

Grading Gun Stock Walnut

By Chuck Hawks



Holland & Holland Royal SxS shotgun with 100% engraving and "Royal grade" European walnut stock. Photo courtesy of Holland & Holland.

Walnut gunstocks are often graded by descriptive name, such as "Semi fancy," or by designation, such as "Grade I," "X," or "A" grade. Some rating systems use a number, with #1 usually being the best and #5 the lowest. These are attempts to rate the attractiveness of the stock on a comparative basis, but the various systems can be confusing, to say the least. This little piece is my attempt to make some sense of it all.

The types of walnut most commonly used for gunstocks include American black walnut (*Juglans Nigra*), European walnut (*Juglans Regia*) and Claro walnut (*Juglans Hindsii*). Bastogne walnut, from California, is a cross-breed (*Juglans Hindsii* x *Juglans Regis*). European walnut (*J. regia*) is often called English walnut, French walnut, Spanish walnut, Turkish walnut, Circassian walnut, etc., depending on where it is harvested; these are all the same species of walnut.

European walnut of higher grades is notable for mineral streaking, while American black walnut in the higher grades is known for fancy figure and fiddleback. Higher grade walnut has more streaking, figure and fiddleback. Figure and streaking must be on both sides of the stock blank. Medium Fancy grade and lower often are not the same on both sides of the stock. In such cases, the *less* attractive side should determine the overall grade.

Unfortunately, there are no hard and fast rules and determining the grade of walnut is subjective at best, even among honest appraisers. Some stock blanks are legitimate "sliders," meaning they could be classed up or down a grade, as no two blanks are identical. The subjectiveness of grading walnut leaves plenty of room for the unscrupulous to intentionally deceive the buying public.

Most sources list three or four grades of non-fancy wood (Utility through Select below) and four to six grades of fancy wood (Semi-Fancy through Presentation below). Few sources list all of the grades below, typically lumping some categories together (often Select with Standard, Moderately Fancy with Medium Fancy and Presentation with Exhibition). Sources that use letter grades mostly use "A" and "X" interchangeably; AA equals XX, etc.

Some sources consider the top (ultimate) grade of wood to be "Exhibition," while others call their top (ultimate) grade of wood "Presentation." Still others use both terms, with Presentation being a higher grade than Exhibition.

Different sources sometimes move descriptive and letter grades up or down one level. One company's A grade walnut may be another company's AA grade. For instance, some equate Extra Fancy with AAA grade and consider Exhibition grade above AAA, while others equate Extra Fancy with AA grade and Exhibition with AAA grade.

In very general terms, inexpensive production guns (field grade guns) with walnut stocks, including most rimfire rifles, usually come with Utility to Standard grade wood. Medium and Medium-High priced production guns (Browning X-Bolt, Browning BPS, Browning Citori Grade I, Marlin 336, Mossberg Patriot, Remington 700 BDL/CDL, Remington 870 Wingmaster, Savage Hunter, Winchester Model 70, Winchester Model 94 and similar) usually come with Standard grade stocks.

Somewhat fancier models, such as the Kimber Classic Select Grade, Mossberg Patriot Revere, Nosler M48, Ruger No. 1 and Weatherby Sporter rifles are often supplied with Select to Semi-Fancy grade wood, as are many limited edition guns.

The most expensive production guns, such as high grade Browning Citori shotguns, Weatherby Mark V Deluxe and Kimber Super America rifles often come with Moderately Fancy to Fancy grade walnut. Rifles and shotguns with even higher grade stocks are usually semi-custom, custom, or bespoke guns and are typically also upgraded with hand engraving, inlays, hand checkering, stock carving and other adornments.

The quality and complexity of engraving, checkering, inlays, etc. is usually paralleled by the grade of wood, although this is not always true. For example, a Winchester Model 21 Grand American shotgun (100% engraving with gold inlays) normally comes with Exhibition grade walnut.

Custom gunmakers and the small manufacturers of bespoke guns typically give their customers a lot of latitude and often allow customers to select their own stock blank or upgrade the wood (at additional charge). For example, the [Grulla 216RL SxS Shotgun](#) reviewed by *Guns and Shooting Online* was ordered upgraded with Royal (Exhibition) grade Spanish walnut .

The grades underlined below are probably the most commonly used designations and their equivalents. I have placed a line of demarcation between what are generally considered the non-fancy and fancy grades of wood.

Walnut Grades

Utility (Very plain wood, usually some sapwood and minor blemishes): Economy grade.

Standard (Sturdy, straight grain flow, possibly some sapwood and minor blemishes): Grade I.
Class 1.

Select (The upper portion of standard grade; decent grain flow, no sapwood, no visible defects): Grade II, Hand Select

Semi-Fancy (Good grain flow with character in color, contrast or fiddleback): #5, Grade III, Class 2.

Moderately Fancy (Good figure, color, or both): Grade IV, #4, Class 2.5.

Medium Fancy (Good figure, good color, some fancy figure behind wrist on both sides): A, X, #3

Fancy (Good color and at least 25% fancy figure behind wrist on both sides): AA, XX, #2, Grade V, Class 3

Extra Fancy (Good color and at least 50% fancy figure behind wrist on both sides): AAA, XXX, #1, Grade VI, Class 4.

Exhibition/Presentation (At least 75% fancy figure behind wrist on both sides, extraordinary figure and color): Grade VII, Class 5, Premium, Royal.