

# Historic hardwood re-emerging in local market

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Oregon's Willamette Valley was once carpeted with towering oak trees. But there was virtually no market for hardwood logs.

## Guest Writer

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Guest writer **Ben Deumling** launched the Zena Forest Products sawmill and millwork operation in 2007. He was inspired by a desire to preserve and protect the family's 1,300 acres of contiguous woodland, in addition to generating sustainable family income. Holder of a Whitman College degree in environmental studies, he applied the knowledge he gained in natural resource policy and forest management to his Eola Hills venture. Though much of the family holding is dedicated to Douglas fir, he has been increasingly turning his attention to stands of native oak.



Oregon's Forest Practices Act requires forestlands be replanted after harvest. And until recently, it mandated replanting with Douglas fir, even on sites where oak had been growing previously.

As a result, the valley's important ecosystems were being systematically converted from hardwood to softwood, diminishing its diverse forestland of the past.

In addition, oak that wasn't cleared for cultivation by early pioneers has often been cleared in more recent times by wine industry pioneers. Combined with Douglas fir conversion, that relegates white oak to just 5 percent of its original local range.

Today, however, we are seeing an upwelling of small businesses, throughout the Willamette Valley and surrounding foothills, that are doing smart things with local oak. They are supporting Oregon's historic ecosystem, engaging in sustainable practices and collectively making a positive impact on our local environment.

These boutique hardwood specialists are trying to create a "voice" for Oregon white oak, thus fostering its re-emergence in the marketplace.

"We need to use this wood," said Dave Barmon, visionary owner and millwright at Epilogue LLC. "We're trying to build a movement where people value Oregon white oak.

"It's an amazing hardwood. It's strong, rot-resistant, beautiful and timeless. And it lasts forever."

Barmon went on the argue, "White oak is just as much an Oregon wood as Douglas fir."

Epilogue specializes in wood utilization from urban tree removal. But it re-uses downed trees as lumber rather than mulch or firewood.

My family enterprise, Zena Forest Products, shares Barmon's vision for the future of Oregon white oak.

We are in the business of protecting our forests first, and that means preserving important natural habitat while still producing beautiful, sustainable, locally sourced hardwood products. We believe rural, values-based entrepreneurship can fuel business growth while simultaneously preserving the quality and character of the forest on which it depends.

In the late '90s, our crew at Zena launched a research and development program focused on the manufacture of finished oak products. In 2007, it brought its groundbreaking think-tank work to fruition with the opening of a facility committed to machining Oregon white oak into hardwood flooring.

Ten years ago, Zena partnered with Trillium Pacific Millwork to take its floor manufacturing to the next level.

Earlier this year, our company launched a new product innovation — engineered flooring. It allows us to create an even higher-quality product, while further stretching our precious white oak resource.

While white oak is more difficult to process than fir, and takes significantly longer to get to market, people are starting to request this local wood in their projects. Architects and designers are increasingly showcasing this local hardwood by requesting Oregon white oak flooring for restaurants and other commercial projects.

We're also hearing from homebuilders who care about local sourcing and sustainability.

Barmon's Epilogue enterprise joins Zena in taking great satisfaction in that. Barmon said, "You may have to work a little bit to find it, but if it's in the budget ... spend the time to find the oak." He said you'll find it well worth the investment.

"There are a lot of places where oak grows better than Doug fir," he said. "I'm a big advocate for creating a strong Oregon white oak lumber market — not only by using existing white oak trees, but also by creating policies about replanting white oak.

Barmon is so bullish on oak that he's writing a book about his efforts. Titled "Wood from the City," it's due out next year.

He said he's all in on building a robust Oregon white oak market for lumber production.