

## **The Story of Figured Woods**

The unique characteristics of the “figured woods” make them generally accepted in the world of non-timber forest products. Very common species of trees can have very uncommon characteristics or “figures” in the grain of the wood. The most common figures found in Atlantic Canadian and Maine trees are: birdseye maple, curly maple, quilted birch, spalted wood, and burls.

### **Birdseye Maple**

Although many people think they know what causes the pattern resembling bird’s eyes in sugar (hard) maple no one has yet given scientific proof of the cause. While the birdseye feature is most often linked to sugar maple, it can also occur in yellow birch, white birch, American beech and white ash. As the tree grows, small dimples begin to form in the cambium layer which is the layer responsible for the new growth of bark and wood. Each year, as the tree puts on new wood, these dimples create a unique pattern in the wood which we call “birdseyes”. Since the birdseyes radiate from the center of the tree, the pattern of birdseyes is best seen when the wood is sawn at right angles to this growth. Most people believe you cannot see the birdseyes unless they remove the bark. The dimples of the birdseyes can be seen in the outer bark by looking closely for these tiny depressions.

### **Curly Maple**

The curly maple pattern is most common and striking in red (soft) maple but it can be found in other species. It creates a very attractive 3-D appearance in well-finished products. Also referred to as “tiger maple”, this pattern is created in the wood through a wave-like grain pattern. Curly maple can be identified in the log by looking at the bumpy waves in the wood under the bark. The larger the diameter of the tree, the more valuable the curly maple log may be. Musical instrument artisans, such as violin, cello and guitar makers, seek out this unique grain pattern.

### **Quilted Birch**

Quilted birch sports a pattern that is similar to the curly figure; however, the frequency of the pattern is much wider. For this reason, this pattern is not as sought after for small wooden items but can be attractive in cabinets and furniture.

### **Spalted Wood**

Spalted wood refers to the figure in the wood created by a type of natural decaying process. The mycelium of fungi penetrates the wood usually when it is still in the form of a log. As the wood begins the early stages of decomposition, unique patterns are created. To maximize the potential for spalted wood, the trick is to cut or turn wood pieces at the right time – too soon and the patterns are not well developed, too late and the wood becomes soft or “punky”. Spalting can occur in most species but the best species seem to be birch, beech and maple.

### **Burls**

Burls are abnormal growths that occur on the outside of trees. Their unique swirling grain patterns create some of the best patterns in figured woods for turners. Many bowl turners actively seek these unusual anomalies. Often small pockets of bark are captured within the burl adding to their unique character. No two burls are ever the same and therefore no two products made from them will ever be the same. This uniqueness makes products created from them some of the most sought after wood pieces in the region.