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Finding Reclaimed Fir

The best deals on small quantities of vintage Douglas fir often can be found at a local junkyard or store specializing in salvaged construction products. (Check the Yellow Pages for "Building Materials, Used.")

For larger quantities, call a local timber-framer and ask for the names of suppliers. Or turn to the Web. *Environmental Building News* has a great source list at www.ebuild.com. To get wood that was salvaged from the Weed, California, door factory, log on to www.oldgrowthtimbers.com. (See the Directory for more reclaimed Douglas fir Web sites.)



Timber framers often reuse old beams whole, either smoothing them with a sander or wire brush (1) or leaving them rough and gray (2). And some customers arrange to have timbers milled into flooring, wainscoting, and other products. A board cut from the beam's center (3) will be free of flaws, but one cut closer to the edge (4) will show bolt holes and nail stains. Another source of reclaimed Douglas fir is old dock pilings, which produce blue-gray material called "marina wood" (5).



By 1950, when this 500-year-old Douglas fir was felled in Elbe, Washington, a 14-foot-wide and 175-foot-tall tree was newsworthy. Now, it's history.

feet of Douglas fir. That's a tiny amount compared to the 8 billion board feet of new Douglas fir produced by U.S. mills each year, but the fact that it's being reclaimed at all represents a dramatic turnaround from the scene in Weed just 20 years ago. Then, somber residents stood by as a demolition crew chopped up a turn-of-the-century sawmill and set the pieces afire. "There were beams 20 by 20 inches, 40 feet long," recalls Alford Linville, who worked at the mill for more than four decades. "And they were as good as the day they were put in."

This time, thanks to the efforts of Smith's crew, much of the door factory's old-growth wood will find new life as framing, flooring, trim—even furniture—for customers who are willing to overlook occasional nail stains and bolt holes. Environmentalists buy it because they like its warm honey color but don't want to encourage more tree-cutting. Preservationists prize its tight grain, typical of the Douglas fir used a century ago for the trim and flooring in Victorian-era and Craftsman-style homes. And timber framers like Tom Salisbury, a contractor on Bainbridge Island, Washington, covet its awesome dimensions. "You have access to sizes that you'd never get with any other wood," he says. Plus, notes T.O.H. contractor Tom Silva, who used recycled Doug fir to build a post-and-beam farm

store, "because the wood is aged, joints don't open up."

Named for David Douglas, the Scottish botanist who introduced the tree to the British Royal Horticultural Society in 1826, Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) is actually not a fir at all; it is more closely related to pine and spruce, hence its other common names: "Oregon pine" and "Douglas spruce." One of the hardest varieties of softwood, Douglas fir is easily machined, so it's perfect for decorative millwork. And while it's not particularly rot resistant, many a shipwright laid boat decks with "Oregon pine" because it remains stable when wet. But the wood is most prized for its strength and stiffness relative to its weight, which makes it

an ideal framing material, especially for such critical uses as roof and floor supports.

Although Douglas fir grows throughout much of the West, it reaches its greatest height and girth in the moist, temperate forests stretching down the coast from British Columbia to Northern California. When the loggers came in the 1800s, crews often chopped through thousand-year-old trunks, 12 feet thick and free of branches for 40 to 60 feet of their soaring 200-foot height. The sawmills that sliced the knot-free wood into planks and beams revealed annual growth rings—the alternating layers of light-colored spring-grown wood and darker summer wood—as thin as the pages of a book.

Walk down the aisles of a typical lumberyard today, and you'll find a very different Douglas fir: boards full of knots, growth rings half an inch thick, and lots of weak spring wood. All of this is evidence that the trees grew fast and were cut down young, for it is only when they get big enough to crowd one another in the forest that their growth slows, their lower branches are shed, and layers of clear wood gradually form. Newly grown Douglas fir performs admirably as framing lumber, plywood, and engineered beams. But the beautiful old-growth trees are all but gone. For our lifetime, and those of our children and grandchildren, there will never be any more of it than we have now. It's this fact more than anything that fuels the demand for this wood.

Salvagers are now mining old Douglas fir from forest blowdowns, sunken logs, and dock pilings. But the richest stock of old-growth wood is sitting in old military or industrial buildings like the ones in Weed, built when thick timbers had to shoulder loads that today would be turned over to steel. Richard McFarland, owner of Jefferson Recycled Woodworks, in McCloud, California, says that when he started his sawmill in 1990, he figured he could find enough old wood to stay in business for a decade. "And here it is, 2000, and there's easily another 10 years in it."

Four West Coast mills are set up to resaw big, salvaged timbers into smaller pieces—flooring, wainscoting, and beadboard—that come out looking as bright as freshly felled wood. All are members of the West Coast Lumber Inspection Bureau, which sets grading standards so building inspectors can accept the wood as structural lumber. Duluth Timber Company has a showroom in downtown Seattle devoted entirely to reclaimed wood and sells Douglas fir timbers as large as 18 by 30 inches

by 40 feet for \$2.25 to \$7 a board foot, depending on quality. A nearby lumber yard doesn't stock anything that big, but does sell new Douglas fir for about one fifth the cost of the salvaged wood. The premium on old wood doesn't apply to flooring, however. New or reclaimed, 1x4 stock costs about \$5 a square foot. This makes the resawn flooring clearly the better deal.

When he built a timber-frame home for his own family, Salisbury used reclaimed Douglas fir for the frame, the floor, the ceiling, the trim, and the doors. He's a storyteller, and the wood gives him plenty of narrative material. Ask about the dark ceiling boards, for example, and he spins this tale: They were rescued from a brewery, and came to him covered with tar, tarpaper, and paint. He nailed them to the frame, then sandblasted them clean. "Old Douglas fir, when it ages and has a clear finish on it, turns just gorgeous. It's a look you can't fake." ■

TOP: To vary the look of the reclaimed Douglas fir in his home, Tom Salisbury sandblasted the ceiling boards and left saw-marks on the timbers. LEFT: He finished the floors with water-based urethane, which gives them a yellow tint, and sealed the cabinetry with lacquer.

