

Ultimate Guide to Wood Furniture

How to Easily Identify High Quality Pieces That Will Last

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NUMBER 1 THING TO LOOK FOR:

Made In America

Pieces made by an American manufacturer are a lot likelier to:

- Be made out of sturdy & eco-friendly material: real wood & low-VOC finishes
- Use lumber from sustainably managed forests
- Not have corners cut during construction as a way to increase profit

WOOD MATERIAL

Not to be confused with type of wood (like maple, oak, or pine), wood material refers to what the furniture is actually made of: real wood or a man-made product.

Best:

SOLID WOOD - Straight from the tree, this refers to pieces of wood or wood boards glued together to make larger panels. It's long-lasting and easy to repair, but can be expensive. Beware of the term "solid wood products" - this is often a way for manufacturers to mislead you into thinking you're getting solid wood when you're not.

Good:

PLYWOOD - Sometimes called engineered hardwood, this is thin layers of real, solid wood adhered together and covered with a veneer of a more expensive wood species. It's stable in changing climate conditions (great if you live in a humid place) and is an economical solution for pieces that need large boards, like bookcases.

Avoid:

MDF or MEDIUM DENSITY FIBERBOARD - This product is made by taking wood waste (a.k.a. sawdust) and binding it together with resins. It's topped with real wood veneer or a plastic laminate. MDF is heavy, filled with chemicals, and a common indicator of poorly made furniture - the veneers are often very thin and chip and flake easily.

Avoid:

PARTICLE BOARD - Similar to MDF, particle board is made from larger wood chips that are bound together with glue and other chemicals. Lighter and less sturdy than any other material, particle board furniture doesn't last long.

VENEERS

These are pieces of real wood made into thin sheets that are then adhered to another wood product (usually plywood or MDF). Veneers can be long-lasting if done correctly, but most veneers on inexpensive furniture are not done well and will chip and peel. Here's how to tell the difference:

Thickness: Standard US thickness is .6mm (1/42"), but it's even better if the veneer is 1/28" or 1/16" thick. Veneers found on furniture made overseas are often much less—around .5mm.

Adhesion: Veneers are adhered to the wood product with glue – if this is not done correctly, veneers can peel and develop hairline cracks.

Substrate: This is the wood material the veneer is adhered to. Differences in moisture between the substrate and veneer can result in hairline cracks. Make sure the substrate is either real wood or plywood—avoid MDF.

JOINERY

This describes how a piece of wood furniture is held together and determines if your furniture will start to wobble or if it will stay sturdy for many years. There are many different good (and bad!) ways to join wood together.

Best: Any method of joinery where one piece “fits” into a notch on the other piece. This is then usually reinforced with glue, and/or nails or screws. Examples are: Rabbet and Dado, Mortise and Tenon, Box Joint, Dovetail, French or Sliding Dovetail.

Best: CORNER BLOCKS - are used in conjunction with other joinery methods to ensure the furniture stays sturdy. They are wood brackets screwed into both pieces of wood at a corner.

Good*: DOWEL JOINTS - If done correctly with glue and more than one dowel, the joint can be strong. If done without glue and with a single dowel, it's not sufficient.

*WITH
RESERVATIONS

Avoid: 100% DOWN CUSHIONS - Butt Joint, Biscuit Joint, or joints that are only held together with screws or nails.

FINISHES

This is what you see from the outside—the combination of the stain, paint, and protective top coat. The right finish goes a long way to ensuring your furniture will last and furniture that has a low-VOC finish will prevent bringing cancer-causing chemicals into your home.

Stain: Used to change the color of the wood species, stains help even out the color variation in natural wood or create furniture in colors not found in nature (dark brown and gray for example).

Paint: Used to totally cover the natural wood grain, paint provides a crisp color. It can be antiqued or glazed to give dimension.

Top Coat: Both stains and paints should have a clear, protective top coat finish.

Best: Conversion varnish/post-catalyzed lacquer, which are resistant to water, heat, and chemicals, but not easy to repair.

Good: Pre-catalyzed lacquer, which is less durable than conversion varnish, but easier to repair. Just know that it may yellow over time.

Good: Polyurethane, which is durable and repairable, but less popular with furniture manufacturers because of its long drying time. It's easily found in hardware stores and often used by DIYers.

Avoid: Plain old lacquer, which is the least durable finish. It's inexpensive and easy-to-use, which makes it popular with inexpensive furniture manufacturers.

DOMESTIC vs. IMPORTED WOOD

Domestic:

- Made from wood grown in North America
- Almost certain to be grown sustainably in managed forests to prevent de-forestation
- Common species are oak, maple, walnut, cherry, ash, poplar, and pine
- Furniture built out of a domestic wood species may not necessarily be built in America – some manufacturers export wood overseas and back again as furniture

Imported:

- Common in imported furniture because the wood is grown near the overseas factories
- Species include: rubberwood (aka plantation hardwood), mango, acacia, sheesham, or segnon tekik
- Wood is grown in humid tropical locations and may not be dried properly, leading to cracking and warping
- May be treated with chemicals and not sustainably harvested

COMMON WOOD SPECIES

Tree species are divided into two classifications: hardwood or softwood.

Hardwood – Slow growing trees resulting in more dense (aka harder) wood

Softwood – Faster growing trees that have a less dense (aka softer) wood

- Ash:** Creamy white or gray with possible light brown undertones, Ash is a hardwood known for its visible grain.
- Beech:** Light-colored wood with a tight grain, Beech is a hardwood commonly found in Scandinavian style furniture.
- Birch:** A light, yellowish brown, Birch is a hardwood commonly used in the structural parts of furniture, like sofa frames.
- Cherry:** This species starts as a lighter brown with pink undertones and darkens to reddish brown over time. It's a popular hardwood with a distinct grain.
- Mahogany:** This starts as a light pink-brown that darkens over time. It's a tropical imported hardwood traditionally used in fine furniture, but poor forestry management is causing some species to disappear.
- Maple:** This species starts as a light brown, but changes to a honey or amber color over time. Maple is a hardwood with a uniform texture and straight grain, though some variations produce more intricate patterns.
- Oak:** White oak has a grayish tint while red oak has pink undertones (any color change over time is very subtle). It's a hardwood with a distinct grain that has been used for furniture and floors for hundreds of years.
- Pine:** Pine has a pale straw color that becomes a honey color over time and eventually darkens to a golden brown. It's a softwood with a uniform grain.
- Poplar:** Brownish-yellow with a green tinge or streaks that change to brown, poplar is a soft hardwood typically used as sofa frames or the inside of drawers.
- Walnut:** Walnut has a rich color and is the only species to naturally be dark brown. It's a hardwood with beautiful grain variations and is very popular for furniture.

RECLAIMED WOOD

This describes any wood that had a previous life before becoming furniture. It could be reclaimed from a 100-year old barn or be reclaimed waste wood from a furniture factory last week.

- Reclaimed wood must be treated properly to ensure it is not hazardous (get it from a responsible supplier)
- Avoid wood made from railroad ties
- Old paint on reclaimed wood may contain lead