



rustic furniture



ladderback chair: a traditional green wood rustic furniture project; the bark has been left on some pieces, and the seat is made of woven sea-grass.

what is it?

It's hand-made wooden household or garden furniture that is quick to make, using wood from trees in a natural state with a minimum of processing. Items retain the character and beauty of the tree. Unless you want to sit, eat your meals and sleep on the floor (and there's absolutely nothing wrong with that), you're going to need furniture. With rustic furniture-making, each piece, whether it's a chair, table, bench, stool, shelf or bed, is as unique as the tree it came from. The techniques of rustic furniture-making are accessible to the complete novice. Pieces can be made using hand tools, and are held together using basic round mortice & tenon joints. Tenons can be fixed into the mortice using wooden wedges to hold the joint tight. Often though, rustic furniture is made from green (unseasoned) wood, which contains a huge quantity of water that evaporates, causing shrinkage. This can be of benefit in some joints, as shrinkage can produce a tight fit. The green woodworking techniques involved in rustic furniture making tend to follow the grain, resulting in increased strength, as the wood's linear fibres remain intact. You can also leave the bark on, if you think it looks nicer. Any wood can be used for indoor furniture, but outdoor furniture tends to be made from oak or chestnut,

as it's more durable. The history of hand-made furniture from natural materials stretches back to the origins of furniture making, traditional woodman's crafts and smallholders' DIY. In many parts of the world, furniture has always been, and still is made this way.

what are the benefits?

Furnishing our homes can be expensive. A major benefit of rustic furniture is that you can make your own very cheaply, if not for free. Making rustic furniture is joyfully simple. Pieces can be made using a selection of basic hand tools, which makes it accessible for anyone to make – you don't have to have power tools or the experience (and power) required to use them. This means that you can make your furniture in the woods where the tree was felled. The materials you need will have a very low embedded energy, and hopefully won't have been transported far. They will also be local, biodegradable, renewable, produced by solar energy, and when alive, will have provided a habitat for many creatures. As well as being beautiful and unique, has potentially the lowest eco-footprint of any kind of furniture you could make or buy. The alternatives are:

1. mass-produced superstore furniture, probably from timber transported long distances, and possibly using glues and preservatives containing chemicals like formaldehyde, that will slowly emit toxic fumes and add to the chemical mix found in many modern homes.
2. craftsman-made wooden furniture, which although beautiful and functional, is often very



using a shave horse and draw-knife to roughly shape a chair leg; the techniques required are easily learned by all ages and skill levels.



expensive, or requires a long apprenticeship to learn how to do it.

When your rustic furniture wears out, or you want a change, you can quickly replace it, and turn it into firewood. You can use low-grade wood from non-timber quality trees – for example local coppiced wood, or wood harvested from gardens or estate management. This could be free, or very cheap. But you can still use large, sturdy pieces of wood to make furniture that will last a lifetime.

what can I do?

First, get some tools. The basic hand tools needed for rustic furniture-making are the same as for any green woodworking project – i.e. an axe, froe (splitting tool), draw-knife (shaving tool), rounder (rotary plane), wooden mallet (that you can make yourself) and a bow-saw. These can be obtained from a variety of places, some mainstream, some specialist (see resources). Alternatively, good-quality second-hand tools can be found in second-hand shops / antique stores, or at wood fairs / festivals / markets. A shave horse and/or a pole lathe could be very useful, although you can still make very good pieces without them. A shave horse is used with a draw-knife for the shaping of things like chair legs. A pole lathe is used for turning wood to make round objects, again – like chair legs. You can purchase them from specialists, or you can make your own (on LILI courses – see resources).

You have various options for upholstery. Woven fabrics can be used for seats – such as sea-grass, bark or reeds, although often you'll need no upholstery. You can, of course, add cushions, mattresses, throws etc. You can choose to finish your furniture with natural oils or stains, but often it will need no finishing at all. You can learn how to make rustic furniture from books, or, as it is a practical skill, maybe a course would be better (see resources). You can also buy rustic furniture – you could find suppliers via word of mouth or an internet search, or you may come across people making rustic furniture in your area from local coppiced wood. Your finished product can be as rough-and-ready or as well-crafted as you like, depending on taste, what it's for, and how much time you are prepared to put into it. In theory you can produce any type of domestic furniture in this style. You are limited only by your imagination.



shelves made from rough-sawn timber and tree branches; if you don't think these are more attractive than anything you could buy from a furniture superstore, then rustic furniture making is probably not for you

resources

books (available from LILI)

- *Making Rustic Furniture*, Daniel Mack – step-by-step instructions
- *Green Woodwork*, Mike Abbott – background info and plans for projects, all with hand tools
- *Green Woodworking Pattern Book*, Ray Tabor – over 300 patterns for green woodwork projects

green woodworking tools

- Axminster, axminster.co.uk, 0800 371822
- the Woodsmith's Store, woodsmithstore.co.uk, 0191 252 4064

courses

- LILI – lowimpact.org/topics_rustic_furniture.html 01296 714184, various locations
- Mike Abbott – living-wood.co.uk, 01531 640005, Worcestershire

information

- naturaltreefurniture.com – lots of ideas and plans for making rustic furniture
- Association of Pole Lathe Turners & Green Woodworkers – bodgers.co.uk

Contact us or visit our website to find out more about our message, networks, factsheets, books, courses, products, services, magazines, links, forum, events and volunteering on organic farms. You can also become a Friend of LILI, receive our e-newsletter, and help us change the world.

Low-impact Living Initiative (LILI), Redfield Community, Winslow, Bucks, MK18 3LZ
tel: +44 (0)1296 714184 email: lili@lowimpact.org web: lowimpact.org
Registered in England. Company Ltd. by Guarantee no: 420502