

THE OUTSIDER

Illinois Extension Horticulture serving Henry, Mercer, Rock Island, and Stark



THE POTENTIAL OF URBAN WOOD UTILIZATION

As people and cities embrace sustainability, an often-overlooked resource is the lumber of residential or community trees that have failed. Community trees, while cherished for their beauty and environmental benefits, often end their lifecycle as waste. Trees that succumb to pests or disease or are damaged by natural weather events remain valuable as lumber. Repurposing this wood creates an opportunity for, what was once consider a waste product, into to be upcycled by municipalities, businesses, and residents for economic, environmental, and social benefit.

Here's how urban wood utilization is transforming communities and the challenges that must be overcome to maximize its potential.

THE BENEFITS OF URBAN WOOD UTILIZATION

1. Environmental Sustainability:

Repurposing urban trees reduces landfill waste, lowers carbon emissions, and promotes a circular economy. Instead of decomposing and releasing carbon, wood can be milled into durable products like furniture or flooring, sequestering carbon for decades.

2. Economic Opportunities:

Urban wood can stimulate local economies by supporting small businesses and artisans. Crafting high-quality products from community trees adds value that far outweighs the cost of disposal.

3. Community Engagement and Identity:

Urban wood projects connect people to their local environment. Whether it's a park bench crafted from a beloved neighborhood tree or a conference table for city hall, these pieces preserve the legacy of trees that shaped the community.



CREATIVE APPLICATIONS OF URBAN WOOD

Across the country, communities are discovering innovative ways to transform urban wood into meaningful products. Here are a few inspiring examples:

- **Furniture and Milled Lumber:** Communities have established programs to upcycle urban trees that are cut down due to forestry operations. Quality logs are milled and dried prior to being available for purchase. In addition to logs, furniture pieces for public spaces are made from the lumber and available for purchase.
- **Artistic Creations:** Artisans use reclaimed urban wood to craft unique furniture, sculptures, and decor. These pieces highlight the character and history of the trees they come from.
- **Educational Use:** High school, vocational, and college students have an opportunity to apply creative and technical skills through programs that provide educational courses with urban wood supplies. Art, architecture, and furniture design programs benefit from the materials and learn the value of reclaimed wood.
- **Wood Products Businesses:** Companies are being established that partner with cities to mill urban wood into flooring and cabinetry, demonstrating how scalable these efforts can be. These partnerships make the process of upcycling urban wood more attainable for communities



OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

While the potential for urban wood is vast, there are hurdles that communities must address to make the most of this resource:

Collection and Processing Logistics:

Urban trees often contain nails, wires, or other contaminants that make processing challenging. Specialized equipment and skilled labor are needed to safely mill and treat the wood.

Market Development:

Building awareness about the quality and uniqueness of urban wood is essential to drive demand. Consumer education and marketing campaigns can help overcome the perception that urban wood is inferior to traditional lumber.



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Policy and Collaboration:

Many municipalities lack clear policies for utilizing urban wood. Building partnerships between cities, nonprofits, and private businesses can streamline processes and open new opportunities.



PROGRAMS LEADING THE WAY

Several programs prove the value of urban wood utilization across the United States. Below are a few case studies as examples.

- **Urban Wood Network:** This nationwide initiative connects communities, businesses, and municipalities to develop sustainable urban wood industries.
- **Davenport, Iowa:** Part of the broader forestry management efforts, the city turns removed trees into valuable wood products. Quality logs are milled and dried before becoming available for public purchase. Funds raised are cycled through the city's General Fund to support the Forestry Division.
- **ElkhartWood Program:** Suffering significant tree loss following the arrival of Emerald Ash Borer (EAB), Elkhart, Indiana developed an urban wood use program that upcycles lumber and generates funds for tree planting efforts.
- **Wisconsin's Urban Wood Network:** A statewide collaboration of urban wood professionals and stakeholders that ensures trees removed from urban areas are repurposed into products like furniture, flooring, and building materials.
- **Sacramento Tree Foundation's Urban Wood Rescue Program:** This California-based program salvages wood from trees that must be removed due to disease or development, transforming them into high-quality lumber for local use.

A GROWING OPPORTUNITY

The concept of urban wood utilization is more than just recycling trees—it's about creating a sustainable legacy for our cities. By embracing the potential of urban wood, we can turn what was once considered waste into a resource that enriches our lives and communities.

As more cities adopt innovative programs and overcome logistical challenges, the possibilities for urban wood utilization are bound to grow, benefiting both people and the planet.

OUTSIDER ACTION

Try these activities to be more of an Outsider

- Seek locally made wooden pieces as additions to your home or landscape or for gift giving.
- Explore the [Urban Wood Network](#) website for additional information and resources

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