

Local artists turn felled ash trees into art works

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When Tim Brudnicki looks at the stacks of milled ash wood drying in a shed on his rural Caryville property, he sees more than the blond-colored hard surfaces adorned with swirled orange-brown lines that make up the wood's grain.

He also envisions tabletops and headboards and other furniture he will create from wood he is giving a second life.

Brudnicki, the owner of Eau Claire Woodworks, is one of three regional artisans taking part in an effort to turn some of the 300 or so healthy ash trees the city of Eau Claire is proactively cutting each year into attractive and useful furniture and works of art.

Previously, that wood has been churned into mulch or turned into pulpwood. But now, thanks to a partnership involving the city of Eau Claire, a Madison-based entity seeking to reuse downed urban trees and local artisans such as Brudnicki, those ash trees that lined many city boulevards are being used for other purposes.

"This is a great way of finding better uses for this wood that was otherwise going to a lesser purpose," he said.

Images:



Staff photo by Dan Reiland - Tim Brudnicki, the owner of Eau Claire Woodworks, discusses the headboards he is making for the Oxbow Hotel from recycled ash trees the city cut down to stop the spread of the emerald ash borer. Brudnicki is among local artisans making furniture and other items from felled ash trees as part of a partnership involving the city of Eau Claire and Wisconsin Urban Wood.



The idea for turning felled ash trees into locally produced furniture and art has its roots in the city's management of its public ash tree population. As the emerald ash borer, a green beetle that infests and destroys ash tree populations, surfaced in recent years in the Northeast and spread to the Midwest, city forestry officials decided to thin the 7,000 ash trees on boulevards, parks and other public lands in an effort to slow the damage.

Four years ago the city began felling ash trees on public property. As city forester Todd Chwala watched one ash after another come down, he hoped there was a better use for them than being ground into wood chips or used for pulpwood.

Chwala and other city officials met in summer of 2014 to determine how to accomplish that goal. They enlisted the assistance of Leadership Eau Claire, a leadership training program operated by the Eau Claire Area Chamber of Commerce.

The group took on the project and ultimately contacted Wisconsin Urban Wood, a Madison nonprofit organization that promotes using wood produced by urban forestry operations and believes that such wood can be used for such purposes as lumber, furniture and works of art. The organization agreed to work as a conduit between the city and artisans such as Brudnicki who want to use the ash trees.

Cut ash trees are piled at the former brush site along Jeffers Road. The three artisans currently working in conjunction with Wisconsin Urban Wood – Brudnicki; Julie McFadden, who owns Eco Urban Timber of Eau Claire; and J.R. Salzman, who owns Salzman Custom Sawing near Downsville – choose from the logs at the site. They don't pay for the wood but are responsible for hauling it to the locations where it will be dried and milled before they turn it into products.

Staff photo by Dan Reiland -

This ash wood, from ash trees the city of Eau Claire cut to prevent the spread of emerald ash borers, is drying at Eau Claire Woodworks owner Tim Brudnicki's property. The wood needs to dry for about two years before it can be turned into the artistic furniture Brudnicki makes.

Matthew Staudenmaier, city forestry division supervisor, said the urban wood renewal program makes sense in that it turns a waste product into items of value while adding to Eau Claire's arts scene.

"These people are finding lots of uses for that same wood before was viewed as waste," he said.

Local ash

Brudnicki approached a stack of ash drying at his property and pointed to one thick slab, noting its twisting, prominent grain. A longtime carpenter in the Milwaukee area before moving five years ago to rural Eau Claire with his wife and two children, he said he hadn't previously worked with ash and has been surprised at its hard nature and attractive appearance.

"It looks and acts a lot like oak," Brudnicki said. "It can be difficult to work with too because of the twists and turns of the grain. A lot of people don't like that in a wood. They like straight grain because it's easier to work with. But this grain is what gives this wood its character. It's what allows me to give some of these pieces an artistic flair."

Brudnicki is doing just that with the pieces of ash he has procured. Nick Meyer, the publisher of Volume One who is one of the owners of the Oxbow Hotel, commissioned Brudnicki to create much of the furniture, everything from bed headboards to end tables to the front desk, for the hotel currently under construction.

Brudnicki is making most of those items from reclaimed ash. He noted how the wood's distinctive coloration makes its swirled grain stand out and how the knots and burls in the wood help form artistic curves he can work with.

"For me, that's where the artistic beauty of this wood is," he said.

Meyer was attracted to Brudnicki's craftsmanship after he began selling items at the Local Store, which Meyer owns, and he subsequently hired him to make furniture for the hotel. The ash trees are a great fit for the hotel, where the aim is to give patrons an authentic Eau Claire feel, Meyer said.

"We really want to make Eau Claire be a big part of this hotel, and this is a very direct way to do that, to take trees that were growing in this place and turn them into our furniture," Meyer said.

Business boost

McFadden praised the ash reuse effort, saying it feels good as an artisan to extend the lives of the felled trees rather than see them go to waste.

"It's wonderful. It's giving this wood a new home, and that is a really good thing," said McFadden, who in addition to building her business works at Chippewa Valley Technical College as a software development teacher and a grant manager.

McFadden's business was born from the ash tree reuse effort. She was part of the 2013-14 Leadership Eau Claire team that initially discussed the idea, and she later attended a training seminar in Spring Green designed to help attendees learn how to reuse urban wood. Many of her products combine wood, light and etching in creative ways.

"My business really sprang from this urban wood idea, so it has special meaning to me," McFadden said, noting she hopes to continue to grow her business and turn more ash into products people can enjoy.

Brudnicki has growth plans too. He hopes to create one line of his business specifically dedicated to reusing urban wood.

He recalled a trip shortly after he moved here and started his business to a gallery in the Pepin County community of Stockholm. He had created two new tables that included a hollowed-out section inlaid with pebbles designed to impart the idea of a flowing river. His business was struggling at the time, and he doubted whether the objects would sell. Moments after he arrived at the gallery a woman bought both works, giving him confidence that maybe his business would survive after all.

Now, thanks in part to the urban ash project, he said, his business is thriving.

“I am so fortunate, and this program has been what I needed to take my business to the next level,” Brudnicki said. “This is a way to give these trees new life, and it feels good to be a part of that.”

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