

***Pacific albus* – What is it and where did it come from?**

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What's in a name? I have always been fascinated with the naming and marketing of timbers from around the world. Philippine and Santos Mahogany (not true mahoganies) compared to genuine Mahogany; Brazilian and Chilean Cherry (not true Cherry) compared to American Black Cherry and the dozens or more "Rosewoods" are examples out there. Now there is *Pacific albus*, a Poplar being compared to American Tulipwood which is *Liriodendrum Tulipifera*, not a Poplar and quite different.

All these industry names surely add to the confusion when selecting a type of timber to use. For as long as I can remember, the timber industry has continued to associate an alternative wood for the original which compels me to write this article. Only, in this case, the original American Tulipwood is also known in the industry as Yellow or Tulip Poplar which adds to the confusion, as it is not a Poplar at all.

First of all let me try to explain the new wood on offer from America, *Pacific albus* (a hybrid Poplar). In the last couple months I have received several inquiries from American and European exporters with regards to a new species called *Pacific albus*. After exploring several websites and talking to two manufacturers who have tried it, I thought I could clear the air with regards to Albus and assist the trade in understanding this wood.

Plantations of *Pacific albus* have earned FSC certification. So what is it? Let me start with a bit of history. The plantations are a hybrid Poplar, *Populus spp. X*, and were originally planted in the early 90's for pulpwood to supply wood fiber to pulp and paper mills in the area. These fast growing Poplars were intended to supply a much needed source for pulp and assist farmers in the area with a cash crop. In fact, several companies started planting fast growing Poplars in a variety of non-traditional hardwood growing regions in the USA. Unfortunately the pulpwood business then experienced a major decline in the late 90's and it was no longer cost effective to harvest the plantations for pulp, so they were left to grow.

Today, the plantations are approximately 20 years old and big enough to convert into hardwood lumber, which grows on the U.S. Pacific West Coast and is generally white in colour. Albus is Latin for white, so the name was born. The trees are a combination of several *Populus* species, the trade names for which include Cottonwood and Aspen which are both true Poplars. The producers will continue to evaluate the variety of species brought into the hybrid mix to insure the highest quality of *Populus spp. x* and ensure a natural catastrophe like bug infestation will not wipe out the entire plantation.

As far as end uses for this "new" species are concerned, I would treat it as another *Populus* species such as Aspen and Cottonwood. Furniture parts, picture frames, interior moldings, Venetian blinds, chopsticks, kitchenware, toys and pallets are some of the more traditional uses for these species. The wood is very lightweight, is sold using the NHLA West Coast grades similar to those used in American Red Alder, and is "abrasive planed" before shipping. Care needs to be taken in final planing or surfacing finishing as traditional *Populus* species tend to produce a fuzzy surface.

What has caused a lot of confusion for a number of years is American Tulipwood, which is known in the trade as Yellow or Tulip Poplar, but often just called "Poplar" by American traders. This timber which comprises about 10% of the natural forest in the eastern half of the USA is not a *Populus*, species at all. Manufacturers have been using Tulipwood for years because of its excellent working properties including its fine finish for furniture. It is a great self-pruning tree which means fewer knots and cleaner lumber. It also produces wider width and longer length lumber than most all other hardwoods grown in America. The recent statistics from America show that in 2010 Tulipwood has passed Oak as the number one species being exported from USA.

The two manufacturers I spoke with, who have tried to substitute *Albus* for Tulipwood, were disappointed in the results. They may have been trying to substitute Cottonwood or Aspen. In no way am I saying *Pacific albus* does not have a place in the market. In fact I think it is commendable to utilize technology to produce these fast growing trees. I just want buyers to understand what they are getting. "Fit for purpose" is the key to success in choosing wood species.

In closing, I would say manufacturers need to ask themselves whether they could substitute Aspen or Cottonwood in their projects for the Tulipwood they are currently using. If so, then *Pacific albus* would also work. If they are not willing to use Aspen or Cottonwood, then the *Albus* may not be suitable. I urge all hardwood traders reading this article to use the correct names for the timbers they are selling and educate their customers to use the right wood for the job. Let's face it - at the end of the day any wood can be used in almost any project, but may not be the right wood or fit for purpose.

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