



Wood Identification: 90 Years of Public Service



Center for Wood Anatomy Research scientist examining a wood sample with a hand lens.

‘What wood is that?’ The curious, the scientist, the lawyer, and the business owner often pose this question. The wood might be a fragment from a crime scene, an ancient tomb, an archaeology dig, or a jar of jam. It might be a board from a house, an industrial facility, or any sized piece from just about anywhere. Identifying the wood might be as easy as looking at it with your naked eye, but in the Center for Wood Anatomy Research, scientists most often use more sophisticated methods, which could include the aid of a hand lens, microscope, or ultraviolet light, to accurately determine the specimen’s identity.

Background

Since the Forest Products Laboratory opened its doors in 1910, the Center for Wood Anatomy Research has been heavily involved in identifying wood from inside and outside the government. In a typical year, scientists identify approximately 1,500 wood samples. In addition to these identifications, they answer another 500 letters, emails, and telephone inquiries regarding everything from wood properties to international trade in endangered tree species.

Objective

The objective of this program is to identify wood specimens for wood-using industries, scientists, museums, and the general public and to provide physical, mechanical, and botanical information on temperate and tropical woods.

Approach

The program is divided into two phases: (1) identifying macro- and microscopic samples submitted by various customers and (2) providing technical information about the species identified. Examination of the wood is normally done with a light microscope and is based on comparison with specimens in the wood collection. The results are reported to the most specific level possible. For most woods this is the genus level, but some groups can be identified at the species level. Information is distributed from literature sources mainly through the web site at www2.fpl.fs.fed.us/

Additional information regarding the terms of the identification service and limitations of the analysis can be found at www2.fpl.fs.fed.us/WoodID/idfact.html

Outcome

The obvious benefit of this program is providing a much-needed public service to many different people in a wide variety of professions. It is also a means of extending to the general public proxy access to the wood collections. Scientists at the Center are some of the very few professionals in the world who can accurately identify small wood fragments, tropical woods, or woods of uncommon origin.



Eloise Gerry, the first Project Leader (1914-1924) for the Center for Wood Anatomy Research