

Internet Wood Purchases

By Joe Fleming

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When shopping for tools, you compare apples to apples—the product design is constant and you know exactly what to expect when it arrives. Shopping for wood, however, is a different ballgame.

Over the years, I have visited many wood vendors spent a lot of time looking at wood blanks, turning them over, inspecting for color, figure, and defects. All of this is difficult to accomplish using the Internet. Although a photo is worth a thousand words, when it comes to selecting wood, I really want more information. Consequently, I rarely buy wood sight unseen unless I am buying a large quantity through our club.

For this adventure, I set out to buy curly maple, which seems ideal for the airbrushing dyes to enhance the figure. I prefer curly maple to quilted maple, but decided to use the word figured for the search. I like to make hollow forms, and my favorite shape fits nicely in a cube. So, I focused on turning stock from 4x4x4" (or longer, to be cut into multiple blanks) to around 8x8x8".

Also, for my search, I decided that I would only buy wood through an online purchase if I could see photos of all the sides of the turning stock.

I started this search on December 16 and continued for a few days. For this experiment, I entered this search: figured maple turning stock. I received hundreds of hits or responses to my query. I started down the list to view the web pages. Many vendors in the list had lumber, but no turning stock. Some had pen blanks, but nothing larger. Few had photos of their products.

I was not having much luck. On the second or third page of responses, I came across a website called: WoodFinder.com. I have not used this before, but am familiar with it. It is the companion site to the WoodCentral.com website. On WoodFinder.com, they list many wood sources and give you the ability to search by several different parameters.

I entered figured maple into the WoodFinder search and received 10 hits:

- Global Wood Source Inc (San Jose, CA)
- Woodcraft (Dublin, CA)
- Pacific Coast Woods (Brookings, OR)
- Oregon Gold/ Hardwood Buyers (Sweet Home, OR)
- Northwest Timber (Jefferson, OR)
- Springer's Luthier Maple Supply (Tenino, OR)
- The Wood Well (Port Townsend, WA)
- AK Logging (Beaver, OR)
- The Wood Gallery (Dallas, TX)
- Hardwood Heaven (Lincoln, NE)

I looked at the list and I opted to use a West coast dealer to keep my shipping costs relatively low. This knocked out about half the vendors. I also knocked out those that did not have a web page. This left these vendors:

- Global Wood Source Inc (San Jose, CA) – no figure maple shown
- Woodcraft (Dublin, CA) – no store specific products listed

- Pacific Coast Woods (Brookings, OR) – stock listed for instruments only
- Northwest Timber (Jefferson, OR) – specialized in instrument and furniture wood
- Springer’s Luthier Maple Supply (Tenino, OR) – limited turning stock; nice billets, but the wrong sizes
- The Wood Well (Port Townsend, WA) – instrument wood

As I browsed through the list, most either did not have turning stock described on their website, or did not show any pictures of what they had. Several specialized in luthier’s stock, such as the booked-matched pieces for a guitar.

I narrowed my options down to two sources. One is a Canadian vendor I have previously placed orders, Bow River Craft Woods. Second, two of the vendors had eBay stores listing wood; Woodbay Company and RuMar Has It Maple Turning Wood. I checked out the eBay stores of both. Woodbay had a 6” x 7” x 18” that had a picture of the four longer sides. This looked OK, but the price was \$40 under bid or \$47 to buy it directly. Shipping was \$20. The dimensions of the block meant that I would end up wasting a lot of the wood. I put this item, Item #1, on my eBay “watch list” and continued to browse.

Next, I did an eBay search on *figured maple turning* and found about 20 entries. One other entry from RuMar looked OK. It featured two 4” x 4” x 3” blocks for \$12 plus \$10 shipping. These, however, did not appear to have very good figure. Maybe the photo was bad, but it did not inspire much confidence. I put this item, Item #2, on my eBay “watch list”.

Finally, I looked up Bow River Crafts Woods, the Canadian vendor I had previously used. Its website describes materials and prices in general (by the board-foot), but does not list specific pieces of turning stock.

At this point and after about seven hours of searching, I had only two eBay possibilities, neither of which were very exciting.

I then e-mailed three woodturning friends in the Northwest and asked for a recommendation. All three responded by e-mail. All three pointed to Bow River as a reliable source. Two of the three pointed out specifics as to why they trust the vendor.

I decided to order from Bow River, so I called them on December 19 and requested blocks of wood that generally met the criteria previously listed. They called me back that afternoon with six different options. They grade their wood with three categories for figure. I asked for the best grade only. I knew to ask for this because I have seen this vendor in person two different times, so I know exactly what I get when I specify color and figure. (I could not do this with someone with whom I have not done business previously.

I selected four of the five pieces for a total of \$176. Shipping was \$47 using parcel post. On December 21, I received a call confirming the transaction and the totals. They told me it was shipping that morning. Because this is the week before Christmas,

I did not expect the package to arrive quickly, but it arrived on December 28, one week after confirming the order. All five pieces came in a large cardboard box that was strapped and heavily taped. Except for the corners being dented, the box did not have any serious damage. The wood was packed in Styrofoam peanuts.

Four of the five pieces were awesome. The figure was exceptional, the color was just what I wanted and the wood was in excellent shape. The fifth piece was very good, but did have an end grain check in one end that extended about 3” into the wood. This may or

may not be an issue depending on how I orient the vessel. The color and the figure were excellent in this piece, too. Three of the pieces had been cut into rounds. While this did limit the design choices, it also reduced the shipping weight by about 25 percent.