

Salvaging Florida's Hardwood Treasure

Don McIvor

Nine straight days of freezing temperatures in the Tampa-St. Petersburg area of Florida in January 2010 left the natives shivering in their coats, and the snowbirds wondering why they'd left home. Driving around the cities it was easy to spot other lingering effects. Frost had found trees at the northern limit of their range and left some species of palms, bananas, and broad-leaved trees looking like an ancient steak excavated from the nether reaches of the freezer. During my visit a week or so after the freezing air mass exited eastward, maples nearing the southern limit of their range burst into spring bloom.

Florida supports more tree species than any other state in the continental United States. Of North America's 625 tree species, 275 grow in Florida. In addition, exotic trees from as far away as Australia and Southeast Asia have been imported to the state. Centrally located along Florida's west coast and with the moderating Atlantic Gulf lapping at its shores, the Tampa-St. Pete area lies in convenient proximity to flora from both the temperate and tropical zones. If you are a woodturner—or any kind of woodworker—in the Tampa-St. Pete area, this is opportunity writ large.

Both cities manage their trees, and especially their native trees, with pride and the serious intent of keeping them upright and in the ground. Removing



a native tree requires a permit from the city, and scoff-laws in Tampa face the area's stiffest penalty—a fine for as much as \$10,000 for removal of a Grand Tree. In spite of these efforts, construction, disease, public safety, personal property protection, and a handful of legitimate reasons warrant tree removal. The area also experiences strong storms and an occasional hurricane that sends trees to the ground. The last hurricane to pass near the area—2005's Hurricane Wilma—toppled many rosewood trees, a shallow-rooted species susceptible to high winds. All of that wood, native, nonnative, permitted or not, has to go somewhere.

About a million board feet of wood ends up in the region's landfills each year, creating an expensive disposal problem. Most of this wood must be burned or mulched. Enter Pete Richardson, an amateur woodworker and a man who thrives on making connections. Richardson has spent a

lot of time thinking about that million board feet of lumber. His research suggests about 200,000 board feet of select hardwoods could be salvaged and used by woodworkers if he could intercept it and mill it into useable form. The rest is either too small or of a species whose merits have yet to be identified.

To coordinate the recovery of the urban timber, Richardson organized Viable Lumber (viablelumber.com). Viable Lumber's mission is to establish the first comprehensive, organized tree recovery and recycling program in the Tampa Bay area. To add to the product's appeal for many, the resulting lumber will be "green certified." In various stashes around town, Viable Lumber has amassed about fifty tons of logs to mill.

Richardson realized early in his research that urban timber reclamation is not an enterprise that will succeed under the direction of one man or one company. After exploring business structures from nonprofits to corporations, Richardson concluded the only way an urban timber reclamation operation could work is to function as a cooperative with profit sharing to support all aspects of acquisition, log handling, milling, storage, drying, marketing, and distribution. But woodworkers tend to be solitary creatures, with more than a few given to obstinacy, and so with his proclivity for connecting people with opportunities, Richardson has taken to herding the cats who may become the key players in this endeavor.

Within an hour's drive of the Tampa-St. Pete area lie about forty woodworking clubs, including three AAW chapters: Sarasota Woodturners, Suncoast Woodturners' Club, and Tri County Woodturners. The St. Petersburg Woodcrafters' Guild, more or less at Richardson's urging, is working to become the central hub that attempts to coordinate communication among these many independent groups. It is from this extended network that Richardson has found many of the keys to the urban timber salvage effort. Through the Guild and an increasing network of contacts, Richardson is tying together arborists, turners, cabinet makers, luthiers, intarsia artists, furniture makers, flooring installers, box makers, carvers, green architects, and municipal waste managers. Oh, and a sawyer.

In mid-January, Richardson navigated us thirty minutes south of St. Petersburg to a residence near Bradenton. Here, Steve Parker has taken the plunge and purchased an LT-40 Wood-Mizer, which serves both the urban timber salvage effort and Parker's own woodturning-based business. In fact, at this point in the venture's life, Parker's woodturningblanks4u.com site is the only web-based source and outlet to



A rainbow poplar log is being cut into boards on a Wood-Mizer. The kerf of the blade is very thin—about $\frac{1}{8}$ " (3 mm)—contributing to the efficiency of the cutting operation and maximum use of the timber.



Australian cypress is a species none of us were familiar with; its density and beauty surprised us.



Rainbow poplar is tulip poplar, which in rare growing conditions appears to incorporate minerals from soils to display an incredible range of purple, brown, green, and yellow hues.

the wider world for the timber recovery effort's bowl blanks. When I raise an eyebrow at the outlay of capital for the Wood-Mizer or Parker's chopped Oneway 2436 lathe, he shrugs, "I used to race cars. A new engine was \$8,000, a new transmission \$4,000. Woodturning is relatively inexpensive in comparison."

At the moment of our arrival at Parker's house, an Australian cypress log reclines on the cutting deck of the mill. Several slabs of the surprisingly dense wood lie stacked on a nearby trailer, where

Richardson hoses off the gritty sawdust to reveal sinuous lines of cream and tan heartwood. "Wood porn!" he announces with mock prurience. Back at the mill, Parker evaluates the pith orientation and the grain figure before continuing his deft sequence of cuts. Twenty-inch (50 cm) slabs come off the mill in 2", 3", and 4" (5 cm, 8 cm, and 10 cm) thicknesses. The last slab on the mill is the center section of the tree containing the pith. Parker props it upright and carves out a series of 3" (8 cm) peppermill blanks. ▶



The day's slabs are stickered and stacked in front of shelves full of turning blanks. From here, slabs destined for turning blanks will be cut to specifications using a bandsaw, and the edges waxed to control the drying process.



Cabinet and furniture maker Joe Pettit holds his monkeypod Phoenix tabletop. The table would take first place in its division at the Florida State Fair.

A paying client arrives to rent the mill for a couple of hours. He tows a flat trailer of red cedar, much of it in limbs better suited to firewood. The first log on the mill yields both the day's first nail as well as a chunk of concrete hidden in the center of the tree. These blade-killers are the reason few sawyers risk urban trees, which often contain everything from rocks to insulators, rope, bullets, chains, glass, and the occasional bicycle left chained to the tree a few decades too long. For the urban tree recovery project, Richardson typically budgets two new saw blades and three sharpenings for each two-day milling session.

More logs from Parker's deck are hoisted onto the mill. In the course of

the day, we'll add stacks of spalted pecan, spalted sycamore, and rainbow poplar to the stickered lumber piles. Other timbers milled to date include rosewood, red gum, silky oak (lace wood), camphor, Norfolk Island pine, flame-wood, monkeypod, jacaranda, golden flamboyant, Java plum, red cedar, sweet gum, bishop wood, eucalyptus, red oak, live oak, holly, grapefruit, and walnut. Today's milling produces turning stock, so the slabs are moved by tractor into Parker's workshop, where they are cut into spindle, bowl, and vase blanks and sealed to slow moisture loss. When dimensional lumber is milled, it is loaded into a small makeshift kiln fashioned in a corner of furniture and cabinet maker Joe Pettit's workshop. Plans for a larger

solar powered kiln are in the works.

As word of the salvage operation gets around, Richardson has started to receive calls with offers of timber from as far away as Gainesville and Orlando, but the need for heavy equipment and the logistics of harvesting and moving tons of wood from these locations has so far prevented the group from capitalizing on the opportunities.

Perhaps surprisingly for turners (most of whom it seems will try securing anything in a chuck at least once), one of Richardson's challenges has been gaining acceptance among woodworkers for some of the more nontraditional species. Monkeypod, for example, is a common turning wood in some parts of the globe, especially in the Philippines



(Above) Live oak, 3 1/2" x 6 1/2" (9 cm x 17 cm)



(Left) Camphor burl bowl, turned green, 3 1/4" x 6" (8 cm x 15 cm)



(Below) Lacewood (silky oak) 1 1/4" x 4 1/2" (3 cm x 11 cm)

(Left) Flamewood, 3 1/4" x 7" (8 cm x 18 cm)



where it is used for mass-produced bowls, while it remains an unknown species for most turners in the United States. To gain acceptance among a wider group of artisans, Richardson often donates highly figured stock to craftsmen in exchange for the use of photographic images and testimonials. Joe Pettit of Pettit Custom Woodworks is one benefactor of Richardson's donation policy. Pettit's monkeypod *Phoenix* conference table incorporating a book-matched flamed figure took first place and enjoyed a wide audience at the Florida State Fair this year. The wood for the table was milled from an enormous monkeypod tree that was destined to be burned or mulched. Turners utilizing Viable Lumber's recovered wood include myself, Steve Parker, Bob Winter, Art Worth, and Ron Eddinger of Suncoast Woodturners, and Rudy Lopez (rudolphlopez.com/gallery.html).

Though a self-professed amateur turner and a relative newcomer to the craft, Richardson has also won more than a few friends among property owners with his heirloom turnings, which he gives back to some who have lost valued trees. Many urban trees brought down by storms or disease once towered over residents who may have spent the better part of their lives in the tree's shade. Richardson has been happy to make keepsake bowls and urns for such owners, many of whom are cheered by the knowledge their trees will continue to live on in another form. But one of Richardson's challenges remains educating the public about the recovery process and its real costs, and few tree owners understand that the economics of timber salvage necessitates that the owner pays to have the tree removed, in spite of the wood's appeal for recycling.

As alluring as the Tampa-St. Pete hardwoods are, securing, processing, storing, and marketing the timber remains a daunting task. But the venture has many supporters, from



Timber milling is a spectator sport. Sawyer Steve Parker explains the milling operation as he prepares two logs for processing. Milling days usually draw a crowd of woodphiles.

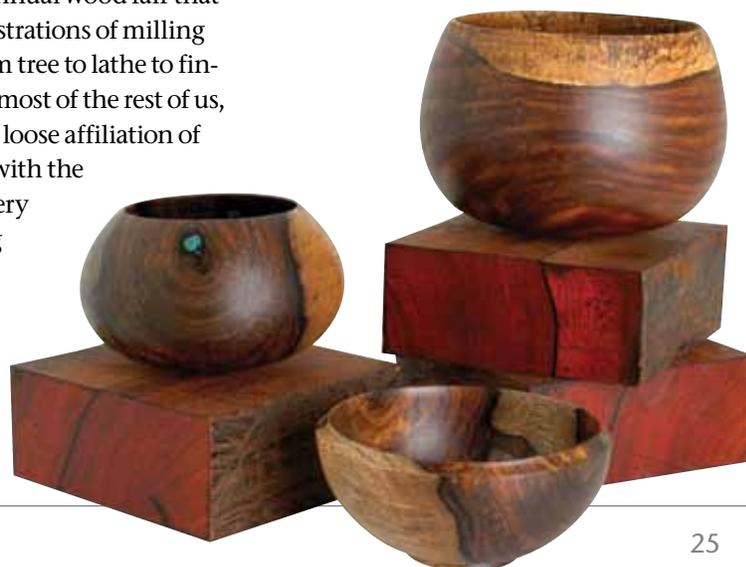
representatives in the state legislature to the varied artisans interested in the raw material. The venture is starting up at a time when the timber market is in an economic depression. Mills across the country are shuttered with log yards stocked with timber more expensive to process than to sell. Still, Richardson is full of inventive ideas and optimistic about the future, and Viable Lumber's "green" specialty woods may be just the ticket to weathering this economy. In the coming year, Richardson will be seeking an innovative recovery and recycling grant from the Florida legislature to support the timber recovery effort. Exposure in the state fair will likely attract more interest from craftsmen. He is planning an annual wood fair that will include demonstrations of milling and processing, from tree to lathe to finished product. Like most of the rest of us, Richardson and the loose affiliation of artisans associated with the urban timber recovery program are hoping for an upturn in the

economy and increasing demand for the extraordinary timber growing in Florida's tropical sun. ■

Don McIvor turns, writes, photographs, and video blogs about woodturning from Washington's Methow Valley. A companion video for this article can be found at TheWoodSpinner.net and at ViableLumber.com. You can see more of Don's work at mcivorwoodworks.com. Don welcomes comments and questions and can be reached at don@mcivorwoodworks.com.

Photos are by the author unless otherwise noted.

The author turned all of the bowls from Viable Lumber salvaged wood.



Rosewood bowls, each approximately 5" (13 cm) in diameter