

www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/chi-ash-borer-furniture_both_23aug23,0,4650045.story

chicagotribune.com

Morton Arboretum furniture display shows that beauty can rise from ash borer destruction

Exhibit at Morton Arboretum showcases pieces made from ash borer-infected trees

By Gerry Smith

Chicago Tribune reporter

11:23 PM CDT, August 22, 2008

With almost every new discovery of the emerald ash borer comes a swift funeral: infected ash trees are felled, tossed in a wood chipper and used for mulch.

But even as the metallic green beetle has broken tree lovers' hearts, its victims are being reused in everything from Little League baseball bats to renewable energy.

In the latest example, the Morton Arboretum in Lisle will present an exhibition this weekend featuring furniture made from infected ash trees across the Chicago area.

The show, "Rising from Ashes," is part of a broader effort to bring attention to making better use of the urban forest. If urban timber could be reused instead of turned into mulch, it could satisfy about 30 percent of the country's hardwood needs, according to Stephen Bratkovich, a forest products specialist with the USDA Forest Service.

The ash borer kills the tree, but the beetle burrows through only the outer portion of the bark, leaving most of the wood undamaged and usable.

"That ash tree is going to need to come down regardless," said Bruce Horigan, co-owner of Horigan Urban Forest Products in Skokie, whose company specializes in turning trees from urban and suburban areas into lumber. "If you use wood from that tree, there's another tree somewhere else that didn't have to get cut down."

The exhibition marks the end of another devastating summer for ash trees in the Chicago area. More than 50 municipalities in Illinois—mostly in the Chicago area—have been infested with the ash borer, according to the Illinois Department of Agriculture.

The pesky insect turned up for the first time in Chicago in June, and recently has been discovered in River Forest, Burr Ridge, Oak Park and Sugar Grove.

First found in Michigan in 2002, the half-inch emerald ash borer has swept across the Midwest with



astounding quickness, destroying more than 20 million ash trees.

Furniture is not the only way ash trees are finding second lives. In Wilmette, infected trees have been turned into bats for a local youth baseball program. And in south suburban Robbins, the branches of infected trees could be used for a wood-burning power plant set to go online next spring.

Not only will the plant use a renewable fuel source, but the facility will create about 60 construction jobs and 30 to 35 permanent jobs in the low-income community, said Ed Kalebich, chief executive officer of Robbins Community Power.

Kalebich said he has talked with several suburban municipalities about using his facility as an outlet for wood waste. The power will be distributed to the Commonwealth Edison electricity grid.

"Unfortunately it's kind of timely relative to the emerald ash borer problems with a lot of our ash trees," Kalebich said. "But if we could turn it into electricity and energy to power up businesses and homes, then it's a good use."

But there is no system in place to harvest and market urban timber. At the Illinois Institute of Technology, about a dozen students just completed an eight-week course on developing a business model for doing so. Last year, the Morton Arboretum received a \$100,000 federal grant to address several obstacles, said Edith Makra, a community tree advocate at Morton Arboretum.

For one, urban arborists don't cut trees into long logs of usable lumber because it is difficult to do safely. In addition, not many woodworkers use ash because it doesn't have the appeal of red oak and other types of wood.

"Ash has gotten a bad rap," Horigan said. "We're trying to get people to understand that ash is a gorgeous wood."

The traveling exhibition at the Morton Arboretum features 29 tables, chairs and dressers—all made of ash wood—at prices ranging from \$1,000 to more than \$7,000.

Woodworkers say ash is attractive wood and easy to work with, offering light or dark hues of tan, brown or creamy white depending on which part of the tree is used.

"It's perceived to be kind of a common wood, but that's not true," said Dolly Spragins, a furniture designer who built a chair from what she believes is wood from infected ash trees in Wilmette. "It's beautiful and it has a lot of variety of how it can look, which for a furniture designer is wonderful."

For residents, the exhibition is a way of softening the emotional blow of losing ash trees. Tree lovers express deep affection for ash for its vibrant fall colors, particularly white ash, which bursts into purple hues in autumn.

"If that's a tree you know and it means something to you, this is an opportunity to keep that alive as a piece of furniture that you can use," said Edith Makra, a community tree advocate at Morton Arboretum. "It tells a great story."

gsmith@tribune.com

Copyright © 2008, [Chicago Tribune](#)