

# deep in the woods

BY MAZUIN KHAMIS

Due to its warm and attractive timeless beauty, wood furniture has always been a very prominent part of the Malay interior décor. When taken care of, it can age beautifully, year after year, and be passed down as heirlooms from generation to generation.

**M**ost laymen buy a piece of wood furniture purely based on price and how it looks. WLM asked three experts from Scanteak, a teak furniture store, The Shophouse, a furniture and home accessories store, and interior designers Nic & Wes Builders not only how you can make a more informed purchase, but also how to make your wood furniture look its best from day one.

**WLM:** What should we know before choosing a particular wood as furniture?

**SCANTEAK:** Weigh the material's strengths and weaknesses. If you're looking for a piece of wood furniture that will last a long time, especially in humid countries like Singapore, look for pieces that are resilient to moisture, mould and insects. Then look into the grade of wood used in a piece of furniture. When a tree is felled, different parts of the log are used. The closer the wood is to the centre of the log, the higher the grade.

**NIC & WES:** Determine whether its main purpose is for indoor or outdoor use. Outdoor furniture should be made of hardwoods such as teak or 'chengal' for higher durability.

**WLM:** What kind of questions should buyers ask about the furniture they're buying?

**THE SHOPHOUSE:** Ask about the drying process and the treatment of the wood. All tropical hardwoods should be kiln-dried and the water content reduced to around 8 to 10 percent at the point of manufacture. From transportation to the point of export, the moisture content should not be more than 12 percent. Too much moisture in the wood causes movement and splitting, particularly when you place the furniture in an air-conditioned room.

**SCANTEAK:** It's not only the type of wood that you should be concerned about but also the form of wood that a piece of



Photo courtesy of Scantek

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Wooden cube from The Shophouse

furniture is made of, such as solid wood, plywood, veneer, and even chipboard. Some manufacturers use multiple types of wood to make a piece of furniture to keep costs low and prices affordable for the customer. Bear in mind that for solid wood, the bigger the plank, the more prone it is to warping. In addition, sometimes the buyer gets so immersed in knowing about the quality of the wood that he overlooks the sturdiness of the furniture frame.

**WLM:** When it comes to wood, does more expensive mean better quality? Is it better to invest in a more expensive type of wood?

**THE SHOPHOUSE:** Not necessarily. It depends on the retailer. Your wood furniture should be value for money: look for finishing, style and whether the construction is robust. Don't be afraid to ask questions and have the retailer justify the price.

**SCANTEAK:** While solid wood lasts longer and is usually more expensive, an expensive piece of wood does not mean it's

of a better quality. Wood is organic, and is rather dependent on its environment. Some types of wood such as beech and pine are harder to maintain in tropical countries like Singapore, and investing in furniture made up of such wood is not practical. Craftsmanship also plays a huge role in the price of a piece of furniture.

**NIC & WES:** Not necessarily so. Sometimes a piece of furniture is expensive more because it has a designer label and not necessarily because it is of a premium quality.

**WLM:** What are the pros and cons of wood furniture as opposed to other materials?

**NIC & WES:** The good thing about wood is that it is very earthy and organic and it's versatile enough to fit into most interior styles, even contemporary designs. The downside is that it requires some maintenance and care. Most woods, if not treated, are prone to wood-eating insects such as termites.

## Caring for Wood

Contrary to popular belief, solid wood furniture is very easy to maintain. Most of the time, only a damp cloth is needed to wipe away dirt or water. For extra shine for your teak furniture, treat it with a layer of teak oil. Apart from the added lustre, the oil also helps to pick up any dirt that's left behind.

Wood also absorbs water very readily, especially in the case of non-lacquered wood surfaces. Placing your coffee and other drinks on coasters also prevents your wood surface from having stains which are hard if not impossible to remove once they have set.

You might think that a glass top will protect your wood surfaces from dirt and scratches but it does more harm than good. In our humid climate, moisture from the atmosphere collects under the glass when hot or cold items are placed on the glass. These create watermarks on the wood, and these marks are hard if not impossible to remove.

Wood also stains very easily when directly exposed to other materials of high temperatures. Put your hot casserole trays and saucepans on coasters and mats on your wood surface to prevent it from marking.

Wood can dry out and crack although this is not usually a problem in our humid climate except in air-conditioned rooms and even then avoiding placing furniture directly beneath the air-conditioning unit can help to prevent it from cracking.

When exposed to the elements, wood furniture, especially teak, tends to fade into a silvery grey. To prevent the surfaces from fading, oil them a maximum of three times a year with a dry cloth and a thin layer of teak oil. It takes approximately three coats before the surface is imbued with a smooth matte finish without any shiny spots.



Photo courtesy of Nic & Wes



Photo courtesy of Scanteak

*Wood is a favourite with home owners because it is organic, so no two pieces of wood are alike. The grains of a piece of wood are like a human being's fingerprints; each grain gives a piece of furniture a different personality.*

Apart from furniture, it's a material of choice for flooring as well as it has a warm, earthy charm compared to tiles. However it requires more maintenance and care. Being a porous material, constant spills and excess water can cause it to rot. We usually recommend parquet to our clients as we find that it is more competitively priced and durable. We recommend wooden flooring for bedrooms as it is warmer on the feet than tiles.

**THE SHOPHOUSE:** Wood is a naturally beautiful product and versatile as it can be easily juxtaposed with other textures and different designs and types of furniture. Feel free to experiment with matching furniture of various types of wood with existing pieces in your home. We use tropical hardwoods such as teak, mahogany, sheesham, mango and acacia woods.

**SCANTEAK:** Wood furniture, especially wood like teak, is known for its durability. When scratched, solid wood can always be sanded down and re-varnished to look brand new. Wood furniture lasts longer, and the warm colours never go out of style. At Scanteak, we use plantation teak, which means that the teak is legally harvested, and for every tree felled, another is planted and allowed to grow. Wood, being natural, requires more maintenance than materials like metal, glass or acrylic and it is also subject to environmental threats as well.

**WLM:** In terms of design (eg. colour, pattern), what should we consider when choosing wood as furniture?

**THE SHOPHOUSE:** The eclectic look is becoming a favourite with home owners today; so it's becoming a trend to blend wood furniture and finishes with other types of material.

**SCANTEAK:** It really depends on the home's design theme and what the buyer likes, as preferences vary. Some buy a piece of wood furniture for the warm colour while others like the texture and pattern of wood grains. But most of all, wood is a favourite with home owners because it is organic, so no two pieces of wood are alike. The grains of a piece of wood are like a human being's fingerprints; each grain gives a piece of furniture a different personality.

**NIC & WES:** Selecting furniture truly boils down to one's preferences. One might opt for teak because of its distinct grains that look good in both natural and dark stains and its flexibility: that it can be used both indoors and outdoors. Or you could let the stain be the determining factor: a dark stain would suit tropical-styled homes while natural stains enhance contemporary homes.

## A Woody Space

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Now that we know a thing or two about wood and wood furniture, let's take a look at some of the many ways that wood can be incorporated into your interior décor.

### PANELLING

Wood panelling is the easiest way to change the overall appearance of a room without spending a great deal of money. The most common use of wood panelling is for partitioning and for covering unsightly things like wiring and worn out walls.

### FOCAL POINT

A piece of furniture - like a beautifully handcrafted table or a quality heirloom bed - deserves to be highlighted and given attention. Remember to care for, accessorise and style the piece in a way that will do it justice.

### BEAMS

Beams are another form of wood decoration. Not quite suitable for the flat dweller, these are best used in rooms with a high ceiling. If you live in a shophouse, you might want to look out for old braces and beams that you could replace or restore.

### ADDING CHARACTER

Can't afford that beautiful solid mahogany dinner table? Look into wood accessories instead. Displaying antique pieces is a great way of adding your own personal character to your home.

### WINDOW TREATMENT

Window treatments such as Venetian blinds and bamboo shades are also an inexpensive way of adding wood to your home.

### CEILING

When wood is used on the ceiling it gives the room a natural and earthy feeling. If you're a flat dweller and beams are not an option, panelled ceilings can add warmth to your space without weighing it down.

### SPACE DIVIDER

Try using wood room dividers to visually break up a space or to demarcate areas for different uses such as study nook or dining area. Visit the flea market for interesting wooden screens or panels for placing in strategic corners in your home.

### PLANTS

Place plants with woody stems into your home such as chilli and bougainvillea or even bonsai plants if you have space. With some maintenance and care, these plants add another organic dimension to your home and keep the space dynamic and lively.