

Wood Wizz



Above: With the planing finished, Kerry switches over to the 120-grit sanding pad for an even smoother finish.

With the growing interest in rustic furniture, more sawyers are finding it profitable to cut wide slabs for countertops, tables, benches, fireplace mantles, and other custom products. Milling is just the first step in the process. To have a truly marketable product, the slab needs to be dried and surfaced. A conventional kiln can handle the drying process but surfacing a 200-pound slab of walnut 3 inches thick, 8 feet long, and 3 feet across is beyond the capability of most woodworkers. The Australian-manufactured Wood Wizz, distributed in the U.S. by Baker Wood Products, is, however, designed to do just that.

The Wood Wizz is a new product for Baker, which is better known for its sawmills, resaws, and pallet manufacturing equipment. Kerry Williams of Williams Logging in Marshall, Missouri, purchased a Wood Wizz from the first shipment sent to the U.S. and has used it to build a business of selling and shipping slabs across the country.

Logging runs in Kerry's family. "My dad had always been in the sawmill business, and his dad was," he explained. "When I was 13, I ran a fork truck for my dad down at the mill, and I've just been around it since then. Dad had a circle mill and a crew of 15, and we made everybody else a living. Now it's just me and my dad and our wives." While Kerry still logs, he contracts with a nearby sawmill to cut the slabs. "They know pretty much what we want," he said. After picking up the slabs from the mill, Kerry air dries them until there is room in the Nyle dehumidification kiln. According to Kerry, drying the slabs is slow business. At the time of my visit, the kiln was loaded to capacity with 2,000 board feet of 3-inch-thick walnut slabs, about halfway through their 60-day drying time. Averaging 1,000 board feet a month may be slow production for most businesses, but Kerry doesn't want to

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SPECS

Wood Wizz

Manufacturer	Wood Wizz, Lavington, NSW, Australia
U.S. Distributor	Baker Wood Products
Maximum working dimensions	11 ft. 8 in. long, 57 in. wide, 8 ft. thick (bed extensions available)
Planer type	Variable speed router, rotary cutterhead
Power	3-hp variable speed electric router
Power requirements	10 amps, 220 volts, single phase
Additional attachments	Straight edger, sanding pads

take chances with a product that will bring upwards of \$20 per board feet.

The Williams family got their start in slab production when Kerry's sister asked him to cut her some slabs to build a table. "My uncle had seen the Wood Wizz demonstrated in Richmond, Virginia, and he told us about it," recalled Kerry. Now they have thousands of board feet of kiln-dry slabs in a variety of sizes and species neatly arranged vertically around the inside perimeter of their metal building so customers can look through them to find the perfect boards for their projects. "We keep together the wood from individual logs so customers can match their slabs for grain and color," Kerry explained. "We've got a store on Etsy, and we get a lot of business off that," he continued. "Some of the slabs are sold locally, but most through the Internet."

The Wood Wizz dominates one wall of the building with a clear path allowing Kerry to bring in slabs with a fork loader. While he says he'd like to get some slabs planed ahead of time, his time is divided between logging, dealing with the sawmill, drying the lumber, planing it, and running the business end of things. "Most of my customers tell me what they want to build and what species they want, and we go from there," says Kerry. "We cut a lot of 3-inch-thick material because you can lose a lot of thickness when you plane it down flat.

That gives us a little more to work with."

Kerry is not one for turning down jobs that exceed the length of his planer. He pulled out his cell phone and scrolled through dozens of photos of slabs. "Here is a conference table that I did a while ago," he said. The 16-foot-long by 42-inch-wide walnut slab was one of a book-matched pair that a

customer from New York had brought in for a 32-foot conference table he was building. To work with these monster slabs, Kerry built an extension table level to the planer table so that he could support the entire plank, plane half of it, then turn it around lengthwise to surface the other half. "It really had some pretty grain to it," he recalled. If requested, Baker can custom-build wider beds and table extensions. "I know of one guy in California who can surface 8-foot-wide by 30-foot-long redwood slabs," Kerry noted.

The Wood Wizz requires 10 amps at 220 volts, single-phase wiring. The built-in phase converter/motor-speed controller provides the 3-hp router with 3-phase current. The planer rides on an overhead gantry system capable of handling slabs up to 11 feet 8 inches long, 57 inches wide, and 8 inches thick. Controls are simple. A pull rod controls the position of the planer across the width of the slab and a hand wheel on the top sets the height of the cutter. A chain feed mechanism powers the cutter down the length of the slab. Dials on the control panel set the motor speed and



Wood Wizz owner Kerry Williams shows off some of his inventory of hardwood slabs. He keeps an assortment of species and sizes stacked on end to make it easy for customers to browse without unstacking them.



The Wood Wizz has a 5-inch cutting width and 1/8-inch cutting depth, leaving a smooth, flat surface on this walnut slab.

feed rate. A toggle switch controls the power feed direction. The 5-inch cutter can remove a maximum of 1/8 inch of wood on each pass. Sharp cutters are especially critical when working with \$2,000 slabs. The Wood Wizz uses replaceable 4-sided teeth that are quick and easy to turn to a fresh cutting edge when they get dull (or strike metal). The resulting wood surface is smooth and flat.

Kerry demonstrated the Wood Wizz on a “small” 30-inch-wide by 5-foot-long walnut slab that had a rough, uneven surface from a chain saw slabber, and had cupped significantly during the drying process. “This one was brought in by a customer,” Kerry explained. The first step was to clamp the slab to the bed. Kerry noted that the clamping system generally works well, but if the slab has an uneven surface, he uses a few wood screws along the edge of the slab to secure it to the wood cross bunks, making sure the screw heads are well below the top of the slab to avoid nicking them.

Before turning on the planer, Kerry ran it over the slab to locate the highest point. He then started the planer and adjusted the spindle speed. The planer itself is no louder than a vacuum cleaner, but the dust collector sounded like a jet engine at take-off. “One thing I really like about this system—there is almost no dust in the shop!” he yelled above the din. Next,



One more pass should just about get it! Kerry sets up the Wood Wizz for its next pass. Once the entire slab is flattened, he'll make a thin skimming cut to clean up the surface.

he lowered the cutter about 1/8 inch for his first pass. With a 1/4-inch difference between the high and low points, it took three passes to level the slab. For the final (fourth) pass, Kerry increased the spindle speed, slowed down the feed rate, and skimmed off about

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1/32 inch to get a smooth surface. Kerry estimates that it would take about an hour and a half to surface and sand both sides of this slab.

The result was amazing. Running my hand over the slab, I felt no ridges from the cutter head, and it looked perfectly flat. But the planing was just the first step. In less than a minute, Kerry replaced the cutter head with an 80-grit sanding disk. Adjusting the height so that the sanding disk just kissed the slab, Kerry made several passes, then repeated the process with 120-grit sandpaper. This time, he unlatched the x-y axis controls to allow him to make a circular movement with the sander. "I always start a little high, then move it down while it is running, until it just makes contact," he explained. "Otherwise, you can throw off the sanding pad. That's just stuff you gotta learn." "They recommend that once you start sanding, finish it in the same session so it stays flat," he continued. The finishing step was a quick pass with 220 grit paper on a handheld orbiting sander. Although the Wood Wizz also comes with a buffing pad, Kerry leaves that step to the woodworker.

The Wood Wizz comes with a vertical straight-line cutting attachment, which Kerry finds very useful for



Left: A straight-line router mills the edge of slabs so they can be joined or fitted to a flat surface.

straight-line edging slabs. Although it takes a 1-inch kerf and requires multiple passes, the resulting edge is straight and square, allowing the woodworker to fit a slab against a flat surface or book-match two pieces with no

gaps. He has also found that the Wood Wizz does an excellent job surfacing end grain. "A lot of customers bring in round cookies, and it works great for that. We've sold quite a few big ones for end tables and smaller ones for chairs and stools," he said.

Even though Kerry has surfaced thousands of board feet on his Wood Wizz, the smile on his face as he felt the surface of the slab revealed that he is still impressed by the results. "I pretty much figured out how to use it as I went along," he said. "It does take some time to do a good job of it, but I'll tell you, this thing does a terrific job." ■

Dave Boyt has a BS degree in Forest Management and an MS in Wood Technology. He manages a tree farm (2006 Missouri Tree Farm of the Year), and operates a band saw sawmill.

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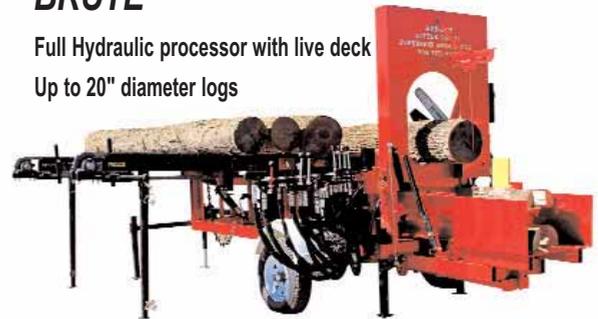
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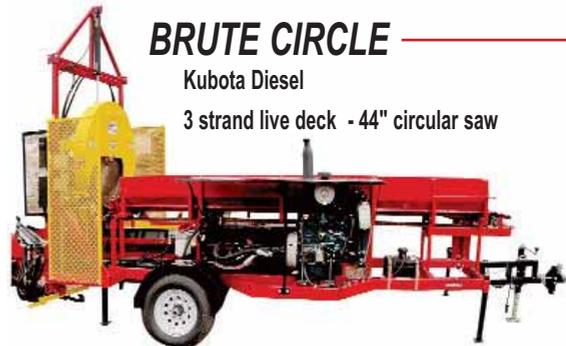
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