

Arizona Woodturner's Assessment of Woods He's Worked With July/August 2018



David Crawford offers his thoughts on working with various species of wood he has been able to find in central Arizona. He's divided 23 species into the good, the average and the poor.

GOOD

Indian Rosewood: Very stable; cuts easily and takes a great finish. Rarely if ever checks or cracks during the air drying process and, most importantly, has the shortest air drying time. I won't turn any rough blank until the moisture is down to 6% to 8%. Indian rosewood is dry within three to four months. There are times when a rough turned blank/bowl doesn't even go oval. Consequently, I leave the walls of my Indian rosewood thin when I rough turn them. Never lost one yet.

Mesquite (honey, velvet, black and South American): Turns well; will dull the edge of your gouge quickly when it's dry. Takes a beautiful finish, almost like glass. Very dense and brittle when dry — if you drop it on a tile or stone floor, forget it.

Willow Acacia (poor man's black walnut here in Arizona): Absolutely beautiful stuff. Like Indian rosewood and mesquites, it cuts nicely and the finish is gorgeous when sanding just to 220.

Shammel Ash: Without a doubt, the easiest wood to turn because it cuts so nicely. Takes a nice finish. I have made some really large bowls from Shammel ash that are quite breathtaking.

Arizona Madrone, Brazilian Pepper Tree, Chinaberry, Bottle Brush, Ironwood, Texas Ebony: All are small trees here in Arizona, so the bowls generally average no bigger than 6" to 8". Nice woods to turn and all take a good finish. I usually include these small bowls in my shows to add some variety, both in size and color.

AVERAGE

Palo Verde, Sumac, Cabot, Silk Oak: All of these woods are a challenge to air dry. Over the past three or four years, I have tried various methods with limited success. Here, like with most other woods, I have come to believe that air drying is as much an art as it is a science — with a little luck thrown in. My loss rate with these woods is almost 25%.

POOR

All the Eucalyptus (Red, Brown, Silver Dollar, etc.): Tough to rough turn until you get through the dense, fibrous outer bark and cambium layer. The wood itself is extremely dense and heavy and requires a sharp tool to cut well.

Chinese Elm: Extremely dense and hard, especially when dry; like trying to cut granite with a butter knife. I avoid it if I can.

Mulberry: Not too bad when it's wet, but finish turning is a challenge; will take an edge off your bowl gouge ASAP (I don't care what type of steel you're using). Very pretty when it's done, so I try to include some in my inventory.