

A way to help support Willamette Valley's fragile hardwood ecosystem | Opinion

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I am closely connected to our Oregon white oak population.

A century ago, Oregon's Willamette Valley was brimming with big, beautiful oak trees. Historically, there have been virtually no economic markets for hardwood logs.

That, along with land development, conversion to agricultural land, and the fact that for decades the conventional wisdom was to plant Douglas fir at all times, resulted in an ecosystem that was systematically converted away from hardwoods and the diverse ecosystems of the past, to the point where less than 5% of the original ecosystem is left.

Today, we see a local movement where people are re-discovering the value of Oregon white oak. We're seeing it on the environmental level, with local businesses, among architects and contractors, and with homeowners.

Just look at the [Willamette Partnerships' Oak Accord](#) project, where more than 50 vineyard and forest landowners have signed a voluntary conservation agreement as a way to protect and restore more than 1,500 acres of the Willamette Valley's fragile ecosystem.



An Oregon white oak, probably 400 years old, stands guard at the Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge. (Photo: BOBBIE SNEAD / SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL)

Over the last five years, my family's business, Zena Forest Products, purchased over 100,000 board feet of logs that came from properties and projects that meet the Oak Accord requirements of "10% net gain." We voluntarily pay landowners a 30 percent premium over the market rate for logs coming from these projects. We do this because it is the right thing to do.

We're seeing an uprising of businesses throughout the Willamette Valley and surrounding foothills that are doing smart things with local oak trees — supporting Oregon's ecosystem, using sustainable practices and collectively making a positive impact in our environment.

Hardwood specialists like [Epilogue LLC](#) and our own [Zena Forest Products](#) believe that values-based, rural entrepreneurship can fuel business growth while simultaneously preserving the quality and character of the forest upon which it depends.

Architects and designers are requesting local wood products for commercial projects and restaurants, great places to showcase local hardwood. Take note when you're in [Venti's](#) in downtown Salem, at [Salem Summit Company](#), or even the ODOT office building, that they all chose local Oregon white oak.

We encourage the idea of thinking local when designing a project — from the rooftop to the floors. There's no need to import oak from out East when it can be grown and provided right here via fertile Oregon soil.

Our favorite is when we hear from homeowners who share our values of sustainability and using local products — they request this wood.

Ben Deumling is the owner and operator of Zena Forest Products. (Photo: Courtesy of Andrea Lonas Photography)



I encourage you to consider using local hardwood products in your home and business projects. If you are a landowner, take the initiative to look into the [Oak Accord](#). If you have legislative influence, lobby for legal protections for native oak habitat in Oregon. If you are a woodworker, contact me and let's talk about doing cool things with Oregon white oak.

Ben Deumling founded [Zena Forest Products](#) sawmill and millwork operations in 2007. He wanted to find better uses for the oak trees growing in his family's forest — the largest remaining Oregon White Oak reserve in Oregon. He may be reached at ben@zenaforest.com

