

Home of Hard-to-Find Hardwoods

A local Florida source supplies exotic wood for artisans and craftsmen



Owner Merrill Morrison shows off a few of the 120 exotic species of wood in stock at Alva Hardwoods in Alva, Florida.



by **Gretchen Coyle**

Aroma, texture, grain, weight, and color are all on display at Alva Hardwoods in Alva, Florida. With 120 different kinds of exotic wood from all over the world, this unique business is a regular stop for artisans and woodworkers alike, and impresses even “non-woody” visitors.

Lining the shelves of the barn that houses the business are numerous varieties of wood with names that sound as if they were taken from a history or geography lesson. Figured African Cherry (Makore), 110-year-old water tank Reclamation Cypress from Ybor City, very rare Handrisen Rosewood Purple Grade, Reclaimed Pre-Civil War Maple and Beech timbers, Heavy Cocoloba, Zebra and Zerra Wood, Wenge, African Padauk, and Purple Heart.

This exotic selection is why boat builders, wood carvers, fine furniture

builders, model makers, hobbyists, musical instrument makers, and those into restoration all make the short trip to Alva. They also come to “talk wood” with the company’s personable owner, Merrill Morrison.

Merrill is extremely knowledgeable and has been in the wood business a long time. A retired shop teacher, he previously owned Homestead Hardwoods in North Bloomfield, Ohio, before relocating to Florida and opening Alva Hardwoods in 1995.

Merrill loves to discuss wood with visitors. He talks about the properties of each variety, where it came from, and what it might be used for. He also knows what wood is gone forever. “It used to be said that a squirrel could travel from Maine to South Carolina on the branches of chestnut trees, without once touching the ground,” said Merrill. “Now it is all gone; cut up for purposes such as telephone poles.”

Merrill’s wife, Eva, also enjoys the

business camaraderie. “We meet a lot of nice people—from locals in the Ft. Myers area to South Africans,” she says.

Merrill sells wood in all sizes and shapes. Some is rough sawn with bark attached; other pieces are antique such as the lumber carts that came from an old sawmill.

Each year Florida-based “Wood Collectors of the World” travels to Alva so that its members can buy different woods. “After their visit, our stock is usually a little low,” jokes Merrill.

Another regular customer is Pine Island artisan George Riggs, a retired Kentucky businessman and builder of superb furniture including tables, chests and nautical signage. Riggs comes to Alva as he is unable to find such high quality exotic wood anywhere else.

“A carpenter friend told me about this place,” says Riggs. “This is the best selection I have ever seen, and I have shopped in wood specialty stores in Cincinnati and Louisville. Merrill is



A veritable treasure chest for woodworkers and artisans in search of rare lumber.

very informative and treats everybody well. He even took the time to introduce me to other wood species, besides the mahogany I normally use.”

When not talking wood, Merrill and Eva live on their 100-acre ranch in Hendry County where they raise horses and cows. The ranch also features a four-thousand-foot airstrip to accommodate Merrill, a former Air Force jet pilot/intelligence officer, who still flies experimental planes.

But during the day it is wood that occupies Merrill’s mind.

Want to know what to do with Northern Red Oak, Tigerwood or Vera Wood...or the story behind the recovery of five-hundred year old River Cypress by the Goodwin Heart Pine Company? Merrill knows.

Just remember that sniffing, visualizing, comparing, and touching are free. For everything else, be sure to bring your wallet.

Alva Hardwoods, 7307 State Route #80, Alva, FL 33920, 239-728-2484, 888-894-6229, www.alvahardwoods.com. Open: Tuesday – Friday: 9am – 4pm; Saturdays: 9am – noon; closed Sundays and Mondays. Call for summer hours June – September.

Gretchen F. Coyle, who divides her time between New Jersey and Useppa Island, has explored and written about many of Florida’s destinations.

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