

Pay attention to those grade stamps on lumber

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When you purchase lumber for a project at your favorite home improvement store or lumberyard, do you pay any attention to that stamp that appears on the side of every piece of lumber? Chances are your answer is no.

Depending on your project, this may or may not pose a problem. For some minor repairs, any grade of lumber may be fine. However, if you are constructing a deck, shed, addition or other substantial structural project, it is important to understand the grade stamp on the lumber to ensure that you purchase wood strong enough for your project.

According to the 2000 International Residential Code, load-bearing lumber must be identified with a grade mark from an approved grading or inspection agency. All lumber produced in America must carry a grade stamp approved by the All American Lumber Standard Committee Inc. (ALSC). There are five pieces of information included in every grade stamp:

1. The identification number or name of the mill where the lumber is produced.
2. The agency or association that certified the material.
3. The species of wood.
4. The grade of the lumber.
5. The seasoning of the lumber, including the moisture content and method of drying.

More than 90 percent of the softwood lumber produced in North America belongs to one of four species groups. Different species have different qualities; some are stiffer, some more flexible. Each of these groups contains several different wood types:

1. Spruce-Pine-Fir (SPF)
2. Douglas Fir-Larch (D-Fir
or D-Fir-L)
3. Hemlock-Fir (Hem-Fir)
4. Southern Pine (SYP)

Lumber grading is performed visually at the mill and is based upon the structural and appearance qualities of the material. Common grades are Select Structural (SS), No. 1 and Better, No.2, No. 3, and Utility Grade. In addition to these grades there is an additional grade category, Stud Grade (STUD), for framing walls.

The moisture content on the stamp can take the form of MC for moisture content or simply have a number indicating the percentage of moisture content after drying. Typically this number will be either 15 or 19. The method of drying will also be indicated by KD for kiln dried, S-Dry for surface dried, or HT for heat-treated.

Because the structural tables found in the building code are based partially upon lumber species and grade, for most homeowner projects these will be the most important of the five pieces of information on the grade stamp.

If you are planning a project with a floor or a roof or a load-bearing wall, the structural qualities of the lumber will make a difference. It is a good idea for you to consult with someone knowledgeable in the use of span tables or obtain span tables and learn to understand them yourself. Span tables indicate the strength and size of the lumber needed to span a given space, either as a floor joist or a roof rafter. The tables can be purchased from the International Code Council at iccsafe.org or by calling 1-800-786-4452.