

IS TODAY'S LUMBER FUNKY?

If you've ever cruised the aisles of Lumberjack, you know that a 2x4 stud today is significantly smaller than 2" x 4." If you live in a fifty year old home, however, its "studs" are close to the full, actual dimensions. In those days, what they "sawed" was what you got.

Lumber today is graded. Using a set of rules which consider the effects of lumber's natural characteristics (such as knots, splits or twisting), lumber is assigned a number and code. These numbers vary by species and size of wood, resulting in a complex variety of designations. For example, I specify Douglas Fir-Larch (a "species group" which contains two types of trees), in No. 2 (the grade) for typical framing. For beams, I ask for Douglas Fir No. 1, F.O.H.C. (free of heart center). For ordinary studs, "Standard and Better" will do ("and better" means that the *lowest* grade in a pile will be standard--higher grades may also be included). Higher grades may tend to look better, but aesthetics is *not* a consideration for grading framing lumber.

According to the Western Wood Products Association (an industry group representing lumber manufactures in 12 western states), the second growth timber that makes up most of our modern forests contains more knots so it yields much less clear and warp-free lumber, and a much higher percentage of middle grade material. This helps foster the perception that this lumber is lower quality. The knots, however, are actually smaller and tighter. According to WWPA, the slope of grain in second growth timber is often better for some categories of structural lumber. In fact, a smaller log produces a larger share of structural light framing grades used in homes.

Over the last 20 years, the majority of lumber produced by these logs has fallen into the standard and better quality range which makes up most structural usage in a residential project. A declining amount of

volume goes to clear material and lower grades.

Another trend has been the use of "green," unseasoned lumber. Twenty years ago, less than a third of the lumber in the market place was put out for a builder to use before it has seasoned to a moisture content of below 19%. Currently, about *half* of the dimensional lumber on the market is over 19%, or "green." Locally, nearly *all* the dimensional lumber used is green! Green lumber requires careful storage and installation techniques. Unless it is handled properly, it can dry unevenly causing warping and splitting. Improper storage also leads to mold, mildew and stains. An inexperienced builder can ruin good lumber right on the job site, by leaving it out in the sun, for example.

The forest industry asserts that lumber today is as good or better than it has ever been for structural services. Our experience generally supports this claim. However, there is no denying the fact that when it comes to *looks*, modern lumber doesn't really hold a candle to lumber cut from the massive logs from old growth forest--days long past, never to be again!.

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