
The Business of Logs to Lumber

By Andy Trotter

For me, the idea of urban lumber evolved in a way that is probably similar to many other arborists. A good friend was a woodworker and I enjoyed spending time after work and weekends building furniture and other wood projects for my home. Of course the cost of lumber was always a consideration, so we talked about how many of the tree species I worked with are also used for woodworking. Next thing you know, I ordered an Alaskan chainsaw mill from Grainger to put on a large saw I had. Even today, I still have walnut and cedar slabs cut from that simple mill and made into counters and tables for my home.

This was all around the time I started working for my current employer, West Coast Arborists, Inc. Still in its infancy, WCA grew exponentially with each passing year, and as we grew we accumulated an increasing number of logs from job sites. Sometimes these logs became firewood, but for the most part they just became giant messy piles of wood that took up too much space in our yard. As I became involved in some of the industry events in our area, I was excited when I met Eric Oldar from the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (now Cal- Fire). Eric, now retired, was the head of Urban Forestry in our state. As foresters often do, he promoted the utilization of lumber from city trees when they are removed. The state also set up a grant program to loan gas powered bandmills (Wood-mizer) and drying kilns for parties interested in producing lumber from urban trees. Compared to my chainsaw mill, the Wood-mizer was the coolest tool out there and would even make Tim "The Toolman" Taylor drool. I wanted one BAD! Fortunately, after using a loaner mill for around six months, WCA agree with me and bought a Wood-mizer LT 40. Just like that, we were in the lumber business.



*Crews do a Borax dip to deter Powder Post Beetles
Used with permission by West Coast Arborists, Inc.*

After years of exploring various species and milling several hundred thousand board-feet of lumber, we came away with many lessons. Mostly, we learned that our income would need to come primarily from our specialized forms of tree care and that our milling projects would have to be a compliment to that work. Steadily, the urban lumber movement continued to grow. We started receiving inquiries from people interested in using and milling our logs. I also met an increasing number of folks doing wood processing and creating added-value products with great success. It was through these encounters that WCA's own wood milling program was able to become better established.

Some of the key elements that we learned throughout this process include:

- Learning what wood species work best for making products (it varies on what the end product is).
- Understanding that many urban trees have character and wood grains that are of great interest.
- Learning the importance of proper drying and handling of wood after milling.
- Learning how to protect your end product from bugs in your lumber.
- Learning what logs are a waste of time (and learning that you shouldn't try to mill everything).
- Knowing what the end product is before milling wood so that your lumber is sized and handled correctly.
- Knowing that it is best to have your end product sold or committed before milling and drying wood.

The bottom line is to create quality products that you can market and sell.

Today, WCA has expanded our wood producing resources to include a Nyle de-humidification kiln, a Lucas slabbing mill, a small woodshop connected to our woodyard, and a chainsaw carver on staff to build products that are offered to our customer base. The customers love the idea of recycling trees that require removal, and it's become a great PR tool for the company. California is now offering support of urban wood utilization by creating new carbon offset markets and by making new grants and incentives available for tree companies like ours.

The e-mails and calls requesting information about urban wood increase every year. The public's interest in recycling urban lumber is creating a wide variety of opportunities for tree care firms, wood milling producers, and woodworkers who may be looking to tap into the green market.



Arbor Day WCA sawmill demo at Glendale Public Works Department.
Used with permission by West Coast Arborists, Inc.

We in the tree care industry have a chance to participate in this growing movement by either working with individuals with experience milling and working with lumber, or developing our own extensions of our businesses to meet these future needs.

Andy Trotter is Vice President of Field Operations at West Coast Arborists, Inc. He oversees tree pruning, removal and planting crews as well as recycling and training programs for the company. Active in the tree care industry, Andy is Certified by the ISA as an Arborist and Utility Specialist. He also is a Certified Tree Care Safety Professional with the Tree Care Industry Association. Andy is past president of Street Tree Seminar and the State Board of California Urban Forest Council. In his spare time, Andy enjoys camping with his family and friends and is co-chair for Conservation and Fire Safety at a 1,400-acre youth camp in Southern California.



Save these dates, pack a brown bag lunch and get ready to learn with the SCA!

The Society of Commercial Arboriculture is proud to announce the 2015 line-up of our Educational Webseries, working to promote workplace education and business savvy. We have 4 exciting topics scheduled, and participants of each course will be eligible for one (1) CEU.

Webinars:

Logs to Lumber

Andy Trotter,
West Coast Arborists, Inc.
Wednesday, March 18
12 PM EST

Why Certify?

Speaker TBA
Wednesday, September 16
12 PM EST

YELP-ing Yourself with Social Media

Nicholas Crawford, Davey
Tree Surgery
Wednesday, June 17
12 PM EST

Capturing the "Teachable Moment"

Dwayne Neustaeter,
Arbor Canada Training
Wednesday, December 16
12 PM EST

See something you're interested in? Further details will be announced closer to each class date.

We can't wait to learn with you!

Photo: Brian Bixler. Arborist: J. David Driver (the X man).

Make sure you have all the Right tools.

TCIA
VOICE OF TREE CARE
TREE CARE INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION
Advancing tree care businesses since 1938

As the only national trade organization dedicated to tree care businesses, becoming a member of TCIA is the best investment you can make.

BUSINESS TOOLS – From professional standards to the latest publications, members receive dynamic tools to run their businesses safely, efficiently, and successfully.

EVENTS – Enjoy members-only savings and deep discounts on TCIA-hosted workshops and events around the country.

SAFETY TOOLS – Worker safety goes hand in hand with professionalism and it's a primary focus of TCIA. We build programs, tools and resources to improve safety for our members and the industry.

NETWORKING – Join our community and participate in targeted discussions, events, and more with TCIA members from around the country.

MAJOR SAVINGS – Receive deep discounts on training and educational materials for you and your crew.

MARKETING TOOLS – Use our exclusive marketing materials to find, keep and impress customers. From videos to postcards, we've got what you need.

First-time members can start taking advantage of membership benefits right away, at the low introductory price of \$195. Limited time offer.

Join today! membership@tcia.org
tcia.org or 1-800-733-2622