

# Wilson's Pearlbush (*Exochorda giraldii* var. *wilsonii*): A Gem to the Core

*Stephen Schneider*

It can be a memorable experience the first time you crack open a geode—pale gray and nondescript on the outside, the colorful crystalline center is anything but. The same can be said for cutting into the wood of the trees and shrubs in the Living Collection at the Arnold Arboretum. There have been many surprises for Arboretum staff who prune and remove trees and are also interested in wood-working; often what is hidden by thick, scaly, neutral-colored bark proves to be a treasure once the inner wood is revealed.

Several species come to mind when considering unique and beautiful wood. Golden rain-tree (*Koelreuteria paniculata*) and Osage orange (*Maclura pomifera*) yield consistent chocolate brown and bright yellow heartwood, respectively. Boxelder (*Acer negundo*), on the other hand, often displays an erratic, bright red fungal staining in parts of its center. Even the old-growth stems of common lilac (*Syringa vulgaris*) often have a deep purple center that, unfortunately, disappears once the wood is seasoned.

Although there are many other Arboretum plants that possess interesting wood, a large specimen of Wilson's pearlbush (*Exochorda giraldii* var. *wilsonii*, accession 11626-C) merits particular attention. Grown from seeds collected in 1907 by E. H. Wilson in Hubei, China, this centenarian shrub resides just off the road near the top of Bussey Hill. Its racemes of spring flowers start as white, pearl-like buds and open to perfect, five-petaled flowers. The flowers are followed by interesting star-shaped seed capsules. Mature and well established, this multi-stemmed shrub has a commanding spread of about twenty feet and a height to match. Its presence, however, is often overlooked by the many visitors who pass by it each day on their march to the top

of the hill. They are unaware of the secret that lies beneath its bark.

I remember well the first time I was introduced to *Exochorda* wood. A rather small piece, about a foot long and four inches in diameter, was tossed to me from across the room. Its weight took me by surprise—it felt as strong and dense as hickory. A first attempt to cut through it failed, since the wood was too hard for the band saw blade to provide a straight cut. It became necessary to use a fine-toothed carbide blade on a table saw. That machine even seemed to struggle a bit, but the results were worth the effort. Hidden beneath the gray, scaly, exfoliating bark was densely grained wood patterned in light and dark browns with orange-red highlights throughout. A single pass of the blade proved to be all that was needed to create a smooth finish, velvety to the touch. Applying a coat or two of Danish oil enhances the beauty of this material since it makes the swirling grain more noticeable.

When put on a lathe and turned, this wood creates a beautiful spindle that displays the variety and complexity of its colors and patterns. Checking (cracking that occurs during the lumber drying process) is nearly impossible to avoid with a wood this dense, so finding stable stock to work with between the cracks can be a challenge. Since discovering the wood of *Exochorda*, I have reserved the use of it for very special projects for very special people. Since Wilson's pearlbush is a relatively easy plant to grow, I'll often give the recipient of the gift a live specimen of it to plant in the backyard as a reminder that, much like a geode, its plain appearance on the outside can harbor profound beauty on the inside.

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