



Maintaining

Despite the wide range
of products, a simple
waxing is best



a Finish

BY TERI MASASCHI

The number of furniture-care products on the market is staggering: There are liquid waxes and polishes, spray polishes, oils with color in them, dust removers with scents in them, and dozens of paste waxes. Everyone has seen, read, or heard the advertisements for these products: The wood in your house must be fed; it is drying out, and it must be re-hydrated or oiled! Or, conversely, too much polishing will lead to the dreaded “wax buildup.”

Most of this is pure hype, but the products sell because most homeowners want to keep their furniture looking its best. Woodworkers are even more motivated to take care of their creations and thus are extra vulnerable to the sales pitch. The good news is that you can ignore most of these products; I'll show you which ones have value and how best to use them.

Why sprays and oils have limited use

The biggest-selling furniture-care products are aerosol sprays and liquids because they are so easy to apply. They fall into three main categories: emulsion polishes, oils, and silicone polishes.

Emulsion polishes are best kept for cleaning—These are emulsified blends of water and oil packaged in cans and sprays. They are recognizable by their milky appearance when first applied. Because emulsion polishes contain both water and petroleum distillates, they are good for removing grease and dirt. They are also suitable for a quick dust pickup and leave a non-greasy surface, but a very limited shine. A cloth dampened in warm, soapy water cleans just as well.

Oils leave a slick surface that attracts dust and dirt—There is a large range of furniture oils, but the main ingredients usually are petroleum-based mineral oil and mineral spirits. Sometimes the latter is replaced with or augmented by a citrus-based solvent that gives a pleasant smell. Other options include added color to help hide scratches.

When applied, these products leave a very temporary shiny, slick surface. They are a favorite of antiques dealers because that glorious shine will last long enough to get the piece out of the shop. How-

ever, the oil left on the surface is a magnet for dust and dirt, so it's better to avoid this type of polish.

Silicone gives a high shine and refinishing nightmares—Many popular emulsion and oil polishes such as Pledge, Old English, and Orange Glo contain silicone. This gives the wood a temporary slippery, polished surface, but silicone is a dirty word for refinishers. If you try to refinish a piece of furniture that has been polished with a silicone spray, the residue will play havoc with getting the new finish to stick.

Paste wax protects and enhances furniture

A regular application of paste wax is the best maintenance you can give your furniture, but it is important to know what paste waxes can and cannot do. When applied thinly and buffed out, paste wax will give a longer-lasting shine than any of the sprays and oils I described. It will conceal minor scratches and other surface blemishes, and by raising the surface sheen, it will give the wood a deeper look. Also, by making the surface slick, paste wax reduces friction, letting

Emulsion polishes



Emulsion polishes clean well. Recognizable by their milky appearance, emulsion polishes are a blend of oil and water. They are good for cleaning dirt and grease but leave only a temporary shine.

Oil polishes



Oils attract dirt. Oiling furniture gives the piece a high shine in the short term but attracts dirt and dust.



objects slide over the surface without scratching it.

Paste wax should not be used to clean furniture: Dirt and grime are removed best with a damp, soapy cloth, and dusting should be done with a microfiber cloth (see photo, facing page) before applying wax. Wax will not fix a severely damaged surface; in that case, you'll have to sand or strip the old finish before applying a new one.

A different wax for each task—

Most paste waxes are combinations of different waxes blended for specific jobs. Popular components include hard carnauba or candelilla derived from plants, medium-density beeswax, and soft paraffin wax.

A paste wax designed for floors, such as Butcher's Bowling Alley Wax, is not a good choice for furniture. Its large percentage of carnauba wax is designed to be buffed out with a machine. On the other hand, a product that contains too much soft paraffin wax is likely to remain smeary on the wood. Good choices for furniture include Staples, Liberon's Black Bison, Briwax, and Antiquax.

All waxes contain solvents to keep them smooth and workable. Many of these, such as toluene, are fairly strong and toxic. People who are sensitive should wear gloves and use good ventilation when waxing. Also, never wax a brand-new finish because the solvents will erode the finish. Wait a week for most finishes to cure and at least a month for lacquer.

Paste waxes also are available in many colors. A dark wax can give dark furniture a richer look, and is important particularly if the surface is grainy or carved. A clear wax that gets lodged in cracks and crannies will appear white when it dries. A dark brown wax won't show up after it is dry.

If you have an antique to care for, you'll need to use a man-made wax to avoid the acids in natural waxes. Known as a micro-crystalline wax, the brand used by most curators is Renaissance wax.

How to apply paste wax—This is one finishing technique that is easy to master and requires no special tools. An old, well-washed cotton T-shirt is ideal for both applying and buffing out paste wax. You either can wrap your fingers in the cloth and scoop out a small amount of wax, or for more control over the rate of application, especially on intricate surfaces, spread some wax inside the cloth. Then fold the cloth into a pad and squeeze it until the wax just starts to ooze through. In both cases, apply the wax thinly over the surface. Some manufacturers suggest working

Rejuvenating an oil finish

If your furniture was originally finished with pure oil or a few coats of Danish oil but has been allowed to dry out, the best way to restore it is to remove any wax residue with a cloth dampened with mineral spirits (1), and then apply another couple of coats of the original finish (2).



1



2

Wax is easy to apply



with the grain, but I prefer a circular motion. Most manufacturers suggest waiting 15 to 30 minutes before buffing. A shorter dry time is not fatal, but don't wait too long—these are not car waxes that need to haze up before buffing. Choose a single surface that can be worked comfortably before moving on—don't apply wax to an entire hutch before starting to buff. You are finished buffing as soon as the surface isn't smeary and the cloth slips without catching.

What about wax buildup? If you apply paste wax correctly, buildup should never occur; each new application will dissolve the previous layer. Buildup occurs only if the last layer has been left on thick and not buffed out.

What to do between waxings

For regular dusting, a new product virtually eliminates the need for aerosols or oils. Microfiber cloths made from polyester and polyamide are non-abrasive and lint-free. Their strand count of 200,000 per square inch can absorb large amounts of dust. They also generate a charge of static electricity to aid dust pickup. Best of all, they can be washed and used over and over again. The easiest place to buy them is at car-care centers.

Avoid those popular dust-pickup products that can't be washed; they contain a chemical coating.

Regular waxing and dusting will not make your furniture bulletproof: A finish cannot tolerate standing water, heat, or brutal sunlight. Protect each piece with coasters, hot plates, and window blinds or curtains. □

Teri Masaschi owns a furniture repair and restoration business near Albuquerque, N.M.



The wax goes inside. By putting the wax inside the cloth, the rate of application can be controlled much more closely.



Apply the wax thinly. Rub the pad in a circular motion to apply a thin coat of wax to one area at a time.



Buff the surface. After letting the wax dry for 15 to 30 minutes, rub the surface with a cotton cloth, turning the cloth frequently to reveal a clean section.