Favorite Finishing Products

A pro reveals the best abrasives, finishes, and repair products on the market

BY TERI MASASCHI

When it comes to finishing, woodworkers are creatures of habit: They find a finishing product that works, and nothing will convince them to try anything else. The product might be something the next-door neighbor recommended, or perhaps the helpful salesman at the hardware store said his grandfather swore by it. However, folklore and second-hand information sometimes can get outdated or be mediocre in the first place. In recent years, many new products have been added to the wood-finisher's arsenal: Simply switching to these new materials while keeping the same methods of application will result in a better and sometimes faster finish.

Before using any of these products, make certain that you try them on a sample board. You should be doing this already, but I am always surprised by the number of woodworkers who use the kamikaze approach to finishing: spend 10 months building a piece and 10 minutes ruining it by using it as their sample board.

While building a project, save cutoffs to use for testing your finishes. Through this simple idea, you will get the best from these products and avoid much stress and disappointment.

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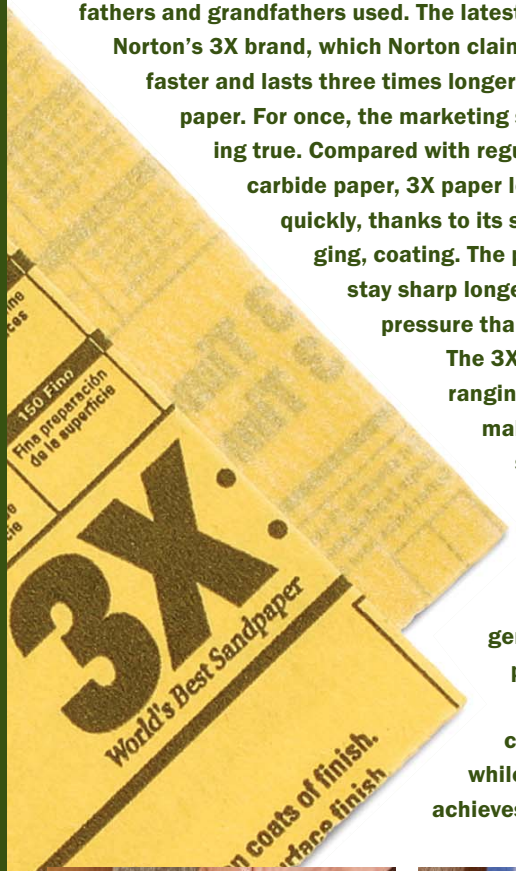
What can possibly be new in sandpaper?

It seems as though nothing changes in sandpaper—the same old rocks glued to paper scratching off the wood. However, sandpaper has come a long way since the glass paper or garnet paper our fathers and grandfathers used. The latest improvement is Norton's 3X brand, which Norton claims cuts three times faster and lasts three times longer than traditional sandpaper. For once, the marketing slogan is close to being true. Compared with regular sheets of silicon-carbide paper, 3X paper loads up far less quickly, thanks to its stearate, or anticlogging, coating. The paper also seems to stay sharp longer and requires less pressure than other papers.

The 3X paper comes in grits ranging from 60 to 400, making it suitable for sanding bare wood as well as sanding between coats of finish. Although a little pricier than generic brands of sandpaper, the cost of 3X is well worth it because it saves time while sanding and achieves superior results.



Generic sandpaper clogs fast. *After just a few passes, this standard grade of 320-grit paper has already lost its cutting power, and finish has lumped on the paper.*

Norton's 3X paper is better. *This piece of 320-grit paper is still sharp and displays no evidence of clogging, even after sanding a 6-in. by 30-in. section of a board.*

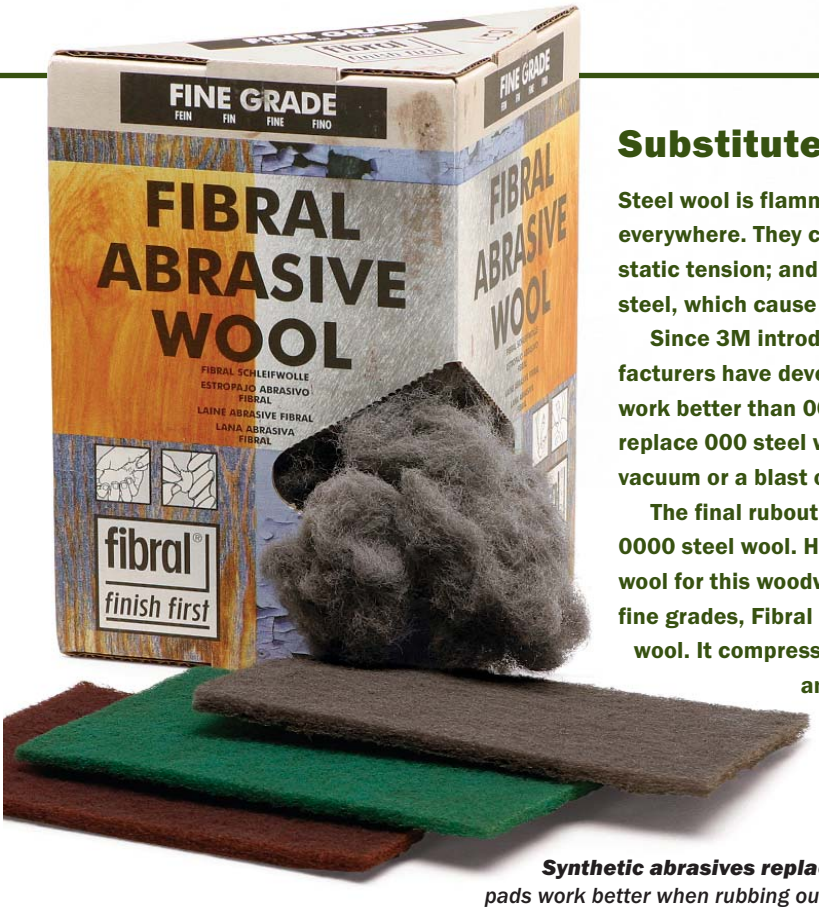
Photos, this page (left, bottom middle, bottom right): Mark Schofield

Substitutes for steel wool won't stain wood

Steel wool is flammable and messy. When used, little shards of steel break away and get everywhere. They can lodge deeply in open-grain woods; they cling to everything through static tension; and water-based finishes can be ruined by the oil in steel wool and bits of steel, which cause rust stains.

Since 3M introduced the green Scotch-Brite nylon pad, the company and other manufacturers have developed a range of abrasive pads suitable for woodworking. Maroon pads work better than 00 steel wool for smoothing finishes between coats, while gray pads replace 000 steel wool. In both cases the grit shed by the pads is removed easily with a vacuum or a blast of compressed air.

The final rubout of a finish to produce a satin luster used to be the exclusive practice of 0000 steel wool. However, now a synthetic steel wool called Fibral is challenging steel wool for this woodworking job. Available in coarse, medium, and fine grades, Fibral is used in the same manner as steel wool. It compresses less than steel wool, lasts longer, and the shed particles are easier to clean up.



Synthetic abrasives replace steel wool. *Abrasive pads work better when rubbing out coats of finish, and a new kind of abrasive wool now matches the results of the original steel wool for the final rubout.*

Automotive compounds polish better than pumice and rottenstone

Products used for polishing a painted surface on a car must be very good because of the flawless surface customers expect. The abrasives used to achieve that shine can be used on most wood finishes and are above and beyond the old pumice and rottenstone traditionally used by wood finishers.

These automotive finishes are applied the same way as the traditional methods. The finished surface must be leveled first by wet-sanding with 600-, 1,000-, and 2,000-grit paper. After wet-sanding, use an automotive compound instead of pumice. The product is ready to use right out of the bottle, and it can be applied with a cloth, which absorbs most of the surplus, so cleanup is much easier than wiping off pumice/oil sludge.

For a wet-look gloss, swirl remover or final finishing liquid produces a super shine that even an expert finisher would be challenged to match with rottenstone. Meguiar's, 3M, and Transtar all make great products that can be found at automotive stores.

A black, oily mess. *Rottenstone is the traditional material used to rub out a finish to a high gloss. But it requires rubbing oil and creates a black slurry.*

As shiny as a new car. *For a really high gloss, rub on some swirl remover. Designed for auto finishes, it can be applied with a cloth, and any surplus is easily wiped away.*

Photos, except where noted: Michael Pekovich; this page, bottom and middle right: Mark Schofield

Wipe-on finish with greater protection than plain Danish oil

Oil finishes are very popular with woodworkers in part because of their ease of application. A Danish-oil finish involves flooding the surface, keeping it wet for at least 30 minutes, and possibly sanding in the finish. Then any surplus is wiped off, leaving a finish that is soaked into the wood rather than a film on top of the wood. The problem is that this type of finish offers the wood very little protection from moisture, and adding additional coats makes only a modest improvement.

A better choice is Waterlox Original Sealer/Finish. An oil-and-varnish mixture, this product has a resin content of 26%, compared with 11% in Watco's Danish oil. Waterlox can be applied with either a cloth or a brush, and in both cases the surplus does not have to be wiped off. While you won't achieve the totally open look of an oil-only finish, the resulting surface will have superior water and scratch resistance and will be easy to maintain. When it gets worn or is damaged, simply clean the surface with mineral spirits and reapply the Waterlox.

A faster-building finish. *Because Waterlox has a higher resin content than typical Danish-oil finishes, it builds faster and offers more protection, whether wiped or brushed on.*

Photos, this page: Mark Schofield

Premixed shellac saves time, effort

Shellac, being one of the oldest wood finishes, is surrounded by much folklore and tradition. The old way was to buy dry flakes of shellac, which come in various grades and colors, and dissolve them in alcohol before use. Mixing and waiting for flakes to dissolve takes time, however, and the finish has a shelf life of only 6 to 12 months. Additionally, some grades of shellac, such as seedlac, require filtering to remove contaminants.

Within the last couple of years, a new shellac product has been marketed that provides incredible ease of use. It comes ready-made in quart or gallon cans, is a consistent 2-lb. cut, has a three-year shelf life, and is 100% de-waxed. An added bonus is that it is cheaper than buying flakes and alcohol. The product is Zinnser's SealCoat, and no workshop should be without it.

SealCoat is a very pale yellow or super-blond shellac. If you desire to replicate the browns, reds, and oranges of other grades of shellac, simply add color with alcohol-soluble dye concentrates such as TransTints or Wizard Tints. With dyes, the range of colors available is almost limitless—anyone for green shellac? Your method of using shellac—French polishing, padding, brushing, or spraying—will not change, but using SealCoat will make the job a whole lot easier.

Any color you want. *SealCoat's blond shellac comes ready to use right out of the can. By adding concentrated dyes, you can replicate different grades of shellac such as buttonlac or seedlac.*

REPAIRS

For repairs, epoxy is easier to apply than burn-in sticks

Repairing a damaged piece is not only distressing, but it's also hard to master. A traditional method of repair is the use of burn-in sticks, which are melted with a hot knife, allowing the molten resin material to flow into the damaged area. However, the material sets immediately, so you have to overfill the repair area and then level it with a razor blade, a chisel, or an abrasive.

Other problems include air bubbles that are revealed when the repair is leveled, and the fact that the smooth, shiny surface of the repair sometimes contrasts with low-luster or open-grain finishes. The entire process is time-consuming and requires practice.

You can speed up and simplify the process by using epoxy sticks. These two-part epoxy products come in a "cookie dough" roll. Slice off the amount you will require for the repair, knead it until the two parts are mixed, and apply it to the void with an artist's knife. While it is still soft, clean off and level any surplus by rubbing it off with a rag moistened with Simple Green. The repair can be ready for use in as little as five minutes. Although epoxy sticks come in several colors, for the best color match you probably will need to touch up the repair using a pigment color and shellac applied with an artist's brush. There are no shiny spots or air pockets, you can shape the epoxy to match profiles, and there is no risk of getting burned on a hot knife.

Knead the two-part epoxy together. *Use a small knife to force the epoxy into the damaged area. Use a cleaner that contains butyl cellosolve, such as Simple Green, to remove any surplus.*

SOURCES OF SUPPLY

WATERLOX, SEALCOAT, WIZARD TINTS, ABRASIVE WOOL AND ABRASIVE PADS, NEUTRAL-COLORED EPOXY STICKS, SMALL SPATULAS
Woodworker's Supply
www.woodworker.com;
800-645-9292

TRANSTINTS, PINE OR MAHOGANY COLORED EPOXY
Woodcraft
www.woodcraft.com;
800-535-4486

NORTON 3X SANDPAPER
The Home Depot

Photos, this page (top right, bottom left): Mark Schofield