



Understanding Proprietary Lumber Grades

What to Watch For When Evaluating Hardwood Lumber Suppliers

While some suppliers use branded or proprietary grading terms, it's important to understand how these differ from established industry standards like the NHLA (National Hardwood Lumber Association). This guide outlines the key differences and what questions to ask before you buy.

■ Industry Standard vs. Self-Defined Grades

Criteria	Industry Standard (NHLA)	Proprietary / Self-Defined
Definition	Clearly defined by NHLA	Internally defined by supplier
Enforcement	Third-party inspection	Self-regulated
Consistency	High — standardized	Varies by supplier
Comparability	Easy to compare quotes	Difficult — no shared meaning
Accountability	Objective standard exists	Subjective — supplier's interpretation

■ Key Risks of Proprietary Grading

1. Lack of Third-Party Enforcement

- Grades defined internally by the supplier
- Not governed by independent organizations
- No standardized inspection protocols
- No external verification across shipments

2. Inconsistent Definitions Across Suppliers

- "Premium," "Architectural Grade," "Select Plus," and "Deck Grade" each mean something different
- per supplier — no shared industry definition
- Same label can represent very different quality

3. Difficulty Comparing Quotes

- No apples-to-apples comparisons possible
- Pricing becomes harder to evaluate fairly
- Lower-grade material can be branded as higher value
- Creates pricing opacity in the market

4. Potential for Grade Inflation

- Defect tolerances may be adjusted internally
- Broader material ranges grouped into premium labels
- "Premium" may not reflect measurable improvements
- Perceived value may not match actual quality

5. Limited Accountability

- Quality disputes become subjective
- No governing body to reference for enforcement
- Responsibility falls on supplier's interpretation

6. Structural Performance Uncertainty

- Grade directly impacts strength and span performance
- Engineering assumptions may not be reliable
- Risk in deck framing, elevated structures, and commercial applications

■ 7. Marketing vs. Measurable Standards

Proprietary grades are often designed to differentiate products and positioned as higher-end alternatives. However, the key question should always be:

What are the actual, measurable defect limits and tolerances — not just the name of the grade?

■ **Best Practice: How to Protect Your Project**

When evaluating hardwood lumber, always ask:

- ✓ What standard is this grade based on? (NHLA or internal?)
- ✓ What defects are allowed — and to what extent?
- ✓ Is the grading independently verified?
- ✓ How consistent is the product across shipments?
- ✓ Can the supplier provide clear, written specifications?

Always verify grade specifications with your supplier before ordering. This guide is for reference only.