

Traditional and green WOODWORKING

part one



In the past, if you wanted to make something from wood it was common to begin at the tree. But nowadays many woodworkers don't consider this as a starting point or they shy away from it. This two-part article might help you see things differently.

BY ALEX JERRIM

At first you might think you've stepped back in time. There's an earthy smell in the workshop, the air is clear, and the only man-made sounds are those of sharp steel severing wood fibres. Here, there is no need for protective clothing – nothing insulates the senses – sight, sound and touch are raw.

Nearby a woodsman's eyes penetrate the bark of a tall tree. Knowing full well the energy that he will spend sourcing material, his mind's eye sketches a picture of the intimate relationship he could soon have with this tree. On one side of the trunk the bark tracks straight for 14ft, void of blemishes. This will deliver a bundle of straight-grained ribs – more than enough to re-rib the dinghy.

At first glance the other side of the tree appears similar but experience triggers a closer look. Several subtle ripples and tiny burley bumps speak of limbs past. Below this erratic bark will be wavy grain that sweeps around young branches pruned by nature years before. Season-by-season these waves will have subsided but never vanished entirely. Hidden for the moment from the naked eye, later they are sure to surface when the drawknife's blade succumbs to the uphill grain.

The tree's sparsely placed branches emerge from a still-straight trunk to take on useful curves and turns. Hidden within these are the materials for several projects: a tiller, thwart knees, a breast hook and

cleats for the dinghy; rockers, arm rests, a seat crest, slats for the captain's chair – it's an organic timber yard.

Near the top of the tree hangs a dead branch. The widow-maker awaits its plummet earthward. Felling will be best done with the two-man cross-cut. This quietly efficient saw will ease the tree from its vertical stand and not disturb what's above. The feel, sight and sound of the saw's teeth severing fibres will allow comfortable warning of the back cut opening up – giving time to walk mindfully to safety.

A final reflection acknowledges a life much longer than his own and then a thoughtful nod confirms the woodsman's decision is made – this living beauty is soon to die.

But this is not a story of death. The woodsman's relationship with this tree is about creation and his approach to harvesting means the impact on the environment will be minimal. Seedlings sown by the tree will soon shoot skyward and much of this tree will live on in new and more permanent forms.

When a tree falls it makes an unmistakable sound. First there is the creak of contorted fibres letting go, then the swish of leaves before the unstoppable trunk hits the earth with a thud.

Anxiety, sufficient to trigger healthy caution, subsides only when a mental review confirms that all has gone to plan. More time passes before the leaves settle, the birds quieten and the understory adjusts to its new

experienced mind grapples with the best way forward. Somehow this beauty has to be transported to the shed.



left: A small branch soon to become a thwart knee.
below left: Trial fit a few hours later.

relationship with the altered environment.

Green wood is full of water. Like a soaked kitchen sponge, most of the water in it will soon freely drain away leaving a damp material, the cell walls of which will dry more slowly. Until the 'free water' drains away a tree is very heavy or at least much heavier than its seasoned equivalent. To be manhandled the fallen tree must now be reduced to manageable pieces or billets.

So why then a pause in proceedings? There's much teeth sucking – that's the sound you hear when an

experienced mind grapples with the best way forward.



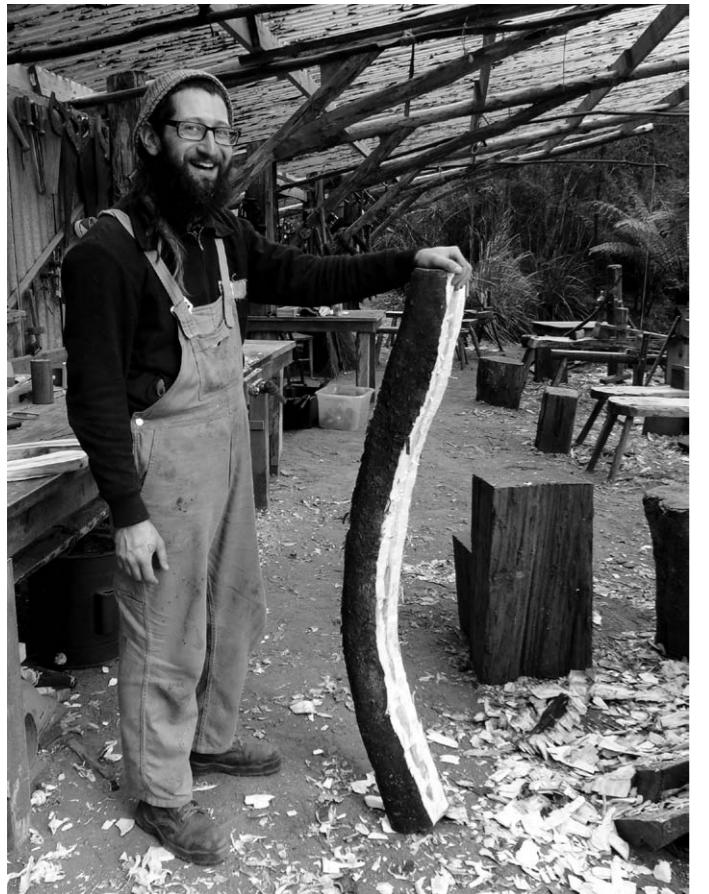
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There are advantages to taking only what is immediately necessary from this tree – but disadvantages, too. Left uncut, what remains will stay green for longer, it will check (crack) less and the options for its use will be greater. Also there will be more time left in the day to get on with today's job. On the down side, if left in the bush to slowly season, billets will become more difficult to cut and split, critters will begin to feast on the sapwood, the bark will stick like shrink-wrap to the trunk and the understory will begin to reclaim its place.

The current project, the captain's chair, will require only one 18 inch billet and an appropriately curved branch. Those ribs will still be easy to release next week. He'll be back later when he's sure of the materials list for the next project.

The crosscut saw makes quick work of the raw material. The billet roles free. Predictably a slight crack radiates from the pith – the tension in the tree's base is no longer constrained. Fibres once taut can now begin to relax, no longer do they have to support the tree as it sways in the breeze or compensate for the push and pull of weighty branches.

With billet on shoulder and crosscut saw under arm it's a short easy walk from the 'timber merchants' back to the workshop.

The crack beckons a steel wedge and when the five pound beetle strikes it the billet splits in half. The tree's heart lies exposed to the world and its still-wet radial figure glistens – perfect material for the coming job.

But how can still-wet fibres be the perfect material? Won't the wood shrink and crack and take months to dry? Isn't green wood difficult to steam bend? Won't the moisture rust your tools? In part two of this story we'll answer these and many more questions.

➤ Alex Jerrim is principal of **Wisdom Through Wood**, a traditional woodworking school in Tasmania's Huon Valley. You can meet Alex in the Shipwright's Village at the Australian Wooden Boat Festival, February 6-9, 2015

left from top:
10' billet split for ribs.
Two rockers for a chair will soon appear.
Life in the outdoor workshop.