



Shading made from wood has been amongst the major growth areas in the last few years, building on a trend for natural materials. Here we examine some of them; plantation shutters, Venetians, and woodweaves with contributions from Decora, Custom West, California Shutter and Blind Company and Blind Solutions. Gerald Arding also considers the ethical implications.

# The wonder

## Wood Venetians The Natural Choice

### Decora Blind Systems

Over the past 10 years consumer preference has embraced wood Venetians. Wood Venetians were once a very aspirational hand crafted product, with high price tags and long lead times. It was during this early adaption stage that Decora built the Timberlux™ brand to become one of the brand leaders for quality and product choice.

As the wood market evolved there was a gap for a cost-effective made-to-measure wood Venetian blind that focused on quality. This demand led to the introduction of made-to-measure blinds with standard controls. Consumers were able to purchase with confidence high quality Basswood Venetians with quick lead times and affordable prices dramatically increasing the market for wood venetians.

Demand for quality and choice is always at the forefront of every blind manufacturer's product focus. The evolution of premium wood products has enabled all consumer price bands to be met. This can be witnessed through Decora's wood Venetian offering;

the handcrafted Timberlux™ brand with an extensive range of wood tones, colour options and finishes; Sunwood™ a premium brand within today's wood Venetian market place and Excel Wood™. Built on value this product offers the price conscious customer quality blinds and budget prices.



Initially, the wood Venetian market offered consumers a select number of wood tones with a standard finish. Advances in supplier capabilities have enabled blind manufacturers to offer a wide range of wood slat in various tones, finishes and colours. Painted finishes enable a blind to be manufactured in any colour, while technological developments allow for unique slat finishes such as sand blasted or high gloss finishes.

Blind accessories such as tapes are becoming increasingly popular. Tapes add an extra dimension to the blind and allow the consumer to customise their blind to create a unique focal point within a room.

The choice of slat size has also increased with consumer demand slat sizes range from 25mm, 35mm, 45mm, 50mm and recently the introduction of 65mm curved, routless slat is aimed at catering for those who aspire to have interior plantation shutters.

Interior style trends have contributed to the dramatic surge in demand for wood Venetians. Incorporating wood into a room adds warmth and richness. Wood flooring, furniture and accessories have all increased in popularity with wood Venetians becoming the perfect window dressing complementing many interior

## Plantation Shutters a great 'traditional' long term investment

Murray Clark, The California Company



There are several styles of shutters in the UK market, with plantation shutters being the most popular with consumers. This is probably because the slats can easily control the light levels in the room, and allow customers to get really creative with the design, the colour and the type of rod, and as such suit most spaces. Plantation shutters are originally named after the large 19th century mansions in the southern states of America. These mansions feature louvers, which open and close to minimise the midday heat, improve ventilation and maintain privacy levels. One trend that's been popular in the US for a number of years and is now creeping into the UK shutter market is for bigger louvers for an ultra modern look.

At The California Company wooden plantation shutters currently account for 95% of total sales.

Hardwood plantation shutters are a great investment for a number of reasons: they



offer light control; maintain privacy levels; are incredibly easy to maintain; are energy efficient; add value to the property; are durable; are child-friendly; and are more hygienic than curtains and can simply be wiped clean. More flexible and cost effective than curtains, shutters make a fantastic feature out of windows.

In the current economic climate, more consumers are choosing to put their move on hold and invest in and improve their current house, so there's never been a greater opportunity for the shutter market to grow and develop in the UK. A recent survey by the AA (May 2009) and OnePoll found that almost five million home owners have decided not to sell their house during the recession, whilst over six million will renovate and improve their homes over the next year.

Yellow Poplar and Elm are amongst the most durable woods on the market, and after rigorous testing have proved most effective against warping and shrinking – perfect for high quality shutters. At The California Company all the hardwood shutters are made out of either Yellow Poplar or Elm.

The current customer breakdown is roughly 60:40, men and women, aged 35 plus, ABC1. This is most probably because shutters are a large purchase for any house and, with any high quality wooden shutters, it's not something that you'd invest in every couple of years – shutters are most definitely a longer term purchase.

Consumers are also internet-savvy, and more interested in hunting out bargains. As people are now working longer hours too, it's becoming increasingly important for shutter companies to have an internet presence, where

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# of wood

styles. The neutral characteristics of wood offer a universal appeal in interiors, whilst its generic properties enable this blind to suit all genders and tastes. The extensive range of woods on offer enables both traditional and contemporary preferences to be met. The demand for wood is set to continue. As wood is a highly adaptable product it will remain a high trend product, keeping up with evolving interior trends.

In addition to aesthetics, wood has high energy efficiency properties in comparison to other blinds. Wood is a natural insulator, creating a barrier between the room and the window, so helping save energy and lower cooling and heating costs.

As with all wood products, world wide, it is the social responsibility of every blind manufacturer to ensure they source quality Basswood from reliable and environmentally friendly sources. FSC certification has become a must for socially aware companies. It is imperative however, that blind manufacturers continue to adhere to FSC regulations when sourcing wood products. Companies should endeavour to reduce their impact on the environment by sourcing wood responsibly.

The continued aim for wood Venetian manufacturers is not only to keep up with wood trends, but also ensure efficient service, high quality standards and quick turnaround times as the bar for consumer expectations continues to rise.



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customers can browse and purchase products 24 hours a day, seven days a week, at a time convenient for them.

The California Company has seen average increases of 260% in sales month-on-month on 2008 for shutters, and this is down in part to the interactive, easy-to-use website and simple ordering processes, designed to make the customer journey as easy as possible.

How are customers using the products; in what locations; and what do the products add to the general décor in the location

Wooden shutters provide a chic alternative to blinds and curtains, and can significantly alter the look and feel of any room. The best thing about them is their versatility, and there are very few spaces that cannot accommodate shutters – round, triangular, on doors, on roofs, the possibilities are endless. And there's relative flexibility too on the size; the largest shutters The California Company's ever made were a massive eight metres!

The most popular colour at the moment is white. White goes with just about everything and helps to pull in the light – great for darker rooms.

The California Company has supplied shutters in a number of different locations, including family homes, restaurants and hotels. But probably the most unusual was in a series of

old Pullman train carriages, which were part of a B&B in Petworth called The Old Railway Station. The old carriages had been converted into guest bedrooms, and The California Company installed full length shutters in a custom-made mahogany shade that fitted in with the original fittings. The shutters looked fantastic and created a real unity in the design of each carriage.

As consumers are increasingly interested in purchasing products that are sustainable and environmentally friendly, it's important that the shutter industry takes responsibility for the wood that they harvest.

At The California Company all the wooden shutters are made using Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certified hardwoods. The FSC is a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to promoting responsible forest management, ensuring that wood is grown, harvested and replanted in a way that does not harm the environment.

Gaining FSC certification is an in-depth process, and involves a complete review of the materials and the processes used. But it is well worth it - all FSC certified products are then listed by category on the FSC website.

The California Company believes it's important that customers know that 100% of the wood used in their shutters does not have a negative impact on the planet, so they can shop with a clear conscience.



## Woodweave Blinds as popular as ever

### Steve Whitehead Blind Solutions

Woodweave blinds have been around for quite some time now and remain as popular as ever due to their versatility and handsome good looks, which enhance any room in the house. As the name implies, the fabric is made up of bamboo and wood bound together by cotton yarn. The most common wood is poplar due to its stability and fine grain which is accentuated by various stains

Suitable for both window and roof blinds, Woodweave offers excellent insulation properties whilst at the same time allowing a pleasing dappled light to filter into the room. The light changes with the intensity of the sunlight to give a relaxing natural ambience throughout the day.

The ethnic look is still very much in vogue, combine this with a growing demand for 'green' and recyclable products and you have the perfect market for Woodweave. As an eco friendly blind it cannot be bettered.

With a large selection of coloured edging braids and bottom bars it gives the blind retailer the opportunity to design a tailor made blind to compliment any room, which if used correctly is a great sales tool. If you let your creative designer side out you can add different materials and textures to the blind to create a stunning



window decoration. For example add a leather valance with a matching covered bottom bar, or stainless steel or coloured Perspex or whatever else your clients desire. Woodweave offers so many opportunities to go for the 'WOW' factor which creates desire and from that, sales. To facilitate this, we at Blind Solutions have put

together a stunning collection of colours and designs that now number around seventy in total.

Closely allied to woven wood is grass weave, which as the name implies is a beautiful fabric composed of grass, jute and bamboo woven together with cotton, to give the most

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natural looking blind on the market today. This fabric has been particularly well received in conservatories as you are able to see through the weave to appreciate the beauty of the garden whilst at the same time enjoying privacy and heat/glare control.



Of course being a natural product bound together by a cotton cord working with the Woodweave is more an art than a science, but years of experience have enabled us to understand this product and produce stunning blinds throughout the UK, Europe and beyond. We were asked to make some blinds for a beach-side bungalow in the Bahamas as the owner thought the heat reducing properties, whilst allowing filtered light through, were perfect for this little piece of paradise. I explained to the customer that in that intensity of the sun the wood was bound to fade and he replied "Great, I love the distressed look." As you can imagine, there were lots of volunteers to measure and fit this job!

Best of all, in these difficult times, Woodweave is a highly desirable product that gives the blind retailer the opportunity to create desire and sell up. It is a premium product offering excellent profit as the margins have not yet been squeezed unlike some other blinds.



## Venetian and plantation shutters – it's all wood

### Peter Wellings CustomWest

"Cut-down wood Venetian blinds were flying out of the door until just recently, which was probably due to the collapse of the buy-to-let market. The wooden Venetian blind has a sophisticated look and because, in this case, it is a complete blind but, cut-down, the cost is not exorbitant, suiting this particular market. Whilst previous levels of sales will take some time to recover, Venetians are still popular. The cut down market is price driven. The higher quality bespoke venetian blind, moving towards wider slats, is driving the market forward.

The picture shows CustomWest's most popular colour, Silk White, 50% of all wood blinds are supplied in this colour. "Even within our Lumberjack cut-down collection and more

expensive bespoke Phoenix top end designer blinds, we still sell more of silk white than any other colour. And incidentally 80% of our plantation shutters sold in the UK are also in this colour."

Peter claims, "The cheapest cut-down wood blinds can only be supplied in 1800mm width and 2400mm drop. However, CustomWest can supply a much higher quality a 3000mm drop on the same widths on both ranges.

The trend in Venetians is for bigger wider slats, 25mm was once very popular, but now it's 50mm with 35mm running a close second. In fact plantation shutters supplied in 63mm wide slats are 65% of all sold, 6 years ago 47mm was the most popular.

A wood blind is supposed to be left down, if you pull them up and down every day the cords will only last 12 months or so. They are not designed to be raised constantly as many

people think they are and larger Venetian blinds are heavy. We can get round this problem by installing an easy lift pulley system hidden within the bottom bar. This option is not normally available with the low cost cut down blinds.

It is a fact that the English expect plenty of light in their rooms. When they order a plantation shutter they think they want to be able to 'open' the shutters daily (in reality they rarely do). So they go for shutters with smaller width panels which when open take less space from the room and have more uprights, which restrict the light. As a result you can end up producing shutters for a design the customer does not use. In contrast the American average panel width is 490mm, compared to the UK where it is 275mm. So it costs nearly double in labour to produce shutters for UK."

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