

CHARACTERISTICS OF A SELECTION OF CARVING WOODS

NOTE: 'Fine' refers to texture and 'straight' to grain

Wood	Main source	Colour	Texture	Grain	Carving characteristics	Rating
Alder (H)	Europe - grey alder - black alder, W America - red alder	Pale to bright Orange	Fine	Fairly straight (no distinct 'figure')	Saws easily, works well with sharp tools gives a good finish.	*
Apple (H)	Europe, W Asia, Americas	Pale pink	Very fine	Irregular, spiral, often twisted	Heavy and hard, takes fine detail, stains and polishes well, splits easily, attractive natural colour.	**
Ash (H)	Europe, Japan, N America	White - pale pink	Medium	Straight but can be wavy	Strong, saws well, gives a good finish, can be steam bent, better where detail is not required, available in large sizes.	**
Balsa (H)	S America	Whittish pink	Fine	Straight	Very light, low strength, bends easily, works well with very sharp tools, excellent for model making.	**
Basswood (H)	See under lime					***
Beech (H)	Europe, Japan, N America W Indies	White to pale brown	Fine and even	Straight	Strong, works well, subject to fungal growth during drying to produce attractive black, gold and red streaks. Referred to in the trade as 'spalting' and is in fact the first stage in rotting. Can be seen in a number of hardwoods.	*
Birch (H)	Europe, Canada	Yellow - light brown	Fine	Straight	Heavy and hard. Similar to oak. Not ideal for detailed carving. Polishes well.	*
Boxwood (H)	Europe, Asia, S Africa	Pale yellow	Very fine and even	Straight but sometimes twisted	Takes very fine detail, high density and hardness enhances its value to the carver.	**
Cedar (S)	Middle East - Lebanon, India - Deodor, N Africa - Atlas	Pale brown	Coarse	Well defined growth rings	Inclined to be brittle and to check and crack, requires very sharp tools, gives good finish but not suitable for texturing, very strong.	*
Cedar (S) (Atlantic white)	USA	Creamy white	Medium	Straight	Easy to work, ideal for hunting decoys, polishes well, not readily available.	**
Cherry (H)	Europe, America (Black cherry)	Pale pinkish brown	Fine	Straight	Prone to gumstreaks, carves well but not easily, good finish, not available in large sizes.	**
Chestnut (H) (sweet)	Europe, America, Mediterranean, Japan	Pale brown	Medium	Straight but often spiralled	Easier to work than oak, has tendency to split, carves well, takes a good polish.	*
Cypress (S)	Europe, America, SE Africa, Australia New Zealand	Brownish red	Fine	Straight	Light, very knotty, goes lovely honey gold colour on exposure to air, works easily.	*
Dogwood (H) (Cornel)	USA and some European countries	Creamy white - soft pink	Fine to medium	Straight	Strong, can be worked to feather thinness, bends easily, sands well, popular with US carvers.	**
Elm (H)	America - rock and white, Europe - wych; Japan - nire	Pale brown	Medium to coarse	Irregular, well defined growth rings	Can be carved but better for non-detailed work, can be steamed and bends easily. Polishes well.	*
Fir (S) (Douglas and Scots)	N America, S and C Europe, C and E Asia	Creamy white - pale brown	Medium	Straight	Needs very sharp tools, not strong, brittle but reasonably easy to work.	*
Holly (H)	Most temperate and tropical zones	Greyish-white but variable	Very fine	Straight but irregular	Very heavy, hard wood that will take fine detail, can be stained to resemble ebony.	**
Jelutong (H)	SE Asia (Malaysia), Indonesia	Whitish-yellow	Very fine	Straight, wood marred by latex trace cavities	Soft and weak wood but excellent for carving, takes very fine detail. Accepts paint well.	***
Laburnum (H)	C and S Europe	Light to dark brown	Fine	Straight	Very hard, works well, can have 'oyster shell' pattern, when cut across end of grain, very heavy but carves well, available in large pieces. Polishes well.	**
Larch (S)	N America N Asia	Light brown	Medium	Straight	Very knotty and resin can cause problems.	*

