

Hardwood Imports and Brazilian Forestry Practices

On an April morning, I stood in the former Pequot River Shipworks building, located on the waterfront in New London, Conn. The building now holds about 2 million linear feet of Brazilian hardwoods (see photo). This is where General Woodcraft (860/444-9663, mataverdedecking.com) — an importer that sells to contractors along the New England coast and to lumberyards and distributors throughout the U.S. and Canada — keeps its stock of ipe, cumaru, and garapa. Some stacks nearly reach the building's 40-foot ceiling.

General Woodcraft's owner, Steve Crook, related how the Brazilian government certifies lumber to ensure a sustainable harvest.

"Brazil is not a Third World country," Crook said. "It has the largest economy in South America." (And the 10th largest in the world.) "They take a sophisticated approach to forest management.

"Before a logging operation can begin, the logger must inventory all the mature trees in the area, and submit a harvest plan to IBAMA (Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources) and SEMA (Secretary of State for the Environment and Hydro Resources). This isn't clear-cutting — approximately one tree per acre can be harvested every 20 years. Of course, there will be a staging area and some logging roads, but they're kept as small as possible. Sunlight and rainfall reaching deeper into the forest where a tree was harvested speeds growth of the remaining trees by about 15 percent. Because of the climate, it takes only about 50 years for these trees to reach harvestable size.

"There is a strict chain of custody. After a project has been approved, IBAMA/SEMA must be told when logging will begin, how many trees will be harvested, which specific trucks will be used to haul out the logs, which

route will be used, and in which 10-day period the transport will take place. These trucks are tracked with GPS. Now, logging operations happen in remote areas. There aren't that many trucks and illegal ones are often pretty easy to spot. If authorities find one, it's stopped. Everyone involved — the logger, the trucker, the destination mill — is shut down until an audit of all transactions and inventory takes place. Penalties range from fines to permanent shut-down. And because of the Lacey Act, which requires documentation to be filed before the lumber leaves a foreign port, the chain of custody

record-keeping requirements continue once the lumber reaches the U.S."

When asked about the common perception that new logging roads provide access that leads to deforestation through slash-and-burn agriculture, Crook replied, "According to Tom Lovejoy (he is the chief biodiversity adviser to the president of the World Bank and is associated with The Smithsonian and Yale University), the way to save the rain forest is to give

it value. Local people have to make a living, and they'll resort to slash-and-burn farming if they don't have an alternative. Jobs from sustainable-yield logging provide an alternative."

I asked Crook about the FSC (Forest Stewardship Council), probably the most well-known independent lumber certifier. His warehouse has an area set aside for FSC lumber. There were several stacks of 3-foot lengths, and not much there was longer than 10 feet or 12 feet. The non-FSC Brazilian lumber ran to 20 feet or so. Crook said, "All legal lumber exported from Brazil is IBAMA certified, including FSC material. We have it, and architects spec it, but FSC-certified lumber tends to cost more and come in shorter lengths. It's harder to find, and we buy it whenever it becomes available." — *Andy Engel* ♦



Piles of Brazilian hardwood await shipment.