

Road Map to Success

How to choose a path that is right for you

By Rob Pickett

Question: When shopping for a log home, how do you prioritize products and companies?

Answer: This is a common question because of the wide variety of log-home companies and the number of options each company offers. At first glance, it can be overwhelming. With more than 400 companies offering milled or handcrafted products, how does one make a sane decision?

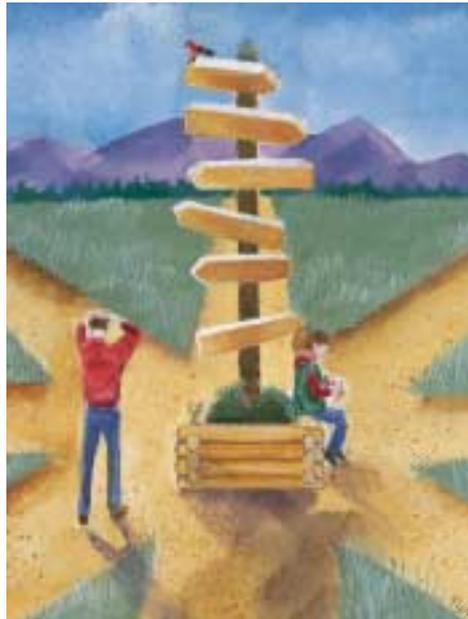
Always and without hesitation, my first response is to contact the Log Homes Council (LHC) for a list of its members or visit its website: www.loghomes.org. I have been an active advocate and contributor to the LHC for nearly 20 years. I believe that the member companies are dedicated to quality as reflected by participation in a log-grading program, providing a construction manual and upholding a code of ethics. And, within the LHC, there is a broad range of products from which to choose.

There are some log-home companies of similar caliber that have not chosen to join the LHC. They can be more difficult to identify and close comparisons are required. Since such comparisons require investigations that take time, I suggest that the first filter is to look for the logo or emblem of the LHC in company advertisements, literature, etc. Membership in the International Log Builders Association (ILBA) can also be an indicator, although the philosophy of its organization has evolved into a quality ethic that differs from the LHC's mandatory performance.

The second filter is to define what appeals to you. As you flip through the pages of this magazine, what style of log home attracts your eye? Identify its log style (shape and size of the logs) and corner design, both on the interior and exterior. This is a very personal choice and needs to be done at this phase of the search.

As a service to you, this magazine offers many tools, but a significant one is its Annual Buyer's Directory, published every fall. When you have identified the log style(s) for you, scanning the pages of this directory issue will help you refine the list of potential companies.

Let's say that the first two filters have reduced the vast possibilities down to around a dozen. That's still too many to compare.



THEODORA TILTON

The next filter involves direct communication with those options. Ask questions about their process—no, not the product yet, we'll get back to that. As you start contacting companies, pay attention to how they treat you, how they describe the steps to successful completion of your new home. Write down the ones with which you feel that you would be comfortable dealing. You will be living with this decision for a long time, so make it a process that is most likely to make you happy. You are very important to every company, and quite often the decision is based on the people you meet.

One feature of the process that can differentiate your priorities is to look at the design capabilities of the company. Some offer exceptional custom-home design or focus on construction documents detailing assembly of handcrafted or precision pre-cut materials. Look at the extent of information provided to the builder on the plans, construction manual and other resources made available to you. These construction documents and training methods will indicate how much responsibility you or your builder will bear in the construction phase.

Have we narrowed our candidates down to three or four companies? If so, this is a manageable number to compare details.

Thirty years ago, companies produced their log products from indigenous woods and used construction methods commonly successful to their local and regional areas. Special requests were not well received, and non-standard wood species were available only at a premium price. Today's industry has matured and become more sophisticated, with economic factors providing broader options beyond regional choices. Still, companies specialize in certain wood species, log styles, production styles and other details to differentiate themselves.

There are other points of comparison. These cannot be prioritized because each log-wall system is designed to be structurally sound, weathertight and durable when built in accordance with the plans, construction manual and details provided with the materials package.

Durability is achieved by preserving the integrity

of the wood itself: naturally resistant wood species vs. Environmental Protection Agency-rated preservative treatments prior to shipping vs. design features (e.g., drier logs, protection from grade, porches and overhangs) and site-applied products. Don't confuse this with maintenance. When wood is exposed to the weather, whether log, log siding or clapboard siding, all companies recommend annual inspection and periodic maintenance to keep the wall looking and performing as expected.

Differential settling occurs in all wood structures as the wood acclimates to its environment. Solid wood walls tend to accentuate this, but there are ways to manage it. Just as trim and joints in conventional framing should allow up to one-half inch of shrinkage from foundation to first floor ceiling, comparable performance is achieved in log-wall systems that limit settling to one-half inch (0.5 percent of the height in question) in an 8-foot wall. Look at provisions for change in log-wall height (adjustments over a period of two or three heating-cooling cycles) vs. processes and methods designed to restrict walls from losing more than that one-half inch. Looking at something as simple as flashing details can also point you toward a possible decision.

Rural construction may not require special construction or design, but building in "wildlands" means that certain resources (e.g., available water supply, applying biofuel management, etc.) are unavailable rapidly. This is important to log walls when it comes to fire and is addressed by the International Code Conference (ICC) Urban-Wildland

Interface Code. This code requires a one-hour fire-resistance rated exterior wall in certain conditions and recognizes a log wall with a minimum 6-inch thickness to meet that requirement.

Energy conservation is a big subject that is covered by the ICC International Energy Conservation Code (IECC). This code recognizes log walls and does not specify any minimum wall requirements. The U.S. Dept. of Energy maintains its REScheck software to demonstrate code compliance of home designs. At this time, this is the best way to qualify the requirements for your log-home design on your building site.

The last item for this discussion would be the extent of log construction knowledge of you and your builder. Builders and craftsmen with extensive knowledge do not need the benefits of manufacturing processes to construct a beautiful, functioning log home. But builders may enjoy working with log walls more when they experience a precision pre-cut wall system. Also, handcrafted log products often include supervision during the assembly of the walls and framing. The range is wide and should be considered.

By the way, did you notice that I haven't mentioned package price? **LHI**

Rob Pickett of Rob Pickett and Associates www.robpickettandassoc.com, a housing-technology consulting firm in Hartland, Vermont, is a specialist in log and timber building systems and a past president of the Log Homes Council. Submit questions for this column to robpickett@vermontel.net.