

the adventures of an exotic-wood buyer

Keith Stephens braves heat and jungle conditions in South America to bring home some of the world's most beautiful species

ONE THAT GOT AWAY

At Yaguarete Forest, standing trees are graded 1, 2, or 3. Number 1 trees, like the magnificent ipe behind Keith Stephens, have the best formation. And though these trees would yield the best lumber, they aren't harvested. Leaving them standing ensures good genes for future generations.



A 26-HOUR FLIGHT
 Keith's trip covered 7,586 air miles, from home base in Phoenix to Dallas, Texas, Sao Paulo, Brazil, and, finally, Asuncion, Paraguay.

K eith Stephens lives a woodworker's dream. First of all, as president of Woodworkers Source, in Phoenix, Arizona, he presides over a candy store of tools, accessories, finishes, and more than 100 exotic woods, ranging from andiroba to zebrawood. And if that isn't fun enough, he also travels a couple of times a year to remote forests throughout South America in search of prize lumber to add to his 200,000-board-foot stock.

When Keith told us he was planning a trip to the Yaguarete Forest in eastern Paraguay last fall, we were intrigued at the prospect of learning more about the exotic-wood business. And to give you (and us) a flavor of what things look like down in tropical Paraguay, we dispatched photographer Marcial Barni to document Keith's trek. As you'll see, getting exotic woods from South American forests to your workshop is a complex undertaking that requires a great deal of dedication and stamina.

It's a long way from day care to Paraguay

Until 1984, Keith headed a chain of child day-care centers in the Southwest. But when Gerber bought out his operation, he capitalized on a long-standing interest in woodworking by developing a hardwood lumber and woodworking supply business. It didn't take Keith long to fall in love with exotic wood species (those harvested outside the United States). And today, Woodworkers Source features the broadest selection of exotics in the United States. Keith stresses, though, that selling these woods from far-away places is "fun but not very profitable." He told us that in 1999, exotics accounted for only about 9% of sales.



YES, I'LL TAKE THAT ONE!
Above right: Each tree is numbered, then entered into a "log" book, along with its dimensions and the number of cubic meters of lumber it will yield.

NOT EXACTLY INTERSTATE 80
Above: Tractors skid out logs along small roads cut into the jungle. After an area is logged, these roads grow over in six months to a year.

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HOW'S THIS FOR A WHOPPER OF A LOG?

Above: Keith takes a close look at a peroba rosa log, which is rose red when freshly cut, sometimes streaked with purple, yellow, or orange.

ALL IN A DAY'S WORK

Right: After a tree is felled, workers remove its limbs and clear vines and debris. The trunk of this lapacho measured 18 feet long.



“Hey Keith, I’ve always wondered...”

When you deal in unfamiliar woods and take mysterious journeys, too, you attract all kinds of attention from other woodworkers. Keith tells us that people seem fascinated by exotic woods, and they’re forever asking him about his travels. Here are some of the most frequently asked questions, along with Keith’s answers:

Q. How much do you pay for a board foot of lumber?

Keith: I have paid anywhere from \$.50 to \$20.00 for kiln-dried, rough-surfaced, usually 4/4 stock. (I once paid \$50.00 for some pink ivory, one of the rarest woods in the world.) Freight, unloading, and surfacing can add up to another dollar per board foot. We sell exotics for double our cost, with 20% discounts for 20 or more board feet.



HOT WHEELS

Local loggers have hauled with oxcarts like this one, *left*, for many centuries. Keith suspects that these logs will serve as firewood.

WOODWORKING, PARAGUAYAN-STYLE

The back-to-basics open-air workshop, *below*, features a bandsaw, the wheels of which are wooden discs, and a jury-rigged lathe with an adjustable tailstock that accommodates work up to about 10 feet.



Q. How much wood do you buy at a time?

Keith: Typically a container load at a time, which figures out to about 8,000 board feet.

Q. How do you get the wood back to the States?

Keith: The containers are trucked to the nearest seaport, then loaded on ships traveling up the east or west coasts of South and North America. It costs about \$2,500 to ship a container from Argentina or Chili to the U.S., plus \$1,000 per container for handling fees. Inland freight is additional.

Q. How long does it take a container to get to Phoenix?

Keith: I've waited as long as 2 years for some of it. At best, it takes about 120 days.

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I'M SURE GLAD WE TRADED IN THE OXEN FOR THIS FORKLIFT

Above: Once logs reach the main road, a forklift scoops them up and loads them on a flatbed truck.

I CAN'T BELIEVE I BOUGHT THE WHOLE LOAD

Above bottom: Here, Keith takes a hands-on approach to inspecting a load of exotic-wood timber that has just been harvested. "At these prices, you want to make sure you're getting the best possible wood," Keith says.

Q. Why use exotic woods?

Keith: Because of their color and figure, they add flair and excitement to projects when used with more common woods.

Q. Can the vivid colors of exotic woods be maintained?

Keith: In a word, "No." But you can lessen the damage caused by light rays by using exterior finishes with UV blockers.

Q. How many hardwood species are there?

Keith: About 10,000. Of these, 3,000-4,000 provide usable lumber. And about 300 different hardwoods are in common use somewhere in the world.

Q. Why are exotic woods so expensive?

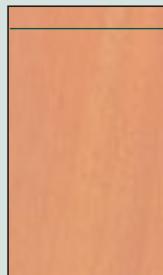
Keith: Several reasons. For example, they cost more to bring to market, they're scarce, some governments control pricing, and there's a demand for premium stock.

Q. Doesn't using exotic woods contribute to rainforest destruction?

Keith: That's a complicated question, but if the lumber is harvested using sound forestry practices, there is negligible effect on the rainforest. 🌳

4 of Keith's Favorite Exotic Woods

(All available at \$9.99/board foot)



Cancharana

Deep red to maroon with purplish markings. Lightweight, very easy to work, finishes smoothly, very stable.



Goncaio Alves

Light golden brown to reddish brown with dark streaks producing a beautiful striped or mottled figure. Hard and heavy. Fine texture takes a glass-like finish.



Guatamba

Also known as ivory-wood. Cream to lemon yellow. Generally straight grain with fine, uniform texture. An excellent turning wood.



Ipe

Olive brown to blackish with exposure to sun, often with lighter or darker striping. Usually straight grained. Great strength and durability. Excellent for decking and other types of outdoor projects.



Left: Ipe logs move through the Yaguarete sawmill. An operator in the booth controls the head rig.

Below: Keith checks the tally on a bundle of ipe lumber that's kiln-dried and ready for shipping.



Do you want to talk exotic woods with Keith?

If this article has gotten you excited about trying some exotic woods in your projects, here's how you can get in touch with Keith. If you live in or near Phoenix, first call, then drop by 5402 South 40th Street, Phoenix, Arizona 85040. Or call him at 800/423-2450. He's got a website, too: www.woodworkerssource.com

Two excellent sources of information about the characteristics of exotic-wood species

Woods of the World CD Rom

For ordering information, contact Woodworkers Source, or key in www.forestworld.com

World Woods In Color

by William A. Lincoln. ISBN: 0941936201
Available through Woodworkers Source or at bookstores.

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