

A collection of various brushes and a sponge are arranged on a light-colored wooden surface. The brushes include a red-handled brush at the top left, a black-handled brush with a yellow head, a large brush with a yellow head and black handle, a brush with a green handle and white bristles, and a brush with a yellow handle and black bristles at the bottom. A black sponge is also visible. The background is a wooden surface with some visible grain and knots.

Brushes for Woodworkers

Choose the right one for the job and get great results

BY PETER GEDRYS

Visit a pro finisher's shop and you are likely to be confronted with a bewildering array of brushes: round handles, flat handles, bristles long and short, ox hair, goat hair, squirrel hair, and nylon. Why do I have so many? The most important thing that a finisher knows about brushes is exactly what a woodworker knows about router bits: One size and shape does not fit all.

That's because there's more to finishing than just brushing liquid onto flat, rectangular surfaces. The brush that works well for that isn't the best choice for narrow or curved surfaces.

To help you pick the right one, here's an overview of the brushes that I use most often. With a little guidance you can put together a custom brush kit that will help you handle any situation, from applying clear finishes on flat surfaces to detail work with dyes and glazes.

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Clear winners for clear finishes

A good finish brush should hold a generous amount of liquid, releasing it only at the point of contact with the surface. There are some general rules to follow: synthetic filaments for waterborne finishes, natural filaments for solvent-based finishes.

Flat surfaces

For finishing large, flat surfaces like doors or tabletops with varnish or waterborne products, a foam brush is my first choice.

Why? The biggest reason is that a foam brush lays down an even coat of finish with no brush marks. Contrary to popular myth, a foam brush won't leave bubbles in your finish. Just be sure to steer clear of

the super-cheap ones with minimal interior support. Look for the ones that have a plastic support right up to the bevel.

Also, take care in loading the brush. First dampen it on the bevel and just above it with a few drops of the appropriate solvent, then dip it into the finish just past the bevel. Take the brush out of the finish and turn the bevel faceup to let the liquid soak in. Repeat this dip and turn once more for a useful charge of finish.

Foam brushes are terrific, but I avoid using them with shellac because the alcohol in the shellac will melt the foam. So, for applying shellac on large, flat surfaces, I use an extrawide brush (below) made with ordinary natural white china hog bristles. This brush is 4 in. wide with short (1³/₄-in.) bristles (Varnish and gesso brush No. 85062100, \$17; kremerpigments.com). The generous width lets me cover a lot of surface area quickly without frequent reloading.

FOAM IS SURPRISINGLY GOOD



Dip and tip. To avoid bubbles in the finish, don't press the sponge against the cup. Instead, angle it upward to let the liquid soak in (above). Foam leaves a smooth finish with no brush marks (right).



NATURAL CHINA HOG BRISTLES FOR SHELLAC

Go wide. Gedrys favors an extra-wide, short-bristle brush for applying shellac over large areas. The extra width minimizes the overlapping strokes that can create unsightly lines in your finish.



Clear finishes continued



GOAT HAIR DOME MOP

OX HAIR



Details

For profiled surfaces and other details, I use a flat brush with short 1-in. filaments. This one (left) is made with soft black ox hair (Habico No. 660D; \$53, Sepp Leaf Products, 800-971-7377). The brush is small, measuring just 6 in. long. The handle is flat and extremely thin, making it comfortable to hold and easy to control. The filaments are beveled at the tip and lay down a very fine coat due to the softness of the hair.

This little brush can cover a lot of ground. Once the brush is fully charged with varnish, I can easily do the narrow facets of the raised panels of a large door and I only have to dip it in the finish once or twice.

For applying clear finish to irregular surfaces, my first choice is a round brush shaped like a mop and made with very soft goat hair (Winsor & Newton 140 series wash, $\frac{3}{4}$ in. or $\frac{7}{8}$ in.; \$7.50, dickclick.com).

The brush holds a lot of finish. Fully loaded, it can lay a thin, even coat on a table leg without reloading. The soft hairs are also long and flexible enough that they can lay flat and conform to any surface you're finishing—a huge help on parts like turned table legs, especially those that are tapered or reeded.

Despite its softness, the brush holds a great “point,” coming to a well-defined narrow tip that is ideal for finishing carved details such as ball-and-claw feet.



For small, flat surfaces. This brush is great for narrow, flat surfaces. Gedrys puts the brush inside a disposable glove (inset) to keep it from drying out between coats.



Curved surfaces. For curved areas, the shape and softness of this mop brush allow it to apply finish evenly.

Stay synthetic for waterborne

To apply waterborne finishes on flat surfaces, Gedrys uses foam brushes again. But for irregular surfaces and details, he chooses mops and flat brushes with nylon bristles.



FOAM

NYLON BRISTLE
FILBERT

Best brushes for color

Gedrys uses a different set of small artist's brushes for tasks like isolating veneers, cutting in dyes, blending glazes, and touch-ups.

SMALL ROUND ARTIST

Small brushes for small details

For detail work that calls for fine lines of color, I use small, round artist's brushes in several sizes (Winsor & Newton series 101, sizes 1 to 3, \$4.50-\$5.50; dickblick.com). A good round brush is made with a mix of natural sable and synthetic filaments. The brush holds a sharp point—ideal for tasks like applying narrow lines of shellac over holly stringing, to keep it lighter than the surrounding surface after stain is applied. I also use rounds to hide filler for nail or screw holes, adding fine lines of color to mimic the grain. I also have several flat artist's brushes in sizes ranging from 10mm to 19mm (Winsor & Newton Series 606, \$9-\$19; dickblick.com). These lay down a very straight line; I use them when blending sapwood to heartwood or adding dye adjacent to stringing that I've already isolated.

Two specialists for glazing

When working with glazes, I keep two brushes handy: one for applying glaze to detail areas and another for blending glaze across a larger surface. These two brushes are as different as night and day. One has a limited row of stiff hair shaped like a fan and the other has long, soft, squared-off bristles.

A fan brush, used with a pushing or pouncing motion, is great for applying small amounts of glaze to detail areas like cock beading or reeded legs (Cambridge fan, size 4, \$8; dickblick.com). Fans can be purchased with hairs of different tensile strengths—stiffer for pushing glaze into recesses and softer for blending.

To blend out and feather glaze on a larger scale, I use a softener (Cadet hog softener, 100mm, \$54; finepaintsofeurope.com). Whisk the brush lightly and consistently across a surface to eliminate any application lines.



Master the fine points. Small round artist brushes are ideal for touching up damaged finishes and other fine detail work.



Flat and straight. The rectangular shape of this brush helps it follow a line—even a curved one—very accurately.



FLAT ARTIST



FAN

Every finisher needs a fan. The broom-like bristles of this brush are used to pounce and daub glaze into hard-to-reach areas.



NON-FERRULE SOFTENER



A brush for blending. The softener removes excess color and blends what remains. Wipe the excess glaze onto a paper towel dampened with solvent.