



Is it softwood or hardwood?

Knowing the wood gives clues to the pest and vice versa

Who cares whether infested wood is a softwood or hardwood? Wood borers do. When you're dealing with an infestation of wood-boring beetles, knowing whether infested wood is softwood or hardwood can help eliminate certain beetles from consideration.



In general, the term softwood (gymnosperms) refers to conifers. These are cone-bearing, usually evergreen trees with needle-like leaves such as pines, fir, redwood, and cypress. Hardwoods (angiosperms) are broad-leaved trees that drop their leaves (are deciduous) such as oak, poplar and hickory. Softwoods are usually used in construction in building framing for joists and beams. Hardwoods, with their nicer grain pattern, are most commonly found in interior finishing work such as stairs or floors, and in furniture.

It's confusing since there are soft hardwoods and hard softwoods. There are also hard hardwoods like oak, hickory, and ash and soft hardwoods like yellow poplar, gum, and willow. And even though all pines are softwoods, they are sometimes divided into hard pines and soft pines. Yes, confusing.

We expect softwoods to have softer wood and hardwoods to have harder wood. But softwood and hardwood are really botanical divisions and don't necessarily have anything to do with the wood's hardness. Hard and soft wood occurs in different species of both

All Wood Types have Sapwood and Heartwood Sections

Then there's the issue of sapwood and heartwood. All trees have sapwood and heartwood portions that vary in their susceptibility to pest damage. Sapwood is the outer portion of wood (closest to the bark) and is light-coloured. It is the living, growing portion of the tree that conducts water. Heartwood is the inner "dead" wood in the centre of a tree that does not contain any living cells. It does not conduct water but instead provides the support for the tree. In many species of trees, the heartwood has a darker colour.

The dense heartwood of mature trees is relatively resistant to rot and insect damage; the porous sapwood is not. The heartwood of cedar and cypress are very resistant to attack. However, the timber used in today's construction is often from fast-growing trees and so has a higher proportion of sapwood compared to heartwood. Consequently, it is more susceptible to insects and decay.

The old house borer attacks the sapwood of softwoods. Lyctid powder post beetles attack the sapwood of hardwoods, while some anobiid powder post beetles will feed on both the sapwood and the heartwood of hardwoods. Lyctids require the larger pores found in the sapwood portion in which to lay their eggs. They're not capable of laying eggs in the dense heartwood that has smaller pores. Anobiid females aren't so picky.

Use wood type to help identify the wood borer involved

First, you need to know whether the infested wood is a softwood or

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hardwood and softwood trees. The hardness of wood is a function of its density, which is the ratio of wood material to air spaces. Hard woods of any type are those that contain less air; soft woods contain more air. In general, the wood of softwoods is indeed softer than that of hardwoods, is lighter in weight and easier to cut, but there are exceptions.

hardwood. That part is pretty easy, you can usually tell a pine board from an oak board. Where the wood is found in a structure is another clue. Knowing the wood type and knowing which type of wood certain beetles prefer narrows down the list of possible borers. Then if you know whether the infested wood portion is sapwood or heartwood, you can often narrow down the borer options even further.

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