



Fast Shellac Finish

Build an attractive
finish in three
easy steps

BY MICHAEL PEKOVICH

Shellac is a finish that a lot of woodworkers shy away from. If you've ever tried to brush it on straight from the can, you probably didn't like it very much. And if you've read an article on the fine art of French polishing, you're forgiven if you were left feeling a little intimidated.

The truth is that shellac is a great fast-drying finish that's easy to apply and perfect for small projects and last-minute gifts. It dries quickly between

coats and lets you build up the finish gradually so you can really dial in the sheen you're looking for. I have a very simple technique that yields a nice satin finish that's friendly to the touch in about 30 minutes.

The key to success is thin layers, but it all starts with surface preparation. Any mill marks, tearout, or sanding scratches will show up in the final finish, so getting a flat and smooth surface is a must. For open-pore woods like oak, sand to

STEP 1 SEAL AND SAND



Thin the shellac for easy application. A one-to-one ratio of SealCoat, a dewaxed blond shellac, and denatured alcohol lets you wipe on thin coats that dry quickly.



One part
alcohol

One part
shellac



Start with a good base. The first coat, called the washcoat, seals the fibers and raises the grain. This coat will get sucked into the wood and dry quickly. After the washcoat is dry, use the highest-grit paper that you used for prep to knock down the raised grain.

Online Extra

To see how to mix your own shellac from flakes, go to FineWoodworking.com/extras.

at least 400 grit; for closed-pore woods such as cherry and maple, sand to 600 grit.

Premixed must be remixed

One of the funky things about using shellac is that it's not ready to use straight from the can—it needs to be diluted. Undiluted, the shellac will be prone to runs and drips, and will take longer to dry. Diluting, or cutting, the shellac remedies these issues. Fortunately, getting the right mix ratio from canned shellac isn't difficult. I prefer

STEP 2 BUILD THE FINISH



TIP PREFINISH AS NEEDED



Shellac dries fast, so you can finish parts without slowing down assembly. This means you can pre-finish components like these dividers that would be hard to reach after glue-up.

Even, straight wipes.

One of the benefits of this technique is the ability to build up the finish in thin coats. Apply the shellac in straight, slightly overlapping passes (above) and don't go over any areas again until the coat is dry. As your finish builds, smooth any rough spots or areas of raised grain with a light scuff of fine sandpaper (right).



SealCoat from Zinsser, a light-colored shellac with the wax removed. Wax occurs naturally in shellac, but removing it increases the clarity, durability, and moisture resistance of the finish as well as allowing other finishes to adhere to it. To use SealCoat, simply dilute it 1:1 with denatured alcohol.

Build the finish in thin coats

I wipe on the shellac with a clean cotton cloth. The diluted mixture will dry fast, so drips and runs shouldn't be a problem. Store the rag in a closed container to keep it from drying out and you can use it indefinitely.

No matter how smooth the surface was after sanding, it will probably feel rough after the first coat. The initial coat performed the important task of saturating the wood fibers and locking them in place. A quick sand with your final smoothing grit should return



Stop before the finish gets too thick. Pekovich applies coats until the surface is just a bit glossier than he wants in the finished product. This will ensure adequate protection without building too thick of a film finish.

STEP 3 POLISH WITH STEEL WOOL AND WAX



Smooth and wax in one step. The steel wool and wax combination levels any dust particles and produces a satin finish that's friendly to the touch. Wet the steel wool with some mineral spirits and then dip it into the wax. This will make it easier to apply a thin, even coat. Once the wax has dried, buff out the piece with a clean cotton rag (right).



the smooth surface. With the fibers locked in place, the surface should stay fairly smooth through the rest of the finishing process.

Shellac is a solvent-based finish, which means wiping on a coat will partially dissolve the coats you've already applied. Don't wipe back and forth over wet surfaces or you'll run the risk of lifting off the finish as you're trying to build it up. Instead, wipe it on using straight, slightly overlapping coats, and wait for the surface to dry before applying additional coats. This might sound time consuming, but it's not. By the time you finish coating all the surfaces of a project, the first surfaces should be dry enough for the next coat. After three or four coats, the finish will stay sticky longer and dry more slowly. At this point, hold up for 10 minutes or so, which should be enough time for the finish to cure.

Before continuing, check for rough areas from raised grain or dust, and scuff-sand these spots with fine sandpaper as necessary. After another coat or two, you should be close to having enough finish on the project. Even though I'm aiming for a satin finish, I apply enough coats that it's slightly glossier than I'd like. The finish at this point might be a little streaky or have a slightly uneven shine, but that's OK. The last step will even everything out.

Finish with steel wool and wax

The final step is to rub out the finish by applying paste wax with fine steel wool. This should remove any roughness, but if you find any problem areas, hit them with 600-grit sandpaper. To make the wax easier to apply, dip the steel wool in mineral spirits first. This will dilute the wax for smoother application. Finally, buff the surface with a clean rag. □

Michael Pekovich is a furniture maker, instructor, and FWW's executive art director.

TIP

ADD PROTECTION WHERE YOU NEED IT

In places that will see wear or moisture, a coat or two of wiping varnish will help protect the surface. The additional peace of mind doesn't take much more time.

