

American Black Walnut - *Juglans nigra*



American black walnut is a deciduous hardwood which grows in the woodlands and forests of North America, ranging from Western Massachusetts and Connecticut in the northeast, southward to the Carolinas and westward to Texas, Oklahoma, Nebraska and Kansas. Its commercial range, however, is confined to fifteen Central States. Three quarters of all lumbered black walnut comes from this region.

One of the tallest and largest native hardwood trees, the black walnut averages 70 feet to 110 feet in height with a 3 to 4 feet trunk diameter. The National Register of Big Trees records the biggest black walnut as 130 feet tall with a trunk circumference of 278 inches and a canopy spread of 140 feet. It grows on Sauvie Island in the Columbia River near Portland, Oregon. America loves this homegrown heartland tree: black walnut is the state tree of Iowa, grows extensively in Kansas and Missouri and has even been proposed in Congress as this Country's national tree.

Black walnut is a beautiful, highly regarded, hardwood that is very strong and durable, yet relatively light in weight. Its extensive variety of grain patterns become more pronounced when quarter sawn for lumber or sliced for veneer. Some of the many figures are: swirls, stump woods, crotches, burls, fiddlebacks, leaves, butts and stripes. It also has an unusual range of distinctive colors. The sapwood is a pale pearly grey brown; its heartwood is a deep purple brown. Walnut ranks high in physical performance. It is exceptionally stable once it is seasoned, works well with hand and machine tools and carves beautifully. It holds nails, screws and fasteners well. It takes a high polish and is satiny smooth to the touch when finished.



18th-century Queen Anne traveling "bachelor's chest"

Along with black cherry, black walnut has always been prized as a premier custom furniture and cabinetry wood. But in the early days of this country's settlement black walnut was not nearly as precious as it is today. Given its valuable status in today's market, it is hard to believe that early Americans used it for such unglamorous needs as fencing and railroad ties! Black walnut is famous as the "gunsmiths' wood." It is perfect in every way for gun stocks and gun handles. Easy to carve, it can be worked into comfortable shapes to fit the hand or shoulder. It is lightweight yet strong. The surface will not dent or mar. It is shock absorbent, therefore has less jar and recoil than other woods. A stable wood, it won't split, withstanding the jolt of a gun being fired. Its true straight grain will not warp guaranteeing accuracy of aim. Once fastened to the metal parts of the gun, it will not loosen or fail.

The careless attitude toward the bountiful black walnut tree led it to be all but wiped out at the turn of the century. But today its future is secure due to careful practices. Most walnut is still taken from forests, but now there are walnut plantations established throughout the Central States. The rich color and swirling patterns of polished black walnut insure its continued popularity. It remains in demand for veneers, paneling, fine interior applications, furniture and cabinetry. Craft-people love it and use it for jewelry boxes, fine art objects and sculpture. Its availability is good as veneer and as lumber in a full range of grades and thickness. The price range is medium to high.

