

# Australian lacewood is a misnomer

Many U.S. exotic wood dealers are selling a South American species

By Brian Caldwell

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Several decades ago, when U.S. wholesalers and retailers sold lacewood, there was no doubt that the wood was from Australia. There was lacewood (*Cardwellia sublimis*) from Queensland and the heavier silky oak (*Grevillea robusta*), which was native to the country's dry and warm regions. Australia stopped exporting lacewood about 15 years ago, though many U.S. dealers continue to sell a South American species (*Roupala brasiliensis*) mistakenly — or intentionally — labeled as Australian lacewood. Reliable exotic wood dealers are more upfront about lacewood's origins.

"There are two lacewoods; the Australian version is the true lacewood and what everyone knew as lacewood; and then there is what's grown down in South America," explained Mitch Talcove, owner of Tropical Exotic Hardwoods of Latin America in Carlsbad, Calif. "The lacewood from South America has been accepted as a good alternative to the original lacewood of Australia, but is suddenly in short supply."

To make matters more confusing, South American lacewood is now being sold in combination with a darker wood with similar figure — leopardwood (*Brosimum guianense*) — a lighter version of snakewood.

The bottom line to remember is that when buying lacewood in the United States, the species is in all probability



from South America, specifically Brazil.

"What you see in the United States is *Roupala brasiliensis* and my main understanding is that a lot of it is grown around coffee plantations as shade trees in Brazil," said Myles Gilmer, owner of Gilmer Wood Co. in Portland, Ore. "Once they get to a particular height, they're no longer particularly great for shade and they chop them down."

"I don't think you'll ever see anything from Australia; they haven't shipped anything for close to 15 years at least. It's funny because everybody says they have Australian lacewood and they don't."

Lacewood is prized for its large flake figure. The heartwood is a pinkish-brown and there isn't a marked difference between the sapwood and heartwood. Lacewood produces a ray-type figure with a high luster, but the rays of lacewood tend to chip or break out

when planed.

"You have to light-cut on a planer with sharp blades; that's always the case with anything with a lot of figure in it such as quilted maple, curly maple, lacewood, any of those figured woods that are prone to tearout," Talcove said. "And it is always best to sand afterwards, but you have to be very careful. If you take too

deep of a cut, you'll destroy it."

"I have lacewood and leopardwood," said Matt Westmoreland of World Timber Corp., a wholesaler in Hubert, N.C. "Lacewood is very lightweight; leopardwood is very dense like an oak. They look a lot alike in physical appearance; sometimes the leopardwood is a little darker in color, but basically it looks the same. But what a lot of larger companies are doing is they're selling the leopardwood as lacewood."

As stunning as the flake figure is with its chatoyance, it comes with a price. Besides the flakes having a tendency to "pop out" during planing, the tree is difficult to cut.

"The tree grows in kind of a spiral so it's a pain in the [butt] getting quartered stuff," Gilmer said. "I've looked at thousands and thousands of units and you look at the end grain and one end is

nically quartered and you walk 8' to the other end and it's flatsawn. A lot of people have just given up on it. I just cut quartered stock from what I can and the rest of it we just turn into turning squares where you're bound to get some quartered on it."

"Whoever is cutting the logs really has to know what they are doing because I've seen some boards that aren't quartered that have the big flake," noted Westmoreland. "When you lay the log up on the [saw] carriage you really need to know how to turn the log, because cutting it quartered may not necessarily mean you get that flake and I think that's why they call it fishtail oak."

Uses for lacewood include furniture, cabinetry, inlay, paneling, plywood veneer, decorative veneer and turnings. The wood dries slowly and sometimes checks or cracks in thicker stock. Working properties such as accepting glues and finishes, nails and screws are rated above average.

"Short supplies is the problem at the moment," added Talcove. "You had an article in Woodshop News about the devastation in Gulf ports and in Louisiana [Nov. 2005 issue, Page 14]. The fact of the matter is that most of the wood came through there, so it was extremely hard to get before; now it's just crazy."

Retail prices for 4/4 South American lacewood run from \$7 to \$10/bf. Westmoreland quoted a wholesale price of \$4,250/mbf.