

## Bamboo — the other wood

By Erica Schlaikjer  
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For Chicago companies, Indonesian wood isn't the only game in town.

Bamboo — used for thousands of years in Asia as "the poor man's timber" — is proving to be a valuable commodity here. As an alternative to traditional hardwoods, it's found in everything from bowls to bed sheets. Chicago companies are moving in on the market, estimated at \$7 billion a year and expected to hit \$20 billion a year by 2017.

Why? Bamboo grows quickly and doesn't require harmful fertilizers or chemicals. It also soaks up more carbon dioxide than trees, which helps reduce global warming. And most of the stuff comes from low-cost producers in China, Vietnam and India.

Crate & Barrel offers bamboo housewares and furniture as part of its "environmental initiatives." These eco-friendly products include bamboo bookcases constructed with low-emission adhesives, naturally antimicrobial bamboo cutting boards and eco-conscious media consoles made without nails or screws. "They're beautiful, they're functional and they have good value," says a representative for the Northbrook-based retailer.

It would be ideal to manufacture bamboo products in the United States, says Ori Sivan, president of Greenmaker, a Chicago supplier of environmentally friendly building materials. But it makes more sense to source them from China, where the plant is native, the manufacturing facilities already exist and, of course, costs are lower, he says.

Greenmaker used to buy bamboo flooring from a domestic dealer and sold it for \$7 to \$10 per square foot. But since May 2007, when the company began sourcing directly from a factory near Shanghai, it has cut costs by 50%. Now it sells the flooring for as little as \$3.25 per square foot.

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