

GUBI

All About Teak

Material Background



All about teak

Teak is a large hardwood tree species that can grow up to 40 meters (131 ft) high, with a diameter of up to 3.6 meters (12 ft). The trees have gray-brown branches, small fragrant white flowers, and large, papery leaves that are rough enough to use as sandpaper and often hairy on the underside.

Teak wood consists of heartwood which comes from the center of the trunk and a thin layer of paler sapwood just underneath the bark. The heartwood is what is used by furniture makers – it has a leather-like scent when newly sawn and its initial yellowish color quickly darkens to its characteristic rich brown hue.

Natural properties

Teak's high tensile strength and tight grain make it an exceptional structural timber and a high-quality furniture wood. Teak is an excellent choice for applications that are likely to experience periodic changes in moisture, due to its low shrinkage ratio. Outdoor furniture made from teak will withstand the harsh effects of heavy rainfall, severe winter snowstorms and broiling sun without its strength diminishing.

Teak is rich in naturally occurring oils, which make it inherently resistant to the effects of weather, insects, rot, fungi and mildew, and therefore particularly suitable for outdoor furniture. Its natural oils prevent it from warping, cracking or becoming brittle. The fact that its natural oils remain locked in the wood mean that teak is one of the most durable and long-lasting of all hardwoods, even if left uncared for. In parts of Western India, teak objects have been found intact that date back over 2,000 years.

Historical origins

Teak, or 'tectona grandis' to use its Latin name, originated in India, Myanmar and Laos and ancient teak forests can be found across south and southeast Asia, with Myanmar's forests still accounting for almost half the world's naturally occurring teak. Teak plantations were established in India, Indonesia, equatorial Africa, and the Caribbean in 19th century. As a result, teak now grows in approximately 40 countries throughout the tropics.

Teak was first introduced to the Western world when sailors and traders visiting India and China in the early 1800s were impressed by the wood in widespread use as a boatbuilding material. Teak has been used to make ocean-going vessels for more than 2,000 years and it continues to be used in the construction of ships and high-end yachts to this day. It was only in the 1950s that it was introduced to America, and later to Europe, when it quickly became a popular choice for outdoor furniture.

Teak's longevity made it ideal for use in public gardens and parks – in fact there are benches in England made from the reclaimed timbers of dismantled Victorian navy ships – a testament to the durability of this wood. It is common for a teak bench, chair, or table to last 70 years or more with the correct care – longevity that means teak can be passed down through generations.

Manufacture

The most desirable and best-performing wood comes from the core of the teak tree. The heartwood is richer in natural oils, is darker and more consistent in color than the surrounding sapwood, and is stronger and considered more attractive as a result. As the tree ages, the living cells in the sapwood die and – over a period of years – become heartwood, so it is only the more mature trees that are harvested for high-quality timbers. It can take four decades or more for a teak tree to be ready for harvest.

After the tree is cut down, logs are cut into planks, which are air- and kiln-dried to remove moisture and improve the wood's resistance to rot and insects before the wood is available to use.

Sustainability

Timber cut from rare old-growth teak trees was once believed to be more durable and harder than plantation-grown teak, however studies have shown that plantation teak performs on par with old-growth teak in erosion rate, dimensional stability, warping, and surface checking.

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Its popularity has led to growth in sustainable plantation teak production throughout the seasonally dry tropics in forestry plantations – and today, the vast majority of commercially harvested teak is grown on teak plantations found in Indonesia. They are controlled by a state-owned forest enterprise, providing local employment and ensuring sustainable woodland management systems.

GUBI only uses farmed plantation teak with SVLK certification, which guarantees that only legal timber is harvested and exported from Indonesia. The Indonesian Ministry of Forestry, through its state-owned enterprise Perum Perhutani, manages its teak forest plantations with agroforestry, ensuring biodiversity, sustainable forestry practices, and providing additional economic benefits to the local economy.

Usage and settings

Natural materials, such as wood, are increasingly sought after for interior spaces, so it's no surprise to see that trend continuing outside too. As well as being beautiful to look at, teak is the firmest, most durable and strongest of all the hardwoods, making it the go-to natural material for anything that needs to balance a luxury look with robustness and longevity – the perfect choice for outdoor furniture.

Maintenance

Teak's natural oils are retained throughout the lifespan of the wood, so it doesn't need to be treated with further oil, wax, paint or varnish. It can be left outside uncovered and untreated all year round and will fade to a beautiful and even silver-gray patina over time. For those who wish to preserve the wood's honey-gold tones, an annual application of oil or sealant is the simple solution.