

# BITTERSWEET BEAUTY

WOODWORKING ARTIST CLAY ARONSON  
TURNS DOOMED BEETLE-BITTEN  
ASH TREES INTO CUSTOM-MADE FURNITURE.

ARTICLE BY MARIAN  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JESSICA TAYLOR

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**S**ome of the ash trees decimated by the onslaught of the potential ash-borer may have a better (if not less costly) fate than a quick wood chipper. Master craftsman Doug Aronson appreciates the character of salvaged wood and hopes to offer the ash lumber a more artistic destiny through the custom furniture he makes. His latest project for an architecture student at Iowa State University used reclaimed barn wood from local farms. So when he and his wife, Meghan, learned that the city of Des Moines would be removing thousands of ash trees, they wondered if they could salvage some of them.

The city, which has about 15,000 ash trees around buildings and along roadsides and trails, can't afford to save all of them. Municipal arborist David Jann says 2,400 trees are currently being treated and another 5,000 will be removed over the next 10 years. The remaining 5,000 are in parks and will be left in place to die on their own. Some dead trees have a priority in the eyes of a local forester, as they're not a total loss.

To get access to the trees being removed, Meghan made some general calls that led her to John, the referred-for-to Family Tree Services, the first designated to take down the targeted ash trees. "He was wonderful," Meghan says of John, in fact, she adds, "what people hear what we're about and what we want to do, they're really responsive."

Last fall, Clay Aronson started picking up some of the felled trees. Starting this spring, he'll cut the logs using equipment that was built for the old Butternut tree west of Boone. The boards must air-dry for almost a year before he can begin working with them, and hopes to build a lot in speed up the drying process, but that's all on the drawing board.

After graduating from ISU, Aronson apprenticed for two years with Robby Peterson at Bell's L&L, a 19th-century woodworking shop in Des Moines. There he learned traditional woodworking techniques using hand tools. "You learn more about the wood that way," he says. "You see the grain more, how wood dries."

Although he relies on power tools now, he still adheres to traditional joinery techniques, using dovetail

#### This page

A woodworker crafts a chair from salvaged ash.

Opposite page, clockwise from top left:

The family business built in Des Moines looks a high-end for the same reason: local salvaged ash.

The woodworker says you may want to expect to pay double, while the sustainability movement has helped ease some of the costs.

Some of the lumber sits in the stacks, waiting for its turn at the custom woodworker.

The sustainability-minded woodworker offers advice on avoiding fast-growing wood products.





and fabric costs and subtly adhere to fast-paced together. "I try to stay as true to the color palette as I can," he says. "They've been terrific clients."

The primary may be traditional, but the master bedroom has a dramatic, contemporary look. "Named Spanish Drive for two of the bedrooms used, they require a little something multifaceted process that is as much the result of creative experimentation as of technical skill. Each piece is produced with a natural-grade material that creates a hard, durable surface that's resistant to water and chemicals."

Arconce painted the first flooring samples with the Spanish Drive finish in the spring of 2015 for Jerry and

To see what  
this is like in the kitchen at work or  
the other projects about the work.  
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Wagner and the interior design process was  
in a room. "I'm not sure about the existing  
work, getting the space and good planning.  
We probably to make it right? The existing  
we also have a window to a great in a room."

one of the members of the Oak Woods Transition Club. The collaboration led to the opportunity to develop a new line of vanities available exclusively through Wisconsin Cabinets in Elgin. (To express their appreciation to Wagner and to honor her work with the club, the designers are donating a portion of the proceeds from sales of the vanities to help disadvantaged youth participate in Wisconsin Cabinets and feature Arconce's one of a kind pieces in its showroom.

Arconce's tables also are available at Renaissance Home in downtown Oak Woods, and B. Conrath Design is planning to offer his furniture at the company's new studio space, which at press time was scheduled to open in January in Elgin.

Arconce has already cut down some old trees for a homeowner in exchange for the lumber. Locally harvested trees look "more busy green, more colors, more character than the ash you buy from a lumber company," he says. "Nobody's trying to look for consistency."

Wagner focuses heavily on the marketing and sale of the business and may be her husband's biggest fan. "It's truly an art form for applying the finishes," she says. "It's a very particular about how he does it. It's fascinating to watch."

As a Transition with Three Pines, residence under Mike Brigham in sunny areas of the ground will have all change the city's  
interiors. The idea that they envision can change over a fraction of the way in a beautiful country. "The thing that surprised me about the  
finishes," she says. "To see the other traditional primary finishes to create this contemporary looking piece."



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