



Australia's Best Turning Timbers

by Andrew Potocnik

We have a rich variety of timbers available in Australia that, according to where they grow, vary in color and character. Keep in mind that we're about the same size as the USA and span climates from tropics through deserts. The flora has adapted to a vast range of environments resulting in timbers that can be as hard as the hardest in the world, to soft-but-dense timbers that cut like a hot knife through butter.

Looking at factors that appeal to turners, I've grouped timbers according to three features that catch our attention; color, figure, and scent. So here is a selection of Australian timbers, either available commercially or through specialist suppliers who unearth the most mouth-watering timbers imaginable. You may need to contact suppliers directly to source some of these woods, depending on where you live.

When it comes to color, one of my favorites is the rich red of river red gum (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*), endemic to the southeast of the continent and protected in the suburb where I live. Its color will vary according to where it grows, but the best will be a deep red; it turns beautifully when worked with sharp tools (**Photo 1**). It can also produce spectacular grain in burl form.



1. River red gum with a contrasting scorched rim. 12" x 6" (305mm–150mm).

Blackheart sassafras (*Atherosperma moschatum*), from Tasmania, gives you not just one but three colors in the same piece of wood. The heartwood of sassafras typically has grey-to-golden brown tones. However, some trees are infected with a staining fungus, causing colorful streaks and veins of dark brown and black and giving rise to the common name. The dense and close-grained nature of this wood makes it a delight to turn (**Photo 2**).



2. Blackheart sassafras is a versatile timber used for projects ranging from small boxes to lutherie. 5" x 3" (125mm–75mm).

Sassafras grows in cool temperate rainforests alongside myrtle beech (*Nothofagus cunninghamii*), which is my next choice in color. Myrtle beech has a deep pink hue and turning it is a delight because of its dense grain—again the result of where it grows. It too can have dark black streaks, thus it is sometimes referred to as “tiger myrtle.”

When it comes to figure, several of our timbers have been given the generic title of “oak,” as their medullary rays resemble the European woods in the *Quercus* genus that early explorers of Australia were familiar with. Sheoak (*Allocasuarina spp.*) and silky oak (*Grevillea robusta*) feature large medullary ray flecks, best seen in quartersawn timber and also apparent when looking at endgrain. Sheoaks have color that ranges in hues of orange, but with





3. The rays in sheoak are so large that they are best displayed in flatsawn timber, especially on smaller forms. 6-3/4" x 2-1/2" (170mm-65mm)

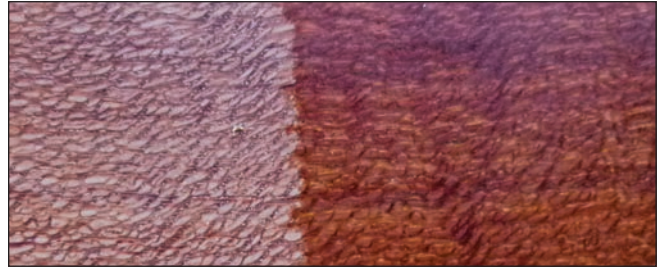


4. Lace sheoak can have truly dramatic figure; it is a highly sought-after timber. Left side of the image shows the oiled timber.

prominent darker medullary flecks (**Photo 3**). Harder to find is an even more appealing variation called lace sheoak (*A. fraseriana*) (**Photo 4**).

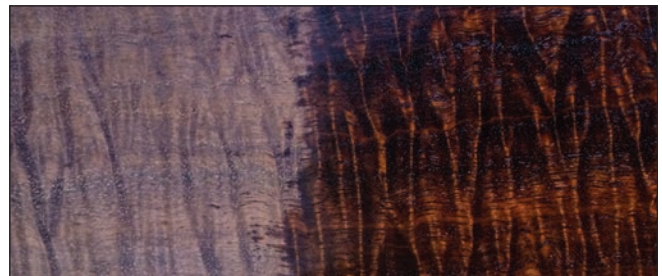
Beefwood (*Grevillia striata*) has not just the striking medullary rays but also a deep red-to-purple color (**Photo 5**). Beware; some people have allergic reactions to timbers in the *Grevillea* genus.

Ringed gidgee (*Acacia cambagei*) has an unusual variation to what we would otherwise call fiddleback grain. The intensely figured timber creates some of the most spectacular grain that



5. Beefwood displays both dramatic grain and a deep reddish-purple hue. The right side of this example has been oiled.

is treasured for turning as well as for knife scales. Scent is another wonder of turning wood that makes this craft a delight, but how to capture it in words or pictures? Ringed gidgee has a fantastic fragrance that adds more joy to the turning (**Photo 6**).



6. Ringed gidgee smells almost as good as it looks. Right side is oiled.

Huon pine (*Lagarostrobos franklinii*) and Queensland red cedar (*Toona australis*) not only release the most wonderful aroma as they are turned, but they also carve easily. Then there is sandalwood (*Santalum spicatum*), a parasitic native with a scent synonymous with Asia—it too is a delight to turn.

This is a smattering of my favorite Australian timbers. Let me know your choices so I can give them a go and see what makes them special to you.

Andrew Potocnik has been involved in woodturning since high school. His work is in many private and museum collections. Andrew's primary interest is sharing his passion for wood with students in any setting. For more, visit andrewpotocnik.com. □