

Ipê – *Handroanthus* sp

Handroanthus is a genus of flowering plants in the family Bignoniaceae. It consists of 30 species of trees, known in Latin America by the common names poui, pau d'arco, or **ipê**. The latter sometimes appears as epay or simply ipe (unaccented) in English. The large timber species are sometimes called lapacho or guayacan, but these names are more properly applied to the species *Handroanthus lapacho* and *Handroanthus guayacan*, respectively.

Handroanthus are indigenous from Central America to northern Argentina, Paraguay and Chile, with one species, *Handroanthus billbergii*, native to northern South America and the Antilles. *Handroanthus* are frequently cultivated far from their natural range, as ornamental trees, for their large and showy flowers. They easily become naturalized where introduced because their seeds are prolifically produced and widely scattered by the wind. Several species are important timber trees of the American tropics. Medicinal use has been reported, but its efficacy and side effects have not been well studied.

If you're considering ipê wood for a deck (or for siding, or for a fence), you probably already know that the smooth hardwood resembles mahogany and can last more than 50 years without needing replacement. Ipê has natural attributes to defeat many of the plagues that deck owners fear most: insects, rots, fire, and the effects of inclement weather.

However, ipê trees are rare in their natural environments (as few as seven trees will grow per acre of forest). Ipê trees have been over-harvested for years, and despite efforts to promote responsible growth practices some eco-conscious designers and architects are looking for alternatives to ipê.

Ipê facts

1. Ipê is hard as nails. Literally.

Ipê is extremely dense less susceptible than other woods to burning, with a fire rating that is the same as steel and concrete. But the density can make it difficult for contractors if they are trying to saw and nail it. The solution is to pre-drill holes and use steel screws. Plus, the hardwood chews up blades. These factors increase labor costs.

2. Ipê is more expensive than many woods.

Ipê is notably more expensive than redwood and cedar. On average, ipê costs \$3.50 to \$5 per square foot “and the cost of labor will increase the total price to around \$20 per square foot,” according to Improve.net.

3. Ipê is more durable than other woods.

Within ipê wood are natural oils that preserve it; combined with the wood’s exceptional density, you can expect an ipê deck or fence to last up to 50 years without replacement.

4. For longevity, ipê requires maintenance.

To extend its life, ipê wood requires some TLC. With oil treatment, its lifespan can be up to 75 years. Tip: Remember to seal the ends of the wood after cutting. When the grain is exposed, the moisture level can change and spread throughout the wood. Applying sealer to fresh cuts slows the process and helps prevent splitting.

5. There’s a black market for ipê wood.

Given Ipê’s popularity, it’s not surprising to learn that the wood is often illegally harvested (as is other rainforest timber.) And because ipê can command high prices, Brazilian loggers and local officials often harvest more Ipê than is legal. The Rainforest Alliance reports that this wood is already over harvested due to its widespread construction use. With continued sourcing, this exotic wood may eventually become extinct. This is one of the biggest factors causing environmentally minded people to say no to ipê.

6. Ipê wood stays cool even in hot sun.

“While Ipê does have some warmth when the sun is out, it does not retain the heat. So, it never gets too hot to walk on,” notes Floor Critics.