

## Heart Pine

You may hear people proudly describing the ‘heart pine’ floors or other components in an old building. Does this make you wonder what heart pine is and what is magical about it?

Technically, “heart pine” is simply the heartwood of pine trees. In Tennessee, this generally means trees from the southern yellow pine species group. Most southern yellow pine lumber that is cut today comes from trees that are too young to produce much heartwood. Thus heart pine also generally means pine heartwood from old, large trees that were cut years ago. Wood from old, slow-grown pine trees may have desirable properties, for example it may have few knots, straight grain and narrow growth rings, but these attributes have nothing to do with the wood being heartwood.

The wood in a tree trunk serves two functions: to move water up from the roots and to provide structural support for the tree’s leaves. The ‘sapwood’ in a tree trunk is the outer ring of wood that helps to move water. Sapwood can be anywhere from ½” to one foot (or more) wide, depending on the species. After a few years (again, depending on the species) this sapwood dies and is converted in ‘heartwood’. Heartwood doesn’t move water in the tree – it only helps to hold the tree up.

When heartwood is formed from old sapwood, special chemicals (‘extractives’) are often put in the wood by the living tree. These chemicals can give the heartwood a special color or odor. For example, black walnut heartwood has an attractive chocolate-brown color, while the sapwood is white. In some species the heartwood extractives make the wood naturally resistant to insect attack and rot. Cedar and black locust heartwood are examples. The heartwood of southern pine trees is not especially rich in extractives, and the properties of southern pine heartwood are not much different from the sapwood.

People often value old and rare things. Because wood can last practically forever if it is kept dry, heart pine and other antique woods can be useful and valuable for years to come.

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