

## Wood furniture buying guide: Helpful hints for your shopping trip

When you purchase wood furniture, no matter the function, there are several quality indicators to look for. The type of wood, the finish and the construction should be scrutinized when looking for a quality piece. We also have helpful checklists for buying Beds and Bedroom Storage, Dining Sets and Occasional / Accent Furniture, and Entertainment Centers. These guides will help you understand differences in quality construction and help you find furniture that will withstand the wear and tear of modern life.

### Wood Source

There are two primary categories of natural wood used in furniture construction: *hardwood* and *softwood*. Hardwoods come from deciduous trees (the ones that lose their leaves in autumn) such as maple, walnut, mahogany and oak. Softwoods come from coniferous (also known as evergreen) trees and include species such as pine, cedar and redwood. Both varieties are used for furniture construction with hardwoods valued for their strength and durability, and softwoods for their easy tooling and shaping.

*Engineered wood* is any variety of wood fibers, particles, or veneers adhered together with a bonding agent. Furniture bearing the description “All-Wood” is frequently composed of engineered wood products. Engineered woods are less prone to warping due to variations in humidity, and in some cases, offer a stronger substructure. Engineered wood may also be viewed as an environment-friendly since it uses of lumber that might normally go to waste.

*Veneers* are a time-honored technique of furniture construction and should not be considered a sign of inferior construction or materials. Veneers have been used in furniture construction since the ancient Egyptian era as a decorative effect. Veneers can be used to create intricate patterns on the surface of furniture with grain matching or with marquetry and intarsia inlays. Veneers are often made from highly-valued woods like mahogany and walnut, or exotics woods like tiger wood and maple burl. Veneers are applied to both solid wood and engineered wood substructures.

The term *case good* refers to any piece of furniture that is not upholstered.

### WOOD SHOPPING CHECKLIST

#### Wood Source

- Hardwood \_\_\_\_\_
- Softwood \_\_\_\_\_
- Engineered Wood
- Veneer

#### Finish

- Stain \_\_\_\_\_
- Hand-Rubbed
- Distressed
- Antiqued
- Painted

#### Construction

- Levelers
- Corner Blocks
- Dust Panels
- Back Panels
- Dovetails – English
- Dovetails – French

*Laminates* are constructed by the adhesion of a paper product, printed to look like wood grain or other appealing pattern, to an engineered wood substructure and then sealed with a protective finish. Laminate products have gained popularity in the flooring industry as a low-maintenance, and low cost, alternative to hardwood flooring.

### **Finish**

*Stains* are used to alter the natural color of the wood. Furniture with a “cherry finish” is not necessarily made with cherry wood; more likely, another hardwood was used for the construction and then stained to look like cherry wood. Stains have been used on furniture for centuries as dictated by home décor trends. Stains consist of thin pigments that are absorbed into the grain of the wood. A wax, oil, polyurethane, shellac or lacquer finish is applied over a stain to protect the wood surface.

*Distressing* is a finishing technique that artificially creates a weathered look. Sanding, punctures, or gouges on the wood surface help to create the effect.

*Antiqued finishes* employ distressing as well as stains to simulate the aged patina of an antique.

*Painted finishes* can be solid and even, or antiqued and distressed. Natural flaws in wood, such as knots, can absorb paint finishes differently; therefore, solid paint treatments can be difficult to create, and thus may be more costly. Distressed painted finishes often have sanded edges and corners that allow the natural wood color and grain to show through.

A number of different products may be used to protect a wood surface. Wax, oils (linseed oil or tung oil), polyurethane, shellac, and lacquer all bring unique character to the wood as they protect it. Whatever material is used in the finishing process, the final product should be smooth to the touch. A *hand-rubbed* finish is “rubbed-out” or buffed with abrasives or cloths after application of the finishing materials. It leads to a smoother, more refined final surface.

### **Construction and Components**

High quality wood furniture will feature construction techniques and components that increase functionality and lengthen lifespan.

*Levelers* or *adjustable floor glides* are components on the feet that may be adjusted up or down so that the piece doesn’t wobble. This is an important feature since leveling ensures the proper alignment of doors and drawers.

*Corner blocks* reinforce the corners of case goods and drawers to improve strength and stability. Corner blocks are not seen from the outside, but bolt to both sides of interior corners.

*Dust panels* are thin sheets of wood between drawers in the body of a chest or desk. They help to keep clothing or other materials in the drawers clean by preventing the infiltration

of dust. They also add to the structural integrity of the piece, making it stronger and sturdier.

*Back panels* are the generally unseen backs of case goods that are placed against the wall. Quality case goods have back panels attached with screws to help ensure the lateral stability.

*Dovetails* are a sturdy construction technique, usually employed in drawer construction, consisting of interlocking tenons of wood. *English dovetails* consist of interlocking fan-shaped wedges. *French dovetails* are constructed with one long groove, which is narrower at the surface and wider at the depth, into which slides an interlocking end of a board. Given two chests of similar scale, drawers constructed with French dovetails will offer less storage capacity than drawers constructed with English dovetails because of the required overhang of wood on the front panel.

*Drawer glides* allow you to effortlessly move a drawer in and out of its station. They can be made of wood, metal, or nylon, or combinations of these materials. Glides can be side mounted or bottom mounted, depending on the case construction. For example, side mounted glides are more likely to be found on drawers with French dovetails. Wood is a strong material for drawer glides since it expands and contracts with changes in humidity, just like the rest of the piece. Glides in office furniture such as desks, file cabinets and computer armoires are important to the functionality of the piece. Metal compound glides in office furniture allow for the full extension of drawers. They are usually side mounted and may incorporate ball bearings or nylon roller wheels. This is useful for accessing file drawers.

*Stops*, made of nylon or wood, prevent drawers from being pulled out too far or from falling out when fully extended.

For information on specific categories of wood furniture, see the articles and checklists below.

**How to Buy Beds and Bedroom Storage**

**How to Buy Dining Room Furniture**

**How to Buy Home Office Furniture**

**How to Buy Occasional and Accent Furniture**

**How to Buy Entertainment Centers**