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# BUYING PINE



▲ With its light color, white pine (top) is easy to distinguish from southern yellow pine (middle) and the western yellow pines (bottom).

**Y**ou'd think it would be easy to walk into a lumberyard or home center and buy a pine board. But sometimes it gets confusing.

One way to simplify things is to keep in mind that most of the pine lumber you see can be divided into three main groups: *white*, *southern yellow*, and *western yellow*, see photos at left.

**WHITE PINE.** As you'd expect, white pine is the lightest in color. It's also the most lightweight. One nice thing about white pine is it has a subtle grain pattern. And it machines well and takes a finish better than the other pines. That makes white pine ideal for making furniture.

**SOUTHERN YELLOW.** You'll also find southern yellow pine at some lumberyards. Besides the fact it's considerably yellower than white pine, it's also quite a bit heavier. And it's hard as nails. (Don't try to drive a screw into it without drilling a pilot hole.)

The striking thing about southern yellow pine is the alternating bands of light-colored earlywood and darker latewood. Run your hand across the board and you can *feel* the difference in coarseness. This abrupt transition makes southern yellow pine more difficult to work and harder to finish.

**WESTERN YELLOW.** It goes without saying that the pines in the western yellow group are yellow. But there's not as dramatic a contrast between earlywood and latewood.

A good deal of the lumber you find at home centers falls in the western yellow group. It's an excellent choice if you're building "country-style" knotty pine furniture.

**GRADE STAMPS.** Even when you know what to look for, it's still sometimes hard to tell one pine from another. So look at the grade stamp imprinted (or stapled) on the board.

There's no doubt whatsoever if it's stamped "white pine." Some white pine will also be stamped 'IWP' which stands for Idaho White Pine.

Another grade stamp that's not obvious at first is SPIB. (No, it's not a soft drink.) It stands for the Southern Pine Inspection Bureau. So you'll know right away you're dealing with southern yellow pine.

Finally, you may see two back-to-back 'Ps'. That's ponderosa pine. Sometimes you'll see the 'Ps' combined with an 'LP' (for lodgepole pine). Either way, it's one of the western yellow pines.

## SELECT & COMMON

Another thing to consider is the *grade* of the lumber. Most grades generally fall into two basic categories: select (or finish), and common.

As a rule, a board that's generally knot-free and consistent in color is assigned one of the "Select" or "Finish" grades. And if there are more knots (or the color is uneven) it's one of the "Common" grades.



◀ **Common.** A board that has one of the common grades has more knots, but it still has plenty of usable lumber.

◀ **Select.** Expect to find clear-grained lumber with few (if any) knots on a board assigned one of the Select grades.

**COST.** The thing to be aware of is that “Select” pine is considerably more expensive than “Common.” So if you want to build a project out of clear pine, you may be surprised to find that it ends up costing as much as one made of oak or walnut.

The solution is simple. For the short pieces of a project, buy “Common” boards and cut around the knots. Buy “Select” only when you need long pieces.

### DEFECTS

Besides working around the knots, there are also some defects that you’ll want to avoid.

**LOOSE KNOTS.** Loose knots are easy to recognize, see photo ‘A’ below. They slide back and forth in the knothole. And in time they’re likely to fall out, leaving a hole in your project. If the loose knots fly out when you’re cutting or routing a board, they can be dangerous as well.

**PITCH POCKETS.** Another defect to steer clear of is pitch pockets, see photo ‘B.’ These are slits in the board that ooze sap. The sap gums up saw blades and router bits. And it can bleed through a finish long after the project is completed.

**PITH.** On some boards, the pith (core) of the tree runs lengthwise down the center, see photo ‘C.’ It’s so soft you can dig it out with your fingernail — too soft to sand or finish. But there’s usually straight-grained wood on each side of the pith. So if you’re making narrow rails or stiles, cut out the pith to get the usable lumber.

**WIDE GROWTH RINGS.** One final note. Some boards have growth rings that are extremely far apart, see photo ‘D.’ This is the result of a tree that has grown too rapidly. These boards tend to be a bit punky, so they’re not as strong. And I find the grain pattern is less desirable.



**A. Loose Knots.** A black ring around a knot is a sign that a knot will loosen up over time.



**B. Pitch Pockets.** These slits ooze sap which gums up saw blades and creates finishing problems.



**C. Pith.** It’s the very core of the tree. But you’ll find it much too soft to sand and finish.



**D. Wide Growth Rings.** It means a tree has grown fast. But at the cost of strength and appearance.

## Tips on Selecting Pine

- 1 Buy Common.** For small projects, buy common boards and cut around the knots. Buy select only if you need long, clear pieces.
- 2 Avoid Loose Knots.** A saw blade can fling loose knots out of the board. And they may fall out of a project after assembly.
- 3 Pitch Pockets.** The oozing sap in pitch pockets will gum up blades and bits. And it can bleed through a finish long after it dries.
- 4 Pith.** Cut out the pith that runs lengthwise down the center of a board to take advantage of straight-grained wood on each side.
- 5 Wide Growth Rings.** Steer clear of wide growth rings produced by fast growing trees. It reduces the strength of the lumber.
- 6 Check Grade Stamps.** If it’s difficult to identify the type of pine by the grain, the grade stamps provide useful clues.