Slabbin' It Up with Rob & Larissa

1. Sourcing Materials

Sawmills: Most sawmills have a selection of slabs, especially now since they are so in vogue. You'll likely find species native to your part of the world.

Make it yourself: With a chainsaw and an Alaskan mill, or a portable bandsaw mill, you can make your own lumber. However, the idea that this method will save you money is a bit ludicrous. The time and effort it takes to produce useable material is very high. If you're happy supplying time and effort though, it does pay off.

Cost: Live edge boards will often be more expensive in price per board foot than their straight edged counterparts. It can be a bit bewildering because it appears the sawyer is eliminating an extra step from the process by leaving the live edge on, however, you're paying for the handling and stacking of irregular shapes as well as the care that goes into keeping a flitch together throughout the drying process.

Choosing the Right Slab

Moisture Content: Some mills will only offer air dried slabs, since the shapes are difficult to fit in standard kilns. Pay attention to when the slabs were initially cut and check the moisture content before jumping into a big project.

Size & Shape: There are an infinite number of natural shapes out there. You can let the material inspire the design of the rest of your project, or you can first design an idea and then look for a piece to fit it. You'll rarely find exactly what you're looking for, so you've got to be flexible. Keep in mind that wild-shaped slabs can make designing bases challenging and sometimes awkward.

Thickness - Thickness is very important in live edge work. If it's the edge itself you want to showcase, a 2-3" thick slab is what you're looking for. If the shape is the feature, the thickness is not as important.

2. Milling

Pay someone else to do it: There are millwork shops and sawmills that have wide belt sanders and large format planers that will mill slabs for you. Whether they are as particular as you would be with getting a truly flat surface probably depends on the outfit that you choose for the job.

Mill it yourself: The most effective means of dealing with slabs (for those of us that haven't saved up for that 36" planer yet) is by using the router. We use several versions of the same concept; A carriage that carries the router with a surface planning bit over the slab along two, dead straight rails.

3. Finishing the surface

The router doesn't leave a very beautiful surface in its wake. There will be ridges and burns and various issues left from the surface-planing bit going back and forth over the surface. The quickest and easiest way to deal with this unevenness is with a belt sander. Belt sanders have

their own issues and if you're not practiced in using one, you can often do more damage than good. Many brands offer a sanding frame to use with the belt sander that holds the sander level to eliminate tracks and dish marks. (Note: Our sanding frame is broken...might work for a photo, but not in real life.)

4. Edge treatment

Removing the Bark:
The first thing we do with the natural edge is remove the bark. The bark will break away eventually, so we want to remove it rather than have it fall off on its own onto someone's dining room floor. Bark also risks hiding insect infestation. Most notably, the dreaded powderpost beetle. These little critters can be in there chewing away forever if your material hasn't been kiln dried.
If the bark doesn't peel off easily, a drawknife can help to pull it away. In areas where the hold is tenacious, a standard screwdriver and a mallet are a good combination to chip away at the bark, without marring the edge underneath. If the edge is particularly uneven and pitted (like that often found with burl edges), a few cheap carving chisels you don't mind dulling can do the trick to get into tight areas.

Cleaning up the Edge:
With the bark removed, there will still be a lot of dust and furries (those hair-like fibers that stick up off the edge, you know the ones) left over. The goal is to leave some of the natural color and texture of the edge while making it feel nice to the touch.

Wire Wheel- A wire wheel in a drill does a great job to remove loose fibers and keep the natural shape of the edge intact.
Routing - Sometimes we need to carve away at softer areas. A Dremel with various carving bits makes short work of this.
Sand Blasting - We sometimes employ a sandblaster on burly areas. This cleans up the loose fibers and gives the edge a softer feel.
Sanding - We always break all sharp edges with sandpaper. We are sure to maintain the natural shape of the edge, but also need to make it soft to the touch.

5. Splits, Checks, and other defects

Splits, checks, knots, bark inclusions, and other defects are very common in live edge material.

Butterflies - Splits and checks need to be held together to prevent them from extending further into the slab as the wood expands and contacts over time. We inlay butterflies/bowties/keys into the surface across the split to secure it using a plunge router and chisels. The butterflies should be about 2/3 the thickness of the slab itself.

Bones – Bones are our take on the traditional angled style of butterflies/bowties. They are shaped with the organic, rounded look of actual bones. The organic shapes marry well with the smooth curves of a live edge slab. We make each bone one at a time so they are all made of unique shapes, sizes, and material that depend on the slab as well as the severity of the split.

Dutchmen – We use these guys to patch any major problems in the surface of the slab. Usually it's in the case of layers of growth peeling up that are often the result of windshake. Sometimes it's a loose knot that we don't want to fill entirely with epoxy. We'll find another, more stable knot to swap places.

6. To Fill or not To Fill

Some types of wood, like burl, will present with small, natural voids throughout it. In the instance of bark inclusion, there will likely be gaps as well as potentially soft areas. We are then left with the choice to fill the voids with something to create a continuous smooth surface or embrace the natural bumps and crevasses.

Epoxies – As a strong, stable, and easily-colored adhesive, epoxy resin makes for a great material to fill and stabilize voids.

Natural Color – In an effort to make our materials maintain their natural coloring, we use sander dust and bark crumbles as coloring agents mixed into the epoxy we use to fill spaces in the surface. Be sure to always use a darker wood dust when patching with epoxy to make it more of an accent- trying to match the colors exactly is nearly impossible.