

Discover the Beauty of

Three experts share their best tips for finding and using these natural wonders

BY
NICK OFFERMAN,
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There is something about thick, natural-edge slabs that appeals to people of all backgrounds. Each one is unique, guaranteeing a one-of-a-kind result. Handled correctly, the wood becomes a beautiful marriage of nature and hand, with flat, shining surfaces meeting swirling grain, charming flaws, and organic edges.

We have George Nakashima to thank for introducing natural-edged slabs into modern woodworking, and since he passed away in 1990, woodworkers have been attempting to follow his masterful lead. I made an attempt myself, and while it contains a few missteps, I love that table, as does every visitor to my home.

From start to finish, working with these big planks is a little different from other types of woodworking. So I turned to three experts—Nick Offerman (opposite page, bottom), Robert Ortiz (opposite page, top), and John C. Sterling (right)—for the tips and techniques they use to make the most of these natural masterpieces.

—Asa Christiana,
special projects editor

Big Slabs



Three approaches to design



NICK OFFERMAN

A natural-edged slab, floating over a trestle base, is a gorgeous modern sculpture upon which one can carve a side of beef or enjoy many fine whiskies. The thing I love the most about slab furniture is getting out of the way of Ma Nature and letting the

beautiful grain and figure and color do the heavy lifting. Claro walnut is my favorite slab wood, closely

GANDALF'S TABLE

Buckeye burl

After I found this gorgeous slab, I mocked up a few designs for the base, including the stump just for kicks. My client said, "Well, obviously, that's the choice."



LIVE-EDGE COFFEE TABLE

Claro walnut

My design aesthetic leans toward the beefy. Taking the organic shapes as my launching point, I then design the table structure to complement the slab as neatly as I can. If the look calls for slab legs as well, so much the better.

followed by bigleaf maple. Both are incredibly strong, hard woods and yet easy to work, but it's the candy-like quality of the grain and color variations in these species that float my boat. The walnut presents chocolate browns, complemented by purples and reds and even greenish grain variations that never fail to take my breath away, and the maple features different shades of reds and purples and oranges suspended in the creamy blond firmament of its expanse.

—Nick Offerman is an actor, writer, and woodworking pro who runs a cooperative shop in Los Angeles (OffermanWoodshop.com).



JOHN STERLING

One of my favorite quotes is: "Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication" (Leonardo da Vinci). So it's not surprising that I like to keep designs simple and quiet, more subtle than overt. I don't

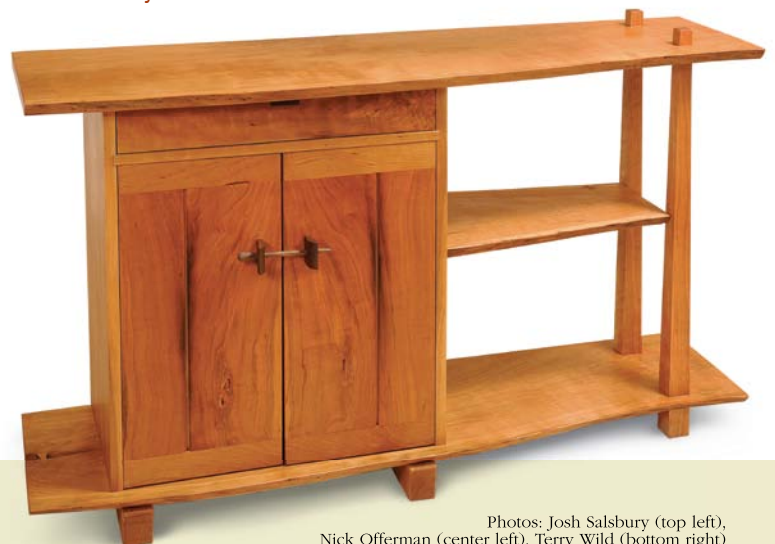
like a lot of glitz as it tends to drown out the quiet of the slab. What doesn't work for me is slab upon slab upon slab. There is such a thing as too much of a good thing. For me a natural-edge slab base doesn't look as clean as pairing that same slab top with a more finished, shaped base. Pairing the rustic with the refined creates a sort of harmony.

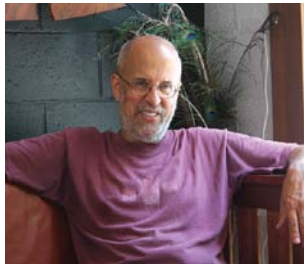
—John Sterling is a professional furniture maker in Millmont, Pa. (JCSterling.com).

OFFSET THREE-TIERED CABINET

Cherry

Inspired by a Mid-Century coffee table that I saw at a thrift store, I took a set of three natural-edge cherry planks and built the first of what I call my "offset three-tiered cabinet."





ROBERT ORTIZ

I became a woodworker after reading George Nakashima's *The Soul of a Tree* (Kodansha, 1981). But it wasn't until 1991 that I used a big slab in a piece of furniture.

I think the greatest danger is overstatement. For me, the challenge is to use a large slab and still have a piece breathe and be elegant and graceful. I'm not looking to make Viking furniture. It's also about restraint. A slab has a personality, in its grain, in its shape and color. My job is to bring out its personality, not mine.

—Robert Ortiz is professional furniture maker who offers one-on-one classes in his Chestertown, Md., shop (OrtizStudios.com).



SOFIA COFFEE TABLE WITH LOW STOOLS
Maple burl, cherry, maple

A natural-edged slab adds an unexpected sculptural element to a piece of furniture, one that invites the hand to touch and feel.



DANIEL ENTRY TABLE
Wenge and sapele

On straight planks I sometimes play Mother Nature with a jigsaw and create my own "natural" edge. It brings an organic appeal to a tabletop.



DINING TABLE
Australian blackwood, walnut

It's helpful to ask where you want the viewer to look when they see your piece. An artist uses brush strokes and color. For a furniture maker, the grain of the wood is the brush stroke.



BENCH
Walnut and maple

I try to let the wood define itself and determine what it is going to be. I like the motion of curved slabs when building benches. I think it allows the slab to shine. On this bench I tapered the one-piece back leg to mimic the taper of the turned legs.

SERVING BOARDS
Various woods

These use up smaller scrap material and turn waste into money. People use them as decorative items, trivets, or serving boards for sushi or cheese. The feet raise the board up so it can be picked up more easily, but I also like the way they look.



Finding good slabs

Ortiz: I recommend visiting the people you are planning to buy slabs from, and finding out how approachable they are. This is important because you need to rely on their expertise and knowledge. Look around to see how well organized their business is, so you have confidence that they've seasoned and stacked the wood properly and the slab you buy will be ready to be worked. I try to find slabs that are beautiful *and* flat. I believe that even if I flatten a warped slab, over the years it will have a tendency to go back.

Sterling: Living in Pennsylvania, I buy most of my slab wood from a very reliable local supplier, who kiln-dries their slabs to ensure stability. But some companies also ship slabs.

Offerman: I keep an ear to the tracks in the Los Angeles area for hardwood trees that have come down in a storm, or may come down to make way for development. I also continue to fraternize with northern California wood-cutters, calling on them when I have a specialized need, like a slab of buckeye burl, or redwood or California claro walnut.



Find a lumberyard that specializes. Sterling is lucky to have a local dealer that has hundreds of slabs on hand and knows how to dry them and keep them flat. Many dealers will also ship slabs anywhere in the United States.

WHAT TO AVOID



Punky wood. Once wood rots it becomes unstable. Avoid slabs with soft or spongy wood.



Bad cracks. A sizable crack can be beautiful when stabilized with butterfly keys, but avoid sideways cracks that extend toward the edge of the slab, making a whole section unstable.



Insects. These tiny holes are the result of insect infestation. If the slabs are kiln-dried, the bugs are probably dead; if you see sawdust piles outside the holes, they aren't.

Tricks for flattening

RIP, FLATTEN, REASSEMBLE

Ortiz: I have flattened slabs just about every way imaginable. I've used a router on rails and a bridge (like Offerman does below). I've used my 36-in. wide-belt sander as a jointer by placing a slab on a large carriage, shimming it level, and feeding it very slowly through the sander, taking off perhaps 0.004 in. per pass. By the way, most woodworkers with big sanding machines like mine are happy to do a slab or two for hire.

Another method is to rip a slab along one of its grain lines to help hide the seam, and mill the parts separately before rejoining them. I still do this on a very warped slab, to maximize the finished thickness. Sometimes I rip it into three pieces.



Check and rip. Ortiz uses a couple of sticks to sight along the slab and see where it is warped (left). This tells him where best to divide it to get the most thickness out of each piece. For an invisible joint, you want to remove the least amount of wood. Use a circular saw and a straightedge (right), locating the cut where the grain will hide it well.



Mill separately. In some cases the parts will be small enough to fit on your jointer or planer, but use any means available to mill them flat. Then lightly joint the mating edges (above). After re-joining the parts with clamps and cauls (right), the glue joint is very hard to find and the big slab is dead-flat.



USE A ROUTER JIG

Offerman: I use a router jig (FWW #222) to flatten slabs. It ends up cheaper in the long run than the labor involved in milling and gluing up a tabletop from disparate planks. Slings the largest slabs around does require a few sets of hands, but that is a great excuse to have some pals come by to help and then have a cold one after the work is done.



Router guide rides on rails. An adjustable plywood trough, which rides on level rails, guides the router and a big straight bit over slabs of all sizes.

Online Extra

To read Offerman's router jig article for free, go to FineWoodworking.com/extras.

What to do with the edges

REMOVE THE BARK

Ortiz: My experience is that bark will tend to fall off over time, and if not, there is always the possibility of some unwanted tenants still residing there. So I clean off the bark right from the get-go.

Sterling: Like the other guys, I don't like bark on my pieces. When people walk up to a piece of my furniture, one of the very first places they touch is the natural edge, so I want that to be as silky-smooth as the top.



Drawknife does it. For Sterling, a quick jerk with a not-so-sharp drawknife pulls off most of the bark in one piece, and then lets him shave away most of the soft cambium layer without hurting the hardwood below.



Other tools finish the job. Sterling uses paint-removal wheels (shown here), brass brushes, and sandpaper to get rid of loose bits and smooth everything to the touch without changing the color or character of the edge.



The new natural. Following a grain line, Ortiz sometimes creates a new edge, replacing a damaged edge or converting a straight one.

CREATE A NEW 'NATURAL' EDGE

Ortiz: Sometimes I will come across a slab that has a damaged edge or a section that was cut straight or irregular by the logger, or a natural edge that is too acutely angled. In those cases, I may decide to play Mother Nature and create a "natural edge" of my own. I also use this technique to create an organic edge on a plain, straight tabletop.



Jigsaw trick. After both sides are flattened, Ortiz draws the new edge, chalking the waste area to preview the final look. Then he cuts along the line with a jigsaw (left), tilting the blade to the angle of the growth rings in the end grain, and then finishes the job with hand tools (right), using rasps, files, and sandpaper to remove sawmarks and sculpt the edge to suit his eye.



Dealing with defects

USE BUTTERFLY KEYS FOR CRACKS AND SPLITS

Offerman: Butterfly keys look terrifically handsome while performing an admirable function (stabilizing cracks). In general I use either the same species as the slab, or something darker, but in the case shown here, the light-reddish tones in the claro walnut burl made cherry an interesting choice.

The biggest mistake I see is woodworkers making the keys too large or long. It's a subjective question, but I find the shape of a neat, Frank Sinatra-era bowtie to be very pleasing, just big enough to support the check or crack that it is suturing. I consider the job at hand when deciding how thick the keys should be also, making them as thick as 1½ in. if need be.

I generally hog out most of the mortise with a trim router and a small spiral upcut bit, and then finish it off with chisels. I'm not afraid to drive a couple of screws into a thick key from underneath for extra security. Nakashima himself made this a regular practice.



Trace around templates. Offerman has a pile of templates in different sizes and species. After marking their rough location (above), he traces his chosen templates onto the actual key stock. After bandsawing the keys and smoothing their edges on a disk sander, Offerman holds each one in place and carefully knives around it (right).



Rout and chisel. Rout as close to the knife lines as you dare with a ¼-in. upcutting bit, and then pare away small amounts until you reach the knife lines.



Chamfer, check, and pound. Offerman puts a small chamfer on the bottom edges of each key, checks the fit, adds glue, and taps the key home. He waits a day before handplaning it flush.

TO FILL OR NOT TO FILL?

Sterling: When I fill flaws, it is only small ones, often to create a uniform writing surface. I don't fill large gaps and cracks. If and when the wood moves, I don't want the filler to open up and leave a sharp edge, or be pushed upward. Also, I often color the filler to create a subtle accent, and big areas of colored filler are too overstated for me.

To fill small pockets, I mix chips of malachite and turquoise with coffee grounds, and then add cyanoacrylate glue (also known as "super" glue).

Coffee grounds work well on their own at imitating the pitch pockets in cherry, and I also combine them with stone dust to add flecks of black and brown for a more realistic look.



Small defects are quick and easy. Sterling first presses the decorative materials into place (top), and then injects cyanoacrylate glue (above) to fill the defect. Don't use the activator spray here. It will turn the glue white.



Pretty possibilities. After waiting for the filler to dry fully and using a belt or disk sander to level it, Sterling reveals the final look with a swipe of finish.