of furniture.

Maple --- Although there are two kinds of maple, hard and soft, hard is best for furniture. It has great strength, a hard smooth surface and fine light reddish brown color. Its grain is usually straight; veneers of curly and birds'-eye maple are desired by many. Besides being suitable for dining room, bedroom and living room furniture, it is sometimes used in drawers, frames, etc. where strength is needed.
Gum --- Gum is used extensively today because it readily takes on color to imitate some of the more expensive woods. Red gum in its natural state varies from rich reddish brown to dark chocolate brown in color. This is used for the less important pieces of mahogany furniture such as posts and rails. Gum can be recognized by its very fine pores.

Black gum is softer and grayish brown in color. It is harder and heavier than red gum, less attractive, and used for unexposed parts of furniture.

Birch --- Birch is attractive though it's of light color and fine grains. It is considered one of the strongest furniture woods. It is often combined with other woods for strength in plywood; it can be stained to imitate some of the more costly woods.

Cherry --- Cherry is strong and beautiful, with its reddish brown color, but is scarce. It most often is found in solid furniture.

Mahogany --- Mahogany is reddish-brown wood, imported from the West Indies, South and Central America. It is used chiefly in veneered pieces of eighteenth century style.

Pine --- Western fir, spruce, hemlock, red cedar and redwood are soft woods, which comprise less than 10% of all furniture woods in the U.S. They are informal woods, valuable because of their flexibility.

Construction

WHICH DO YOU PREFER, SOLID OR VENEER? -- Each has its advantages and also its disadvantages. All that's solid isn't necessarily the best, just as all furniture that is veneer isn't top quality.

WHAT IS VENEER? Veneer is made of sheets of wood about 1/28" thick. Many are glued to a core of hardwood to make plywood. This is held under extreme pressure and heat. Layers are applied, one on top of the other
with the grain of one running at right angles to the one just before it. Crossing the grain adds strength and prevents warping. Plywoods may be judged both in quality and beauty of top veneer, plus the number of layers. Less expensive plywood has only three plies (the core and two veneers). You'll also find only three layers in such places as ornamental rails, which receive little strain. The better quality furniture is five ply on most surfaces. A surface which is intricately shaped may have as many as seven or nine. Be sure your plywood has an uneven number, such as five, seven, nine, eleven etc. which helps to indicate the same number of plies on each side of the core. In expensive pieces, all plies are mahogany, walnut, etc.; in the less expensive, the underneath plies are a substitute. You may find 2 ply, which only means a "face" of veneers has been glued to a solid piece. This has probably been done to beautify the piece. It adds nothing to strength. This veneer is found loose and cracked off on some of the older pieces of furniture.

Why are so many pieces made of veneer today?
   For beauty - Swirls etc., can be placed where they look the best.

   Less likely to shrink or swell than solid.

   Economy - Highly figured woods came high. Core can be of a cheaper wood.

There are disadvantages!

   1. It cannot be carved.
   2. In refinishing the piece, it cannot be sanded deeply.
   3. Veneers sometimes come loose. Dry heat causes the glue to lose its power.
IS SOLID ANY BETTER? --- It can be carved; it can be planed down by the refinishers; it does not peel in extreme dry heat. However, it may split from the extreme dry heat which we get in artificially heated homes, unless moisture is kept in the air. It will also warp.

Solid simply means one piece of wood is used for each part of the piece. In other words, the board used in the table top is as thick as the top itself.

Can you rely on the label? Some pieces are not labeled.

![Label: SOLID WALNUT](image1)
![Label: GENUINE WALNUT](image2)
![Label: WAL.](image3)

The label on the left indicates that solid pieces of walnut have been used throughout. The label in the middle indicates only walnut has been used in the exposed parts, that the veneers are all walnut.

The label on the right may tell the consumer that the piece is stained to look like walnut but is some other wood, usually gum.

Examine Construction!

Examine the construction is largely left to the buyer. Salesmen point out what is good about the construction but leave out its weaknesses.

Test each article to see if it is rigid, if it stands up under pressure. Pull out drawers, open doors, drop the leaves, inspect all parts to see how they are put together. Do all four legs of the piece stand squarely on the floor?

How is the top fastened on? Screws, doweling or steel clips are preferred to glue alone.
What about the joints? They should be either doweled, or mortise and tenoned.

A dowel is a wooden pin which is glued into the holes to prevent slipping.

Mortise and Tenon. The tenon is swabbed with glue, then inserted into the mortise or hole.

Reinforcement? Corner blocks are an evidence of good construction elsewhere.

What about drawer construction? Are they dovetailed or merely glued or nailed at the corner?

Dovetail Construction.
The bottom of the drawer should be set into the drawer side. There should be a drawer guide either in the center or on each side.

Look on the underneath and back of the piece. The finest furniture is sanded smoothly and sealed. Finishing on the underneath, as well as on the outer surface, prevents swelling or shrinking.

Screws are found in the better furniture; nails are seen in the low-priced poorer quality pieces.

If the piece has a mirror, read the label to see if it's plate glass or sheet glass. Plate glass has been ground and polished, so that the glass when silvered gives true reflection and shows no distortion of the object viewed in it at any angle. Sheet glass (window glass mirrors) has apparently plane and smooth surfaces but has not been ground and polished. When silvered, it has a wavy characteristic which is visible when looked in at an angle.

Are there casters on the legs? Casters should pivot and roll easily in any direction. On lighter pieces, such as dining room chairs, metal glides make the piece move more easily.

Finish

Wood needs to be finished to seal the pores, to make it easy cleaning, for beauty, and to change the color. A
good finish is an indication of quality. The ideal finish has a rubbed satiny appearance rather than glossy.

Inspect the finish in good light rather than a dark corner in a furniture store. Examine the surface for defects and rough spots. Poor sanding may have caused a rough finish.

Test it by rubbing the finish with the fingernail. It may scratch easily, leaving a white mark, if finish is inferior. Another test, again on an unexposed area, is to rub the surface with the finger until it is warm to see if the coating powders or becomes sticky. These are signs of poor finishing.

Figured grain is sometimes printed on cheaper furniture. This is, of course, an imitation of the beautiful grain of expensive wood. However, much is being done by manufacturers in making a better quality furniture with plastic tops. These wood-grained surfaces will resist stains, such as, alcohol, water, grease, etc. They are desirable for furniture that will have hard wear.

Will The Piece Need Special Care?

Read the label, also save it for instructions on care. If there are growing children and the family cannot be allowed to enjoy the piece, then perhaps one not so fine, and one which can be cared for more easily, should be purchased instead. Ask the dealer about the care recommended if there is no instructive label.

Style

Most homes can be classed either as formal or informal settings. Pine, maple, cherry, and oak are considered more informal, with walnut more on the formal side. Mahogany is regal and is used with the more luxurious furnishings. A study should be made of period furniture to help the homemaker make the wisest selections.
Decide what will best fill the family's needs before shopping. If possible, let the family help select so that they will feel they have had a part, and by this, will have more pride in the home and pride in taking care of the furniture.

**Trends**

Furniture styles in the home may be mixed to add variety and interest to rooms. A modern sofa may be added to a traditional room, provided it is in good basic design. A pleasant blending of woods also provides interest. A use of all matching, within one room or throughout the house, tends to be monotonous.

You'll find convenience in today's wood pieces. Efficiency is foremost in design. Look for:
- Shirt partitions in drawers
- Rounded drawer bottoms for easy dusting
- Filing drawers in desks
- Pull-out shelves
- Cloth-lined silver drawers
- Interchangeable and moveable shelves

**Interchangeable drawers**
- Long, shallow drawers for linens, etc.
- Extensions
- Dustproof partitions

Furniture is being designed to serve many purposes and can be changed from room to room. Unit furniture is being purchased instead of the usual "suite".

Unit bookcase and chest. Same unit stacked and used as linen and dish cupboard.
his desk-dinette is a space-saver for a home or apartment with little dining space. When opened, 4 to 12 persons may be seated. There is a china storage cabinet at the top and a long drawer for linens and silver.

A coffee-dining table is a clever solution to space problems in a small living-dining room. At mealtime, the legs unfold to regulation table height.

Here's a folding chair that can stand with pride in your living or dining room. It's the perfect answer if 6 chairs are needed and there is room for only 4.

A handy space and step saver, a serving cart serves many ways. (Since TV, and more outdoor living, meals are served throughout the house and yard.)
This handy storage headboard utilizes otherwise wasted space. A swing arm pin-to-wall lamp gives good light for reading in bed.

DESIGN

THIS or THIS?
Which would you choose?

Ask these questions before buying a piece of furniture to decide whether the piece is a good design:

**Yes**  **No**
1. Could I live with this 10 years without tiring of it?
2. Is there enough interest to make it beautiful?
3. If some of the trim were left off, would it still be beautiful?
4. How easy will it be to dust?
5. Will it be useful as well as beautiful?
6. Is it neither too large nor too small for the space in which it will be used?
7. Are the parts suited to each other?
8. Does it belong to the rest of the furnishings in the room?