



# UNDERSTANDING **TIMBER** **GRADES** IN ILLINOIS

A Practical Guide for Landowners  
Selling Black Walnut & White Oak



Many Illinois landowners are surprised when their timber does not bring the value they expected. This guide explains how timber is graded, why most trees are not high-grade, and how growing conditions across Illinois affect log value—before you sell.



# WHY TIMBER GRADING CONFUSES LANDOWNERS

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Most landowners rarely sell timber, sometimes only once in a lifetime. As a result, expectations are often shaped by stories, past prices, or the belief that a large tree automatically equals high value. In reality, **timber grading is a manufacturing decision**, not an opinion. Buyers grade logs based on what they can produce from the wood, not how impressive the tree looks standing.

Grade is determined by **clear wood yield**, not age, diameter alone, or sentimental value. Even healthy, mature trees often contain limbs, sweep, or internal defects that significantly limit their end use. Understanding this difference helps landowners avoid frustration and make informed decisions.

## COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS INCLUDE:

“Big trees are always valuable”

“Walnut and white oak are always high grade”

“If one buyer offers low, they must be dishonest”



# WHY LOCATION MATTERS IN ILLINOIS

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Illinois produces some of the best hardwood timber in the Midwest, but **not all areas produce the same quality**. Climate, soil, and growing conditions vary significantly from north to south, directly affecting growth rate and log quality.

Northern Illinois generally experiences cooler temperatures and shorter growing seasons. Trees grow more slowly and evenly, producing tighter growth rings and fewer limbs. Southern Illinois trees often grow faster due to warmer temperatures and longer seasons, which can lead to wider growth rings and more branching.

This does not mean southern Illinois timber has no value—but statistically, **high-grade and veneer logs are more common in northern Illinois**.

## KEY REGIONAL DIFFERENCES:

Growth rate

Ring tightness

Limb development

Overall consistency



# WHAT DETERMINES LOG GRADE

When a log is graded, buyers evaluate how much **clear, defect-free lumber or veneer** can be produced. The outside of a tree often hides problems that reduce usable yield once the log is opened.

Straightness is critical. Even slight sweep can eliminate veneer potential. Limbs create knots, which interrupt grain and weaken boards. Scars, cracks, insect damage, and decay further reduce grade. In black walnut, excessive sapwood lowers value because veneer buyers prefer dark, consistent heartwood.

Open-grown trees—such as those in pastures or fence rows—usually develop large limbs and wide crowns. Forest-grown trees, under competition, naturally prune themselves and are more likely to produce higher grades.



## PRIMARY GRADING FACTORS:

- Straightness and taper
- Knots and limb scars
- Surface and internal defects
- Growth consistency
- Sapwood vs heartwood



# veneer logs

## (HIGHEST GRADES)

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### 4-SIDED VENEER LOGS

Veneer logs represent the highest and rarest grade. These logs must be exceptionally straight and clear, with no visible defects on any face. Veneer buyers are selecting logs to be peeled or sliced into thin sheets, meaning **any defect shows immediately and ruins yield.**

Because of these strict standards, only a very small percentage of trees qualify. Many landowners assume veneer is common—it is not.

#### Veneer requirements include:

- Straight log with no sweep
- Uniform diameter
- Clear on all four faces
- No knots, scars, or rot
- Minimal sapwood (walnut)

### 3-SIDED VENEER LOGS

Three-sided veneer logs meet nearly all veneer standards but contain one minor defect. These logs can still be valuable, but they are priced below perfect veneer. Many trees that “look perfect” to landowners fall into this category.





# MID-GRADE SAWLOGS

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## 2-SIDED VENEER / HIGH-GRADE SAWLOGS

These logs have two clear faces, allowing some high-quality boards to be produced. Knots or defects limit veneer use, but these logs still carry solid value, especially in walnut and white oak.

## 1-SIDED SAWLOGS

One-sided logs contain only one clear face. These are common in Illinois and still usable for lumber, but yield is limited. Sweep, knots, and taper reduce board quality and volume

## WHAT THESE GRADES HAVE IN COMMON:

- Usable lumber
- Limited clear yield
- Lower prices than veneer



# LOWER GRADES & CULL LOGS

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## STANDARD SAWLOGS

Most trees harvested fall into this category. These logs contain knots and minor defects but can still be milled into flooring, framing lumber, or pallet stock. They are not “bad logs”—just not premium

## SLAB LOGS

Slab logs have significant sweep or multiple defects. Their irregular shape limits milling options, often restricting them to railroad ties or low-grade products.

## FIREWOOD / CULL

Cull logs contain rot, hollow centers, heavy insect damage, or severe storm damage. Large size does not overcome poor internal quality.

# BLACK WALNUT VS. WHITE OAK

Black walnut and white oak are both valuable species, but they grade differently. Walnut value is heavily influenced by color consistency and sapwood percentage. Trees grown too fast or too open often develop thick sapwood, lowering veneer potential.

White oak grading depends strongly on grain tightness and internal soundness. Many white oaks appear solid externally but contain hidden defects. True veneer-grade white oak is rare and highly selective.

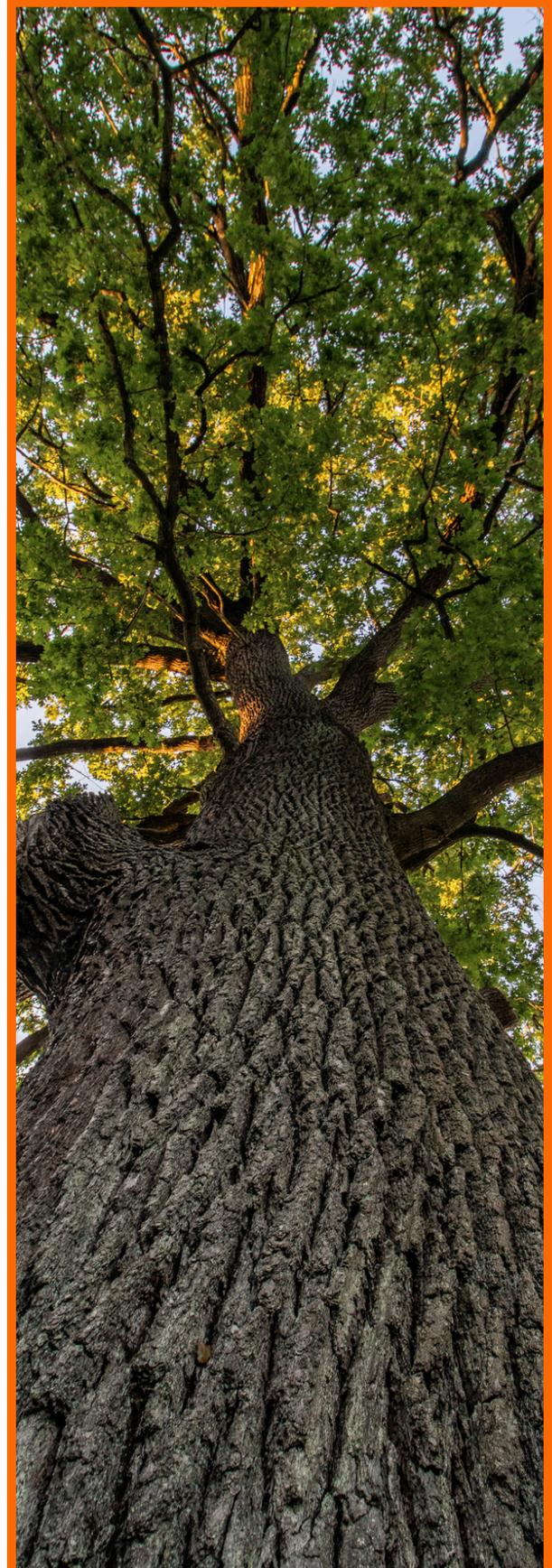
## KEY DIFFERENCES:

### WALNUT

color & sapwood matter most

### WHITE OAK

growth rate & internal health matter most





# BEFORE YOU SELL:

## ILLINOIS LANDOWNER CHECKLIST

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Selling timber is a business decision that can affect your land for decades. Taking time to understand your trees and the market helps protect both value and trust.

### BEFORE ACCEPTING ANY OFFER:

- Confirm species
- Look for straightness and limb history
- Understand grading, not just diameter
- Check for visible and hidden defects
- Ask how logs are being categorized
- Get multiple bids
- Be cautious of “everything is veneer” claims
- Consider professional advice
- Avoid high-grading your best trees



# FINAL THOUGHTS

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High-grade timber is not common—and it should not be expected. It is the result of **decades of slow, consistent growth under the right conditions**. Illinois produces excellent hardwoods, but realistic expectations are essential.

At **GradeTimber.com**, our goal is to help landowners understand what they have, why it grades the way it does, and how to make informed decisions with confidence.

**EDUCATION IS THE FIRST STEP TO FAIR VALUE.**



# BEFORE YOU SELL TIMBER

## A QUICK CHECKLIST FOR ILLINOIS LANDOWNERS

### BLACK WALNUT & WHITE OAK

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#### STEP 1 KNOW WHAT YOU HAVE

- Identify species correctly (walnut vs. oak types)
- Understand that **size does not equal grade**
- Look for straightness, not just diameter
- Count visible limbs and old limb scars
- Check for sweep, crook, or heavy taper

Most Illinois trees are **sawlogs**, not veneer—and that is normal.

#### STEP 2 CHECK TREE HEALTH

- Dead or broken tops
- Cracks or seams in the trunk
- Fungal growth or conks
- Hollow sounds when struck
- Insect holes or staining

Healthy-looking trees can still contain internal defects that lower grade.

#### STEP 3 UNDERSTAND GRADING CLAIMS

- Ask how logs are being graded
- Ask which logs are veneer vs. sawlogs
- Be cautious if everything is called “veneer”
- Remember veneer logs are rare in Illinois

Veneer is a strict manufacturing standard—not a compliment.



## STEP 4 PROTECT YOUR LAND

- Avoid cutting only the best trees
- Think long-term about forest health
- Understand how access and damage will be handled
- Get multiple bids when possible
- Consider professional forestry advice

## COMMON RED FLAGS

-  Buyer only talks about diameter
-  No explanation of grades or uses
-  Pressure to sell quickly
-  Claims of “easy veneer money”

## FINAL REMINDER

High-grade timber is **grown, not assumed.**

Education is your best protection.

**LEARN MORE AT: [GRADETIMBER.COM](http://GRADETIMBER.COM)**