ILLINOIS LANDOWNER'S TREE VALUE FIELD GUIDE

Unlock Your Timber's True Worth – Sustainable Harvesting with Grade Timber

Empower yourself to identify, value, and sustainably harvest your trees. This guide equips Illinois landowners with step-by-step tools to estimate timber worth and plan sales. Brought to you by Grade Timber, your certified master logger and trusted forestry partner in Springfield, Jacksonville, Pittsfield, and beyond.

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HOW TO USE THIS FIELD GUIDE

This guide is designed to help you estimate the general value of your trees right on your Illinois property. By walking you through the process of identifying tree species, assessing whether trees are ready for harvest, and calculating board feet (bdft), you'll gain the tools needed to gather essential data and plan potential timber sales effectively. The goal is to empower you as a landowner to make informed decisions about your forest resources, ensuring you understand the potential economic benefits while promoting sustainable management practices.

To get started, gather a few simple tools: a tape measure for accurate sizing, a notebook and pen to record your observations and measurements, flagging tape or non-toxic spray paint for marking trees, and of course, this guide to reference as you work. New addition: Download our free app for on-the-go calculations at www.gradetimber.com/app.

The process unfolds in a logical sequence of steps.

- First, clearly mark your property lines to confirm you're evaluating only the trees within your boundaries.
- Next, identify the species of trees on your land, as different types hold varying levels of value based on their uses and market demand.
- Then, measure the trees and assess their quality grades to determine their suitability for harvest.
- After that, calculate the board feet to quantify the volume of usable timber.
- Finally, use this information to estimate value by reaching out to loggers, and contact professionals like loggers or foresters for expert guidance and appraisals (note: if using a forester, their fees are typically paid by the landowner; always vet their reputation by checking certifications, references, and online reviews).

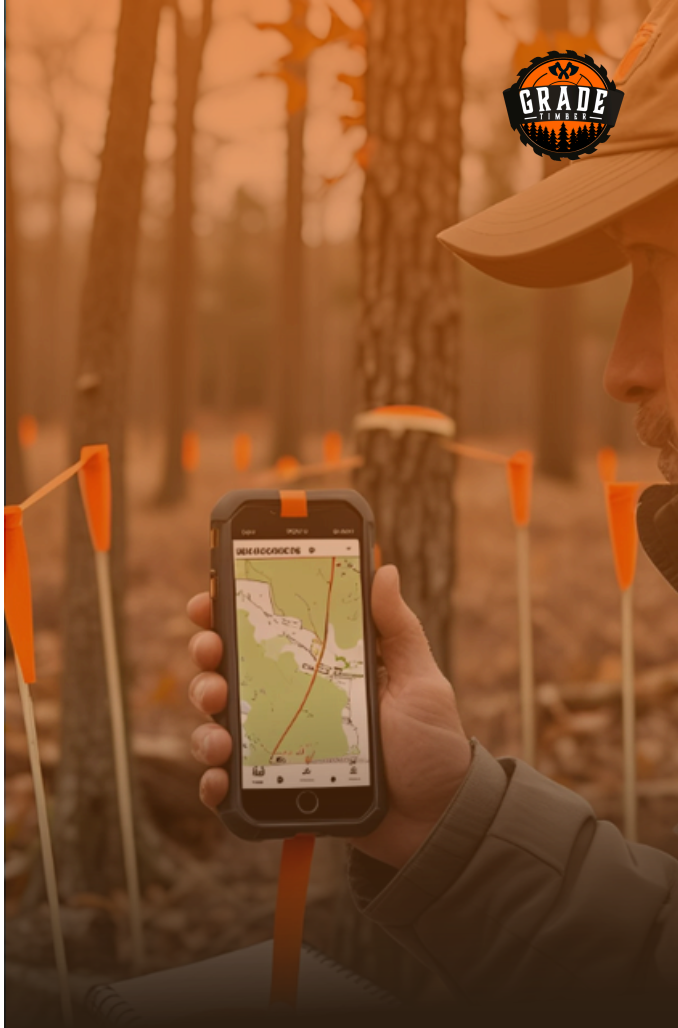
Illinois is home to valuable trees such as walnut and white oak, which can contribute significantly to the worth of your land, depending on factors like market conditions and tree quality.

START WITH YOUR BOUNDARIES

MARKING PROPERTY LINES

Before diving into tree assessments, it's essential to establish and mark your property lines clearly. This foundational step prevents any potential disputes with neighboring landowners, ensures that all your evaluations and markings are confined to your own property, and supports sustainable forestry by helping you visualize the full scope of your land. Without well-defined boundaries, you risk inadvertently including trees that aren't yours or overlooking valuable sections of your forest.

To mark your property lines effectively, begin by reviewing official documents such as your property deed or plat map, which you can obtain from your local county recorder's office or through online resources on Illinois county websites. These documents provide the legal description of your boundaries, including coordinates and landmarks. Next, utilize a GPS-enabled app or device, such as onX Hunt or LandGlide, to pinpoint corners and trace the lines accurately on the ground. As you walk the perimeter, secure flagging tape to trees, branches, or temporary stakes every 20 to 50 feet to create a visible outline. For more permanent solutions, consider installing metal stakes or posts at key corners, but always verify local regulations to ensure compliance. If your boundaries are unclear or contested, it's wise to engage a licensed surveyor, whom you can find through the Illinois Professional Land Surveyors Association at www.iplsa.org (vet their reputation via references and reviews).



In the field, aim to mark during seasons when leaves are off the trees, such as fall or winter, to improve visibility through the underbrush. Take photographs of your marked lines and jot down GPS coordinates in your notebook for future reference. If your property shares lines with neighbors, involving them in the process can foster good relations and avoid future conflicts. Ultimately, accurate boundary marking not only safeguards your investments but also provides a precise framework for your tree inventory, allowing you to maximize the value derived from your land. New tip: Use Grade Timber's boundary mapping service for precision.

KNOW YOUR
ILLINOIS TREES

Understanding the species of trees on your property is a critical first step in determining their potential value, as each type has unique characteristics that influence its market appeal and applications. Illinois boasts a rich diversity of forests, predominantly featuring hardwoods that thrive in the state's varied climates and soils. By learning to identify these species, you can prioritize those with higher economic potential, such as those used in fine furniture or cabinetry, while also appreciating the ecological roles they play in your woodland.

BLACK WALNUT

Let's start with some of the most valuable species found across Illinois. Black walnut stands out for its premium wood, prized in industries like furniture making and gunstock production due to its rich color, durability, and grain patterns. You can identify it by its compound pinnate leaves, which typically have 15 to 23 leaflets, along with its deeply furrowed dark bark and the round nuts encased in green husks that it produces.

Black walnut can fetch up to $1,000+ per tree with Grade Timber buyers.

WHITE OAK

White oak is another highly sought-after species, valued for its strength and resistance to decay, making it ideal for furniture, flooring, and even barrel production. Its distinguishing features include leaves with 5 to 9 rounded lobes, light gray bark that often appears scaly, and acorns that serve as a key identifier in the fall.

BLACK CHERRY

Black cherry offers a beautiful reddish-brown wood that's favored in furniture and cabinetry for its smooth finish and workability. Look for its serrated leaves, shiny bark marked with horizontal lenticels, and clusters of small black cherries that appear in late summer.

HICKORY

Continuing our exploration of valuable Illinois tree species, hickory is renowned for its exceptional hardness and shock resistance, which make it perfect for tool handles and other demanding applications. Identification is straightforward; observe its pinnate leaves with 5 to 7 leaflets, bark that can range from shaggy to smooth depending on the variety, and the nuts it bears.

SUGAR MAPLE

Sugar maple, with its versatile wood, is commonly used in furniture and flooring, appreciated for its fine grain and ability to take stains well. Key identifiers include its palmate leaves with 5 distinct lobes, smooth gray bark on younger trees that becomes furrowed with age, and the winged seeds known as samaras.

Beyond these top species, you'll encounter others like **red oak**, which has lobed leaves with pointed tips and reddish inner bark; **ash**, featuring opposite pinnate leaves and diamond-patterned bark (though note that pests like the emerald ash borer can affect its viability); and **pine**, often recognized by its needle clusters and resinous bark, frequently planted for specific purposes like windbreaks.

To aid in identification, leverage resources such as the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (DNR) website at www.dnr.illinois.gov, where you can download the "Trees of Illinois" PDF. The University of Illinois Extension at extension.illinois.edu/trees offers detailed fact sheets. For on-the-go help, the free Naturalist app allows photo-based identification by uploading images of leaves or bark. Consider purchasing "Trees of Illinois" by Stan Tekiela from Amazon for a portable reference. Professional foresters, accessible through the Illinois DNR or www.illinoisarborist.org, can provide expert confirmation (note: forester fees are paid by the landowner; vet their reputation by checking certifications, references, and reviews). New: Section on emerging threats like invasive species and how Grade Timber helps manage them.

In the field, capture photographs of leaves, bark, and any fruit during spring or fall when features are most prominent, and use flagging tape to mark trees once identified. Consulting a forester ensures accuracy, especially for similar-looking species.

IS YOUR TREE READY TO HARVEST?

Determining if a tree is ready for harvest involves evaluating several key factors that influence its maturity, quality, and overall value. Harvesting at the right time maximizes economic returns while supporting forest health, as premature cutting can diminish potential growth and value, whereas allowing over-mature trees to stand might lead to decline from disease or damage.

Size is a primary indicator of readiness.

For timber purposes, target trees with a diameter at breast height (DBH) —measured 4.5 feet above the ground—of 12 to 24 inches, as this range typically yields the highest volume of high-quality wood. Trees below this size may not yet have developed sufficient volume or quality to justify harvest, while larger ones can be exceptionally valuable if healthy.

Health plays a pivotal role as well.

A healthy tree exhibits vibrant leaves, a straight trunk free of rot or cracks, and robust growth, all of which contribute to higher market value. Signs of issues, such as dead branches, fungal infections, or insect damage, can downgrade the tree's potential, making it less desirable for premium uses.

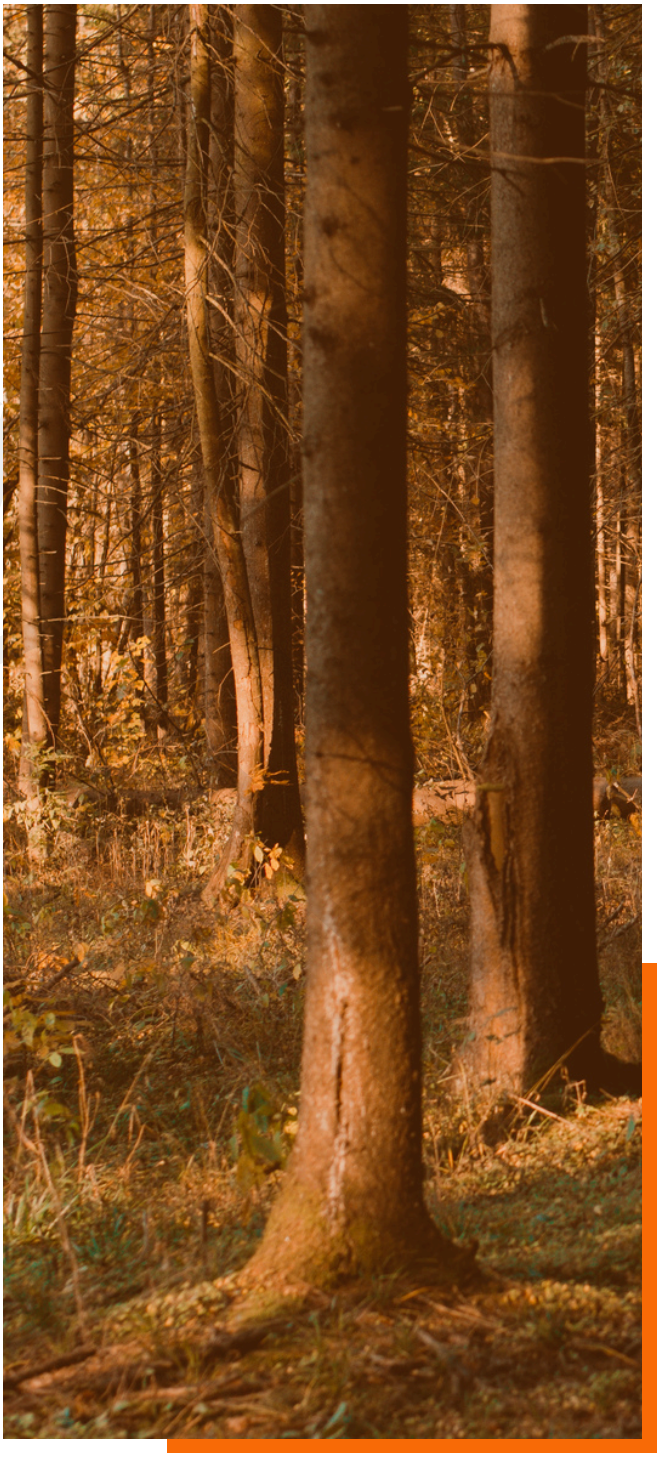
Growth rings provide insight into the wood's density and strength.

These annual rings, visible on cut stumps or cross-sections, reflect the tree's growth rate: tighter rings (more per inch) signify slower growth in cooler conditions, resulting in denser, more durable wood that's prized in the market. Added: Sustainability note – "Harvest mature trees to promote forest regeneration, as recommended by Grade Timber experts."

To assess in the field, use your tape measure for DBH, visually inspect for health indicators like leaf color and bark integrity, and consult a forester through the Illinois DNR for a professional health evaluation (note: forester fees are paid by the landowner; vet their reputation). As you work, measure the DBH of at least 10 trees, check their overall health, and mark those that appear ready for further consideration.

UNDERSTANDING
TREE QUALITY AND ITS IMPACT ON PRICING

The quality of a tree is not a static attribute but a result of its growth history, environmental conditions, and inherent characteristics, all of which profoundly influence its market price. High-quality trees, with straight trunks, minimal defects, and dense wood, are suitable for top-tier applications like veneer or fine lumber, commanding premium rates. In contrast, trees with imperfections may be relegated to lower-value uses, significantly reducing their worth. Understanding these factors allows you to better appraise your forest and make strategic harvest decisions.



Quality variations stem from several interconnected elements. The growth environment is paramount: trees in fertile, well-drained soils, prevalent in northern Illinois, tend to develop straighter forms with fewer structural weaknesses. Conversely, in wetter or poorer soils more common in southern regions, trees may exhibit leaning, rot, or excessive branching due to stress, which detracts from their grade. Climate and location further shape quality, the cooler temperatures of northern Illinois promote slower growth, leading to tighter growth rings and denser wood, while warmer southern climates accelerate growth, producing looser rings and lighter, less robust material. Tree age and forest management also matter-mature trees in well-spaced stands grow more uniformly, avoiding the competition that causes crooked trunks or low branches in overcrowded areas.

Tight growth rings are particularly important for pricing because they indicate wood that's denser and more resilient. Each ring represents a year of growth, and when packed closely (often 10 or more per inch), the wood gains strength, better resistance to wear, and superior aesthetic qualities like finer grain patterns. This is especially valued in species like walnut and white oak, where tight rings can increase value by 10 to 20 percent, as the wood performs better in manufacturing, holds finishes more effectively, and appeals to buyers seeking longevity. Loose rings, from rapid growth, yield softer wood prone to warping or weakness, often resulting in downgrades and lower prices.

TIGHT RINGS

LOOSE RINGS

Pricing is also affected regionally: northern Illinois trees frequently fetch higher rates due to their superior ring density and access to urban markets like Chicago, where demand for quality hardwoods is strong. To evaluate quality in the field, examine any available stumps or sections with a flashlight to count rings per inch, and record notes on soil type, location, and visible defects in your inventory. By grasping how growth dynamics impact quality, you'll be better equipped to identify high-value trees and negotiate effectively. Expanded: Regional pricing examples (without specifics) – "Northern Illinois dense wood often commands premiums; contact us for current rates."

MARK AND MEASURE YOUR TREES

Once you've identified species and assessed readiness, the next phase is to mark and measure your trees, creating a tangible record that ties back to your marked property lines. This step is crucial for building a comprehensive inventory, allowing you to quantify potential timber volume while ensuring sustainable selection—avoiding over-harvesting that could harm your forest's long-term health. Working with a forester can refine this process, helping you choose trees that balance economic gain with ecological preservation.

Note: *forester fees are paid by the landowner; vet their reputation.*

For marking, employ flagging tape or non-toxic spray paint to designate selected trees visibly. Apply the mark at 4 to 5 feet up the trunk with a simple "X" to indicate it's under consideration for timber harvest. This method keeps your selections organized and easy to locate later.

Measurement provides the data backbone for value estimation. Start with DBH by wrapping your tape measure around the trunk at 4.5 feet from the ground and dividing the circumference by pi (3.14)—for instance, a 56-inch circumference yields an 18-inch DBH. Next, estimate the height to the first limb, ideally 16 to 32 feet for high-value timber, using a stick held at arm's length to compare proportions. Total height can be gauged similarly or with a clinometer app on your phone for more precision.

In practice, limit sessions to marking and measuring 10 to 20 trees to avoid fatigue, and record all details promptly in your notebook. Always cross-check with your property lines to confirm the trees are yours. This systematic approach transforms abstract observations into actionable insights. New: Tip on using Grade Timber's measurement tools.

LOG GRADES
AND THEIR VALUE

Log grading is a standardized system that evaluates the quality of a tree's trunk based on the number of defect-free sides, directly correlating to its end-use and market value. Higher grades open doors to lucrative markets like fine woodworking, while lower ones limit options. Mastering this concept helps you prioritize trees and anticipate pricing from loggers.

The grades are defined by clear faces: a 1-sided clear log has one defect-free side with minor issues elsewhere, suitable for basic lumber. 2-sided clear offers two clear sides for improved versatility; 3-sided clear provides three clear sides, enhancing value; and 4-sided clear, often qualifying as veneer, is flawless on all sides with no knots, cracks, or irregularities. Veneer logs are especially prized, representing only 1 to 2 percent of harvests, as they can be sliced into thin sheets for high-end furniture and cabinetry, demanding straight trunks of 16 to 24 inches DBH and at least 16 feet to the first limb.

To assess grades in the field, inspect trunks closely for defects, ideally with a forester's assistance (note: forester fees are paid by the landowner; vet their reputation), and focus on species like walnut and white oak that frequently achieve veneer status. As you evaluate at least 10 trees, note potential veneer candidates and seek professional grading confirmation. This thorough understanding ensures you capture the full value spectrum of your trees.

GRADE	CLEAR FACES	TYPICAL USE	VALUE PREMIUM
1-Sided	1	Basic Lumber	Low
2-Sided	2	Versatile	Medium
3-Sided	3	High-Quality	High
4-Sided (Veneer)	4	Premium Furniture	Highest