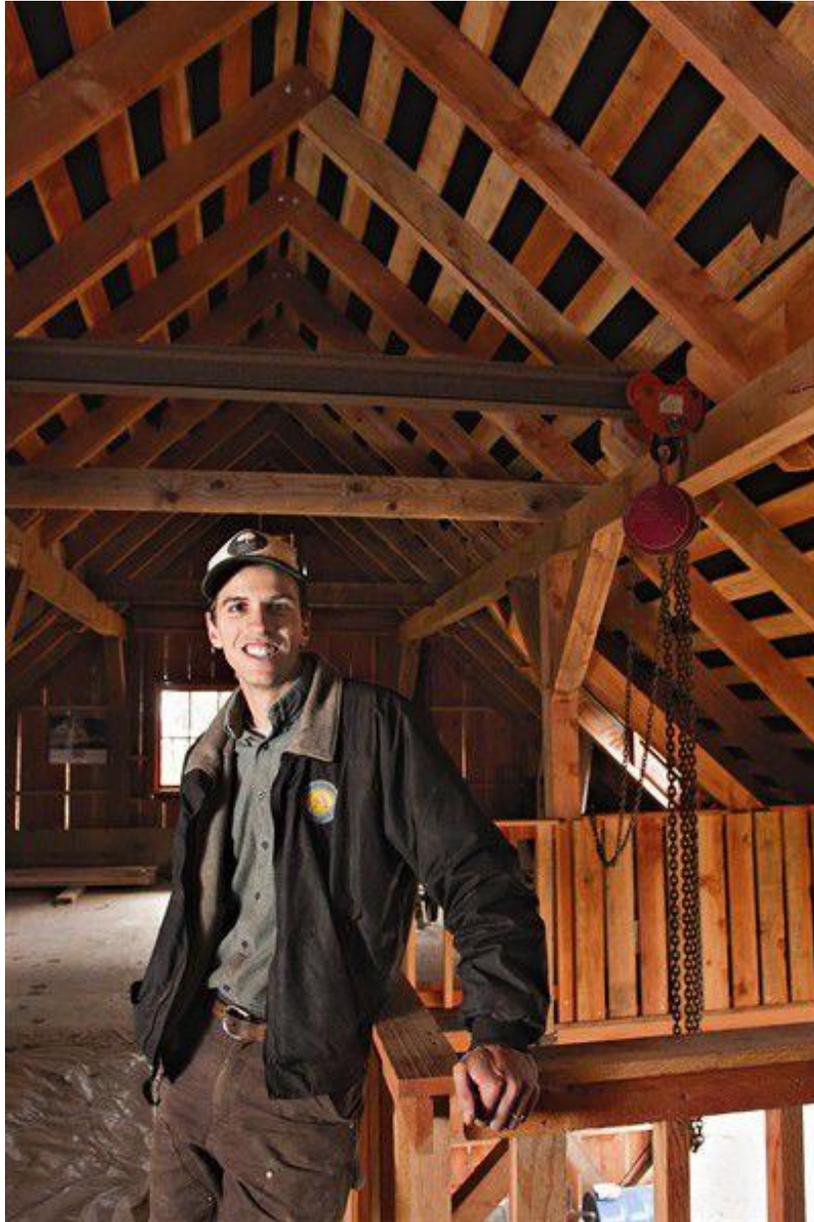


Family Forest

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RICKREALL -- A quick glance around the mill at Zena Forest Products and you can see Oregon white oak in tree, log and lumber form.

Zena Forest is unique for that -- working with oak lumber and other hardwoods.

The Oregon timber industry is dominated, understandably, by Douglas fir and other species that grow fast and big in

the state. But the owners of Zena Forest Products, the mother-and-son team of Sarah and Ben Deumling, are doing their best to add diversity to the local market.

The Deumling family began managing the 1,300-acre Zena Forest in 1987 for the previous owner, who lived in Germany. They eventually acquired most of the acreage in the years since. The forest is located in the Eola Hills west of Salem, peppering the landscape with a gorgeous mix of Oregon white oak, Douglas fir and bigleaf maple.

Photo by Pete Strong

Ben Deumling checks a board in the outdoor drying shed, where lumber remains for up to six months.

In 2007, Ben finished college and came home to help start the mill. Still finding its footing, the Deumlings hope the mill will give them the opportunity to maintain high management standards and the philosophy that growing diverse production forests can work.

"It's a way to make this work economically, so we can do this right," Sarah said.

Working the forest and the mill is a labor of love for both Deumlings.

Sarah, the forest manager, spends much of her time in the trees. She walks the stands selecting the trees to be cut. She also cares for the seedlings, even taking a machete to cut back the blackberry brambles to give the young trees a chance to survive.

Sarah limits the amount of heavy machinery and roads cut through the forest to lessen soil compacting and doesn't clear cut stands. Rather, she selects mature trees for harvest in a way that allows the remaining trees to grow bigger, healthier and stronger. The strict practices meet and exceed Forest Stewardship Council certification standards and the forest has been placed under a conservation easement.

Once taken from the forest to the mill, Ben Deumling carefully chooses the method he uses to cut into the logs, looking for patterns in the grains that would look appealing in the final product.

After milling, boards move to the open air drier, where they will sit for up to six months, drying naturally. The process is completed in a kiln, where heated air "cooks" out most of the rest of the water over five to eight weeks. Then the wood is ready to make flooring.

"One of the things I've learned in the couple years I've worked up here is patience," Ben said. "It just takes lots of time."

Ben's selectiveness and Sarah's management practices are time consuming and more expensive. But they are selling points for the products.

Ben has landed high-profile projects with the Bush Barn Art Center remodel and the restoration of the Oregon Department of Transportation's office in Salem.

"One of the reasons I'm sticking with oak so much is because I have a real market niche in (Forest Stewardship) council certification," he said.

The Deumlings are also thinking of the future -- and their very clear love of the forest -- with their commitment to high standards.

Driving into the forest in an old

bright yellow log truck to pick up a load of waiting logs, Ben passes a young stand of oak about a half a mile from the mill. Those trees weren't planted there.

Photo by Pete Strong

Deumling explains the difference between flat sawing, quarter sawing and rift sawing a log, each of which will produce a piece of lumber with different characteristics in grain pattern and structure.

"These patches of oak came in on their own," he said. "The oak is what wants to grow here."

The trees are maybe 10 to 15 feet tall -- much smaller than the full and mighty oak trees most people see in parks and on vineyard hillsides in this

area. But Ben sees potential.

"This is high-quality oak saw logs in the making here," he said. "They're growing tightly together, they're straight, they don't have too many branches. They're going to make great saw logs in 100 years."

Wait ... 100 years?

"That is kind of a hard thing to wrap your mind around -- that I will never be able to cut these trees down, but my children and grandchildren will.

"I feel it's really important to think about forests in those kinds of terms," he said. "The 35-year rotation of growing Doug fir in the coast range -- it kind of works -- but it's not a very natural way to manage a forest."

Zena Forest itself relayed that message decades ago. Sarah said more than 25 years ago, a 150-acre block of trees was clear cut and replanted with Douglas fir. Left to their own devices, in some areas the trees grew beautifully. In other areas the firs died and oak and maple replaced them.

Deumling picks up a load of logs left on the forest floor since being cut a few months ago.

"It was just such a nice example of, look folks, part of this chunk is happy with Douglas fir, but the other parts have their own ideas of what to grow," she said. "It's like not just planting corn, but planting beans and squash, too."

The upside of growing a number of species is becoming clear now that the market for Douglas fir is down.

"People aren't building new houses, but they are remodeling and wanting flooring, furniture, cabinets and things that come out of hardwood," Sarah said. "It gives you more options if you are growing different species."

The downside, however, is the current lack of research in growing hardwood for production locally.

"We need to learn when you can prune them, how close together they should grow, when to thin, and how much to thin to maximize the growth and quality," Sarah said, listing a number of topics needing scrutiny. "There's just a lot to learn."

Oaks in the Willamette Valley

have fallen victim to clearing for farming, development and to make way for Douglas fir. Oak now is seen as valuable for habitat restoration -- which the Deumlings are actively involved in -- but not as a commodity. Sarah Deumling believes both are possible.

"There is a market for this," she said. "Instead of just setting it aside, we need to have working landscapes, where you save the ecosystem, but at the same time it's a renewable resource. If you do it right, you can have it all."