

NORTHERN RED OAK

From
men-of-war
to kitchen cabinets,
always number one

To England's ancient druids, the oak symbolized strength. Warlike Norsemen even cherished pieces of the wood as charms to protect them from evil. But to the Greeks, Romans, and later seafaring nations, oak meant sturdy men-of-war and reliable merchant ships. In fact, England and France reserved whole forests for use in building their fleets. That's why red oak from North America saw immediate popularity when it was introduced to those countries in the early 18th century. Within a few years, northern red oak substituted for native English and European oak species and was crafted into furniture and paneling.

Even after centuries of popularity, northern red oak still outsells all other hardwoods. And luckily, it's plentiful, comprising about one fifth of the standing timber species grouped as red oak.

Wood identification

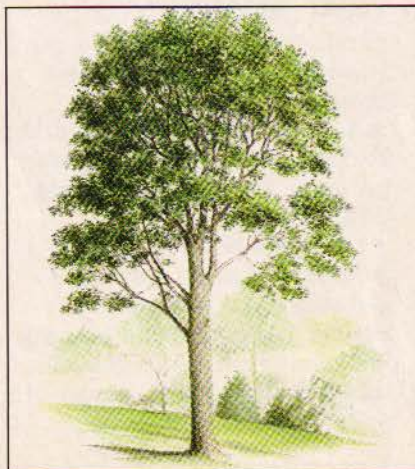
The broad, spreading crown of the northern red oak (*Quercus rubra*) shades the landscape in a sweeping range that covers nearly half the U.S. and much of southeastern Canada, as shown on the map, *top right*. More commonly called red oak, but also known as eastern red oak, gray oak, and Canadian red oak, the tree can grow to 150'

heights with trunks 6' in diameter in fertile upland forest soil. Open-grown trees more often approach only 70', with trunks that separate into several large branches.

Northern red oak has distinctive leaves up to 9" long, with a pointed bristle on each lobe tip. In the spring, flowing catkins of pollen-bearing flowers emerge amid the greenery. Acorns about 1" long develop every two years.

Rare is the board of northern red oak that carries a trace of its light-colored sapwood. Instead, the vast majority of northern red oak treats woodworkers to nicely figured heartwood with a pinkish tint.

You'll find that northern red oak has coarse-textured, straight, open



Natural range

grain. This hard, stiff, strong wood weighs 44 pounds per cubic foot dry—just a little more than walnut.

Uses in woodworking

Ever since the early 1970s, northern red oak has been highly favored for kitchen cabinets, and still leads in appeal for all kinds of furniture as well as millwork and flooring. Turners and carvers, too, find the wood a choice stock for decorative projects. (To learn about this wood's working properties, turn the page.)

Availability

Hardwood dealers and home centers offer northern red oak as lumber, veneer, plywood, turning squares, and dowels. But, all northern red oak won't be the same. Trees from the North—from the Appalachians on into Canada—grow slower and therefore have a more uniform color and a finer, easier-working texture than those from the South. Other characteristics remain the same, though. And, no matter where the wood hails from, board-foot price hovers around \$3.