

Eco Wise

Woodworker's Goal: No Log Left Behind

By Eviana Hartman
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Most people don't think about what happens to trees and branches when they're trimmed, knocked down by storms or felled because of disease. But according to the U.S. Forest Service, 3.8 billion board feet of perfectly good lumber are discarded or burned every year, equivalent to one-third of the annual domestic timber harvest.

Chris Holmgren, 49, wants to change that. As the owner of Seneca Creek Joinery (<http://www.woodsurgeon.com>), a custom wood shop, mill and processor in Dickerson, the master craftsman hand-hews Windsor chairs and products from firewood to flooring.



Chris Holmgren makes chairs, flooring and other products from salvaged wood at Seneca Creek Joinery in Montgomery County. (By Pat Holmgren)

For years, Holmgren has used local and salvaged timber, and now, with help from a Forest Service grant, he is partnering with communities and companies to take in fallen trees. His business has added a wood kiln and sawmill to tackle every step of production. The goal? Inspiring other entrepreneurs in the D.C. area to follow his business model so that no local trees go to waste.

We spoke with the Montgomery County resident about turning what might otherwise be garbage into gold, and the importance of making the most of local resources.

What do you do at Seneca Creek Joinery?

We make almost anything in wood. We specialize in Windsor chairs using 18th-century tools, but I also do modern cabinetry. We do doors, windows, whatever our customer wants.

Have you always been interested in sustainably harvested wood?

My parents grew up during the Depression. I was taught "waste not, want not." I knew that long before I understood what it meant. I've worked with wood and carpentry and cabinetry for 30 years. I started as a hobbyist when I was a kid. I've got sawdust in my blood. There just wasn't anything else I was going to do.

When did you start your company? Was it always green?

I started in '94 or '95, and I was using local wood from farms. Folks would show up at the shop with a log, saying, "Well, here it is. We took it down, and we don't want to see it go to waste." People were always bringing me logs. I'd see somebody taking a tree down, and I'd talk to them and give them some nice logs out of it.

How did the Urban Wood Recovery Project, the program you're running with the Forest Service grant, come about?

Brian LeCouteur of the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments gave a waste-wood workshop a couple years ago. I called to RSVP . . . and before I was done he talked me into making a presentation. . . .

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With this project, we're trying to write a blueprint for a processing center that could be duplicated anywhere in the country. Logs are a resource, and too many logs in this country either get burned, buried or chipped. For example, of all the hundreds of thousands of yards of lumber left in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, most of it was burned.

Where do the salvaged logs you use come from?

Part of the project was the formation of the Community Woodlands Alliance, a loose network of arborists and municipalities. I've got a string of local tree companies that work with me, and I get logs from the Montgomery

County parks department and the cities of Greenbelt and Rockville.

Have you found that people are more interested in buying your products and salvaging wood now that the green movement is growing?

A lot of people, yeah. It makes it sort of an easy sell. "Rediscovered wood" is what we call it. The wave hasn't even begun to crest with the green building movement. Local wood is going to be a vital part of that, especially with diesel fuel at five bucks a gallon.

What kinds of green architecture components do you provide?

Decking, molding, flooring, all sorts of things. Most green architects don't mind if some of the flooring has dark stains or other defects in it. They think it looks more interesting. And it does. If I tried to sell that to a regular mill, they wouldn't take it. It's a matter of the market.

Are you a strong believer in the buy-local movement?

My wife tells a story about when she was living in Minnesota. She'd see apple trucks from Washington state heading for New York state, and then she'd see trucks from New York state on their way to Washington state, and they were loaded with apples! You can laugh, but when you get down to it, it's pretty stupid.

A lot of our urban and suburban planning has completely disregarded agriculture. In a fuel crisis and an economic crisis, it's important to start buying local and thinking local and planning local. It's of critical importance, as far as I'm concerned.

What does the Urban Wood Recovery Project hope to accomplish in the region?

I envision six or eight processing centers like mine around the Beltway. Two hundred million board feet of lumber goes to waste each year inside the Beltway alone. What makes up that figure? Tree trimming, hazard trees and diseased trees. And there's always somebody saying, "Well, we don't like to take a tree down, but that one's so messy."

We lose 10 to 15 acres of woodland a day in the Chesapeake Bay watershed to land-clearing for development and growing corn for ethanol. That's not an economic disaster, but it's going to be an ecological disaster.

What can readers do to make sure their cut trees don't go to waste?

They can call me. I've got a list of tree people that I work with. Or they can tell their tree company that they want me to get their logs. They can just send them up here and see them come back as furniture or something they can use.

If they're building an addition to their house and have to take a tree down to do it, we can saw the tree up, bring the logs here, dry them up, process them and make something out of it for the house. The stipulation is that it's got to be a good enough log. If it's got heart rot and a bunch of termites holding hands, I really can't do much with that. But I could carve spoons or bowls out of it. There's no such thing as waste wood.