

Bois d'arc!

By Dan Phillips

Bois d'arc is a fascinating tree. Perhaps more than any other tree that abounds across middle America, it claims more folklore and chainsaw stories than can be claimed by any living thing in the solar system. It is an icon unto itself.

It is the tree that produces the big, green, nubby apples, which gives it yet another name—"horse apple tree." The female tree has long thorns, which made it ideal in the past two centuries as a fence, or a hedge row. On the plains where wood was at a premium, farmers planted rows of bois d'arc to keep free-range cattle off their property.

Early French explorers named the Osage Orange (*maclura pomifera*) tree "bois d'arc," meaning "wood of the arc," because its younger branches were used for making strong and resilient bows. In fact, a French trading post established in the mountains of Arkansas and Missouri in the 1700's was named "Aux Arc," after the abundant bois d'arc trees in the area. The English name "Ozark" is probably a corruption of the French "Aux Arc." In East Texas it is pronounced "bodark," and the etymology has taken a vernacular turn, often being described as "wood of the ark," meaning Noah's ark. Ostensibly Noah would have chosen a strong, impervious wood for building his boat.

And yet it is routinely "gotten rid of," and perceived as a nuisance. The irony is that its credentials exceed most native trees, and its wood out-performs any wood available at the lumberyard, in all areas. In these days when diminishing wood supplies are giving everyone the blues, simply cutting down this magnificent tree—dead or alive—and burning it rather than making use of it, is one of the more shameful things we do.

The wood is extremely hard, and simply won't rot. And while termites aren't real bright, they're smart enough to stay away from this wood. (Father termite: "Son, don't abuse chemicals, and for God's sake, stay away from bois d'arc. It may look yummy, but it'll ruin your teeth.") Fence posts from the 1800's are still standing in parts of Oklahoma and East Texas. Historically, the wood has been used for hubs, spokes, electrical insulators, fence posts, yellow dye, and even the live tree was a host for silkworms and a domestic silk industry.

Because of its twisted contours and shapes, the wood is difficult to exploit commercially, but it nevertheless has a world of uses. Its iridescence exceeds the finest of cabinet-grade burlled woods, such as burlled walnut, crotch-grain mahogany, and cherry, and because of its extreme density and hardness, polishes to a brilliant, diamond-like appearance. Jewelry is often made from the wood.

Occasionally bois d'arc is available at exotic hardwood lumberyards, but it is exceedingly expensive. It is a wood of choice for woodworkers who love to turn wood on a lathe and

excellent for making goblets, handles, spindles and bowls. Because of its hardness, razor-clean cuts are possible, and polishing is easy. Sculptors seek it out with a passion.

It is the heartwood of the tree that resists the ravages of nature, which is a lemon yellow when first cut. Upon exposure to the ultra-violet light of the sun, it ambers to a deep, rich burnt orange. Eventually—after a hundred years or so—it turns black.

So, what could you possibly use this marvelous wood for in the real world if you no longer need the wood for your covered wagon hub? Well, fence posts present an immediate use, not to mention using it for landscaping abutments. If you like to work with wood, it presents spectacular opportunities for furniture—chairs especially—and can be resawn for lumber, should you be tooled up for such a thing. Because of its natural curves and curls, it automatically presents itself as a material when you want organic, natural shapes—porch posts, for instance. If you mount your mailbox on a bois d'arc post, you can be certain it will be there for your grandchildren. They'll probably want mail, too.

If you are in the market for some bois d'arc, keep your eyes out for land being cleared. If you simply ask the contractor if you could have some of the wood, he will look at you with a blank expression. This is normal. He'll be a bit confused and suspect that maybe you're a lunatic, but he'll say, "Uh, sure," while he furrows his eyebrows. Be prepared for the next question.

"What're ya gonna use it for?" You see, he knows about bois d'arc—that it's hard, that it was used for bows, and that, in his world, it's a nuisance. But he's always on the lookout for something you could do with this stuff. And you will need to listen to one of his bois d'arc stories.

"Oh, I was thinking of making a staircase." Or you could say, "I was thinking of making some earrings for my wife. Why do you ask?" Or you could say, "Well, the hub went out on my covered wagon. Just need some repair material."

In all cases, you will have inspired his curiosity. That will be a good thing.

When you grieve about materials not lasting in the weather and sunlight—plastic comes immediately to mind—you might consider bois d'arc. If you don't like chemically treated wood in your life, consider bois d'arc. And especially, if you would like to annoy termites, bois d'arc is your choice. While fungus is so low on the food chain that it doesn't warrant annoying, the wood does infuriate fungus as well.

The conclusion here is that if you want to irritate fungus, please your wife, or simply have a staircase like no one else's, bois d'arc could be your friend. Talk to your neighbor when he's cutting down that bois d'arc tree. He'll give you a blank expression. That's your cue: "Oh, just whipping up some yellow dye."

