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Clay Culture: A Burning Question

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a burning question by Wesley L. Smith

Wood firing can be expensive depending on your location and the availability of wood. Your local parks district just might be able (and more than willing) to help.

There is a major question that gets asked when thinking about building a wood kiln: Where will I get the wood and how much will it cost? Living in the Northern Plains in the Upper Midwest “fuels” this question. There is wood up here in the windbreaks between fields, but it’s not a wooded region. Many people living/teaching in urban or suburban areas may have the same reservations about wood firing.

I teach at the University of North Dakota and we built a *manabigama* wood kiln (John Thies design.) The design was chosen for its economy of wood use and size, which allows for more frequent firings. Still, we were spending a few hundred dollars on wood for each firing and this is a major expense for students—or studio potters. While at the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) conference a couple of years ago, I attended a lecture in which a researcher was monitoring the carbon footprint and gases given off during firing. The lecturer said that he/she was using deadfall wood from the national parks district near his/her studio.

This got my attention, but we had no national parks of that scale near us and we were in an urban area. We did have a river nearby, and there is a lot of deadfall along it from yearly flooding, so I decided to start at the top! I called the mayor’s office and simply started

asking if there was someone I could talk with to harvest this wood. Our biggest goals were to find a source of free wood for the students and to make sure we were not harvesting healthy vital trees. I got a response from the mayor’s office, “No, but we want to help you!” I was told the city parks district could help me out.

I was informed the city parks district managed large portions of the city and they were constantly dealing with windblown and diseased trees as well as trees that need to be removed for building projects. After discussions explaining what we were doing with the wood and a quick tour of the facilities, the parks district wanted to help. They told us they could not let us onto city property with chainsaws and equipment to gather the trees, but they were *willing to deliver* them to us—amazing!

The wood began streaming in; the logs were several feet long and ranged in size from 4 to about 36 inches in diameter. The first summer, we received something in the neighborhood of 30 cords of wood from the city. This started a great relationship. As we worked together, I learned that all the wood we were given was originally headed to the landfill. This was a perfect “green” partnership for the City of Grand Forks and the University of North Dakota. As it turned out,

in addition to keeping the trees from becoming landfill, we saved the city a couple hundred dollars per load in disposal fees and saved on transportation costs as we were located closer than the landfill. To date we have given extra wood to some nearby families who use it to heat their homes during the winter, to the Boy Scouts for tree ring counting, and we are still looking for ways to put all the wood to good use as it continues to be delivered.

This method of attaining wood could work for almost any person or group. Individuals can always start by contacting their local city administrators, local/state/or national park management, and individuals or groups that maintain hiking or various sports trails in your area. Other resources could include builders who must fell trees to construct homes or tree trimming/removal companies. The idea is to get in contact with anyone who might have to put trees into the landfill or burn them to destroy them. This saves everyone money and precious, shrinking landfill space, while giving ceramic artists an ecologically and socially responsible source for wood.

the author *Wesley L. Smith is an associate professor of ceramics at the University of North Dakota, Grand Forks.*



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1 The first delivery of free wood from the parks district arrived at the ceramics studio and logs were piled up near the wood kiln awaiting cutting. **2** The large logs were cut with a chainsaw into lengths appropriate for stoking. **3** Smith sits in front of the pile of split wood after many hours of collective hard work.