

Lifestyles

Local artisan's rustic reclaimed wood furniture gains national attention

By Lynn Groom
For The Leeds News

The growing popularity of "green" art has a root in our back yard. Leeds artisan Gayle Christopher's rustic reclaimed wood furniture designs are catching the attention of buyers around the country, who have commissioned her from as far away as Washington state. Though Christopher uses only real wood in her designs, she rarely buys or cuts it, preferring land clearing, refurbished furniture, or even discarded palettes as the raw material of her work.



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"Putting found wood to another use keeps it out of landfills. I like salvaging and reusing things out of principle and for the creativity required."

Christopher first experimented with furniture design when she started work as a research scientist after graduate school. She had a strong taste for real wood furniture, but no spare money to buy it. So she experimented with making furniture herself. "Basically, need was the mother of invention." For the starving graduate, reclaimed wood was an economical medium. "Lumber is very expensive in board form, but found wood is usually free except for the labor involved in preparing it for use. I started with refurbishing found pieces and progressed to making pieces totally from scratch." The first pieces she designed for herself were a bed and side table.

Those pieces still have a place in her home. Reclaimed wood was a natural choice for Christopher, who was "green" long before it was popular. Her furniture and wardrobe are made from natural fibers, her house is wood, and she grows some of her own produce.

Christopher put out her virtual shingle for furniture design in 1999 when she launched her web site, www.rustixs.com. Though she has not advertised since, demand for her work has grown. In 2007, Coastal Living magazine, where she then served as online editor, commissioned her to create a dining table from salvaged barn timbers for their North Carolina Idea House. Clients around the country (and here in Leeds) have found her through her web site, word-of-mouth recommendations, and the publicity of the Idea House table. (One client asked Christopher to reproduce the table exactly for her home in Chicago.)

An Indiana client, Karla Kitch, had Christopher make a bed from poplar wood that was found on Kitch's family's property. The piece has sentimental value because of the wood's origin. "It's also indestructible," she says. Leeds resident Melissa Edgil commissioned Christopher to make a modern bed with clean, straight lines. "The craftsmanship is great. It hasn't worn at all in five years, and I expect it to last a lifetime." Regardless of the client's tastes, Christopher's goal is always "to produce something useful and beautiful." When she's working on a new piece, she describes feeling "very peaceful and thoughtful. It can be very Zen-like and relaxing."

When Christopher is looking for salvaged wood, she keeps in mind how the final piece will be used and what her client is looking for. "Some pieces would be better served by using hardwoods and others by using a closed grain species. But when I'm just trolling along the road or on loading docks, I look for longer pieces of



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wood with fewer knots and warps. Rustic wood from tree cuttings may be chosen for a unique bend, curve, or branch structure. I do like to incorporate different textures and materials where possible."

As Christopher's business has grown in the past two years, her focus has stayed on reclaimed wood. For her, handmade, reclaimed wood pieces offer a beauty that no other type of furniture does. "Found wood has unique properties that add beauty to the final pieces. And with hand-made furniture, particularly rustic furniture, each piece is one-of-a-kind by nature. Handmade furniture is generally constructed better than mass-produced furniture and can also take advantage of the variability found in rustic wood." She notes that that

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same variability can make designing pieces a challenge. "The knots, warps, twists, and natural curves add complexity to the building process just as they add interest to the final piece."

Her penchant for using reclaimed wood is not only an artistic preference, but a consequence of her faith. "Reusing is a form of good stewardship," she says. "I also think that

God gave us this earth and expects us not to be wasteful. I don't believe He is ever wasteful."

In addition to her designing furniture, Christopher also designs web sites and holds a doctorate in cell biology. To view her conversations with suppliers and clients around the country, visit <http://rustixs.com>