



## Treespotting

In recent years, the abandoned lots and burned-out houses of downtown Detroit have given way to urban prairie. Weeds, vines, even trees poke out of broken windows, and one plant in particular, *Ailanthus altissima* — aka Tree-of-Heaven or “ghetto palm” — runs rampant. Able to grow a ravenous 5 feet a year, flourish in toxic soil, power through walls, and resist the occasional bullet, the exotic tree has become synonymous with urban blight.

But where some see an invasive pest, **Mitch Cope** sees opportunity. In 2005, Cope along with fellow artists **Ingo Vetter** and **Annette Weisser** founded the Detroit Tree of Heaven Woodshop, a collective of artists, arborists, and woodworkers that transforms the ghetto palm into lumber.

In a ritual they call “treespotting,” Cope and crew scout the streets of the Motor City for prime specimens. Once they’ve got their tree, arborist **Kevin Bingham** cuts it down and then they call up Last Chance Logs to Lumber, a small urban milling company that processes the wood on-site with a portable band saw.

Curing can be tricky. The tree’s large pores release a whopping 5 gallons of water a day during drying, which makes the wood susceptible to warping. A trial run with a solar kiln dehydrated the wood too quickly and made it crack. So far, the most effective technique has been drying it slowly outdoors under shelter. Cope admits experienced woodworkers have been stumped and surprised by the results.

The Woodshop turns out furniture and sculpture including a set of sleek, minimal benches for an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit. And although the project is essentially a design experiment, not a moneymaking venture, Cope believes that given the tree’s overabundance in urban and rural areas, an enterprising soul could turn their model into a viable business. Who said Detroit was out of ideas? —Jeanne Storck

» The Woodshop: [treeofheavenwoodshop.com](http://treeofheavenwoodshop.com)

*The Detroit Tree of Heaven Woodshop is taking part in Heartland, an exhibition of Midwestern art and ingenuity at the Smart Museum in Chicago. Oct. 1, 2009 — Jan. 17, 2010.*