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Should your wood shop become a "grass shop?"

If you've been following eco trends, you've undoubtedly heard a lot about bamboo. It's become one of those "of the moment" materials, but why? And is it as great as they're saying?

First off, it's not actually wood; it's grass. And like common grasses, it grows fast. I mean really FAST. You can't quite see it grow – though some say you can hear it – but it can grow as much as a foot or more a day. I'd say that counts as rapidly renewable. That's a primary reason bamboo is gaining a reputation as a greener alternative to wood, especially "exotic" types of wood that might have come from rainforests or from other non-sustainably managed forests.

Bamboo has its own interesting grain and coloring, making for beautiful floors, cabinetry and even accessories like bowls. Boards of bamboo, which can be bought like you'd buy plywood or strip flooring, are made of glued-up small strips cut from bamboo tubes. Depending on which way the strips are laid up, you get either a flat or an edge grain. The bamboo nodes are more pronounced in the flat grain.

Regular lumber yards and home improvement chains don't carry bamboo yet, but green materials suppliers do. Here in NYC, I get it from Bettencourt Green Building Supplies or Green Depot. Green Home Guide has a listing of some potential retailers.

You can generally get bamboo in two colors: natural and "amber" or "caramel." The darker version is produced not by staining, but actually by steaming the material. Here's a wall made of both colors being constructed on a project of mine.

Because bamboo sheets are made up of strips of solid material, they have another great advantage over typical plywood: you can expose the edges and not add edge banding.

That eliminates a step (always a strong point for DIY'ers) and helps to make up for the somewhat extra cost.

Although bamboo is rapidly renewable, that doesn't mean it's a perfect eco material. As Willem wrote in the previous post, there's no single simple answer when it comes to looking for the greenest materials. For one thing, we have the carbon footprint of transportation to take into account. Virtually all bamboo is grown in Asia, which means it has to be shipped a long way to get to the U.S. The fact that it's grown in Asia also means we have to look out for quality issues and for social equity issues. What are the conditions at those farms and factories like?

Another concern is with the glues used to make those strips into panels. Until recently, virtually all glued-up woods, like plywood and particle board, used glues made of urea-formaldehyde, which is a known carcinogen. Some American mills are replacing their glues with non-formaldehyde adhesives. And some bamboo manufacturers are as well (notably Plyboo and Teragren), but you need to ask.

Bamboo, as I said above, has become very trendy. Is it too trendy? A New York Times columnist asked me about that recently and I answered that we have to be careful not to overdo it: "You don't want to do something so of-the-moment that it dates the design." Too much of anything is…well, you know how it goes.

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