

Harvesting Vermont's forests

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Thomas Lathrop of Bristol says he loves what he does.

"I love the smell of the wood when I walk in here in the morning. I enjoy taking pride in getting the best lumber to a cabinet maker to put in someone's home where it's appreciated," he said.

The Vermont Wood Manufacturers Association affirmed its appreciation for Lathrop in January, when it honored him with its 2007 Woodworker of the Year Award.

Mike Rainville, then president of the association, said, "Our decision to give it to Tom was because of his unique approach to providing lumber. With his business, Exclusively Vermont Wood Products, he has been able to make a connection to provide Vermont wood for Vermont products."

Lathrop's goal has long been to provide high-quality lumber and wood products, such as flooring, through Lathrop's Maple Supply, the business he founded 30 years ago.

To further his interest in sustainable forestry and local processing and use, Lathrop and his wife, Pamela Lathrop, created Exclusively Vermont Wood Products LLC in 2007 as Lathrop's Maple Supply's "green line."

"Sustainably harvested timber is the only timber accepted into this line of wood products," he said. "Ninety percent of it comes from less than 25 miles away. It's exciting to know that we're spearheading a movement to use the forests that we grew up around."

A tree and its home must pass stringent tests before being accepted by Lathrop for Exclusively Vermont. Forest parcels from which the tree comes of origination must be managed according to accepted management practices guidelines from the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources.

Lathrop requires that all timber harvesting be done conducted within county, state and federal laws for the industry. Exclusively Vermont Wood Products obtains most of its timber from land enrolled in the Vermont land-use program.

Landowners mark trees for harvest with the aid of a county forester, except on Lathrop's 500 acres where he selects trees using expertise passed down through five generations. "I started helping my father mark timber around the age of 7. Dad would instruct me which trees needed to be harvested and why," Lathrop said. "Harvest was always conservative and sustainable."

Lathrop's work is his occupation and hobby all in one, he said. He described the pleasure he derives from the forest. "Marking timber is one of the things Pam and I most enjoy together. When you have thinned the forest and removed the mature and damaged trees, you come back in a couple of years and it's beautiful to see the trees. Seedlings are coming up. The cycle of the forest is in motion."
Employees tend to stay

Inside the 18,000-square-foot milling facility south of Bristol, the ambience appears more pragmatic as saws convert logs to lumber. The two businesses employ seven people full time and three part time.

"Workers tend to come and stay. We don't have much turnover," Lathrop said. "All employees multi-task."

For example, Jody Brown of Lincoln, a 10-year employee, is a shop salesman who also planes lumber and runs the forklift. He said he likes the variety. "I get to meet a lot of people and get an idea of what's going on in the industry."

Lathrop defines his own job as "one-source responsibility: I'm responsible for purchasing logs, production, schedules for drying lumber, quality, grading and for people's needs."

Vermont ash, beech, birch, cherry, hickory, pine, red oak, red and rock maple are on Lathrop's flooring sales list. They also purchase black walnut and white oak logs from outside Vermont for milling and resale. All milling and drying processes for Lathrop's Maple Supply and Exclusively Vermont Wood Products take place on one 3-acre parcel.

"We've cut out several middlemen by dealing directly with the landowner's timber and selling directly to the consumer," Lathrop said

Prime logs for flooring and lumber are quarter-cut, meaning that a piece is removed from each side, leaving a square timber that then is sawed in two lengthwise, and boards are cut perpendicular to the center cut. "Quarter-cut lumber is entirely different. It changes the grain structure and the look," Lathrop said.

The sawmill operation produces 10,000-15,000 board feet of lumber daily. Waste wood from the mill fuels its two drying kilns; some is sold for mulch; and some heats wood-fired ovens at bakeries and pizza restaurants. "Using our waste wood enhances its greenness," Lathrop said.

About half of Lathrop's sales is flooring. Lathrop's Maple Supply also supplies and delivers furniture-grade hardwood and softwood lumber within a five-hour, one-way distance. "We have steady customers in Boston, eastern New York state, Connecticut and along the coast of Maine," Lathrop said.

Custom flooring material usually is installed more locally. "We have floored over 20,000

homes and businesses in our 30 years of operation: places like the Shelburne Museum, Stowe's ski museum and the Orvis fishing museum," Lathrop said.

Last year, loggers cut white ash timber from the Hinesburg town forest and transported it to Lathrop's for milling before it was installed as a new floor in Hinesburg's Town Hall.

Lathrop's is supplying 12,000 square feet of maple for a home in Richmond, harvested on the home's site. Another 30,000 square feet will go back for use in Shelburne on the site where it was cut.

That's the kind of local connection the Vermont Wood Manufacturers Association valued when choosing an award recipient, according to Rainville.

"Those of us who buy lumber and make products don't go to the woods and select trees. While we like the idea that it comes from Vermont, it isn't always easiest to get that wood. One of the things we find laudable is the way Tom brought the pieces together for a sustained supply, to his advantage and our benefit."

As president of Maple Landmark Inc. in Middlebury, maker of wooden toy trains, puzzles, games, clocks and home decor, Rainville is one of Lathrop's customers.

"For the entire 29-year history of our company, we have purchased the majority of our lumber from one local source: Lathrop's Maple Supply," Rainville said. "We use native species, rock maple primarily, pine and cherry. We are fortunate to have them locally available."

Lathrop plans to add space to make more flooring products available. "We want to put in a state-of-the-art flooring manufacturing facility," he said. "We have started buying equipment for it."