

A True Oil Finish



Nontoxic and easily repaired, this traditional finish is still worth considering

BY CHRIS BECKSVOORT



After 30 years of building and finishing furniture, I still turn to an oil finish for almost all of my work. Oil seeps into the wood and leaves a hand-rubbed sheen that film finishes just can't replicate.

Oil finishes are very popular, and I've tried them all: boiled linseed oil from the hardware store, Watco, Waterlox, Velvit, oil and polyurethane mixes, Livos (now Bio Shield), tung oil and Minwax. But when Tried & True came

on the market in the early 1990s, I decided to use it as my primary finish. It has all of the attributes of an oil finish: spot repairability and easy maintenance, ease of application and quick build of both the finish and the patina. However, what really sealed it for me was the fact that I would no longer be exposing myself and my customers to toxic metal and petroleum driers contained in most other oils. I have no

Fine Woodworking asked its contributors: What's your favorite finish and why?

qualms about using Tried & True for baby cribs, children's



APPLYING AN OIL FINISH

- 1. Lay it on.** Becksvoort heats the finish to 120°F in a glue pot, which makes application easier. Wipe it on with a clean cotton rag. A rubber squeegee can be used for large surfaces.
- 2. Wipe it off.** Allow an hour for the finish to be absorbed, then wipe off any excess with a clean cloth.
- 3. Rub it out.** Once the first coat has dried completely, buff it out with #0000 steel wool. Residue from a dry oil finish will be dusty (like the steel wool on the right), not gummy (as it is on the left).

furniture or even cutting boards. Never again will I be dipping my bare hands into “boiled” linseed oil.

Believe it or not, the “boiled” linseed oil you get from the hardware store is not boiled at all. It’s raw oil with either petroleum or heavy-metal driers. Many contain volatile organic compounds (VOCs), which cause air pollution. Even so, they never really dry. The raw, unfiltered oils used in most oil finishes should not be applied to cabinet interiors. When opened, one of my 30-year-old cabinets still greets me with the smell of rancid oil. Tung oil is a decent oil finish, but it takes ages to dry, and it tends to turn yellow.

As far as I know, the only real boiled linseed oil on the market is Tried & True Varnish Oil. This filtered, pure linseed oil is light in color, has a pleasant odor and is very thick. Wiping it is a bit like pushing honey, giving the term “hand-rubbed finish” a whole new meaning.

Tried & True was developed by Joe Robeson, a furniture maker in Trumansburg, N.Y. He found an 1850 formula for producing the oil used in coach-makers varnish. Heat causes the oil to polymerize and absorb oxygen when drying, yielding a bright, durable finish. Robeson found the right boiling time

and temperature to produce an oil with great film strength and beauty. The Material Safety Data Sheet is almost too good to be true. It contains less than 0.1% of any substances listed as carcinogens by government agencies. Think about that the next time you stick your bare hands into an oil finish containing petroleum distillates or heavy-metal driers.

Tried & True can be applied over bare or stained wood. The directions say the oil and wood should be at least room temperature (70°F). But heating the oil to 120°F in a glue pot makes it penetrate better.

Apply a thin coat, allow it to penetrate for an hour, then wipe with a soft cloth until the surface is completely dry. A clean rag should not drag or pick up any oil. Allow the finish to dry for 24 hours and then rub it with #0000 steel wool or a soft cloth. Because low temperatures and high humidity tend to slow the drying time, I find that three days between coats works better in my Maine shop. But it’s easy to tell whether the finish is dry. When buffing with steel wool, if the residue is gummy, allow more drying time. The residue from a thoroughly dry finish is dusty. I only buff with steel wool after the first coat, preferring to rub with a soft cloth after subsequent coats.

Additional coats deepen the shine and increase protection. I apply three coats on

beds, cases and chairs, and five coats on tabletops (both top and bottom, for even moisture transfer). For me, the finishing process takes about two weeks. However, dust in the shop is not a problem. What I initially found most amazing about Tried & True is that it has a faster surface build than any other oil finish I’ve found. As with any oil finish, oily rags must be disposed of properly: spread to dry, placed in water or in an approved sealed metal container.

Tried & True not only builds fast, but it also lasts. I recently visited a customer who had one of the first pieces I finished with Tried & True. Compared to my early pieces finished with Watco or “boiled” linseed oil, the finish was still bright and shiny. Tried & True Varnish Oil is available directly from the company (607-387-9280; triedandtruewoodfinish.com), from the Garrett Wade finish catalog (800-221-2942; garrettwade.com), Woodcraft Supply Corp. (woodcraft.com) and Lee Valley (800-871-8158; leevalley.com). □

Watch it on the web

Visit finewoodworking.com to see how Chris Becksvoort gets a beautiful oil finish.

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A simple repair kit

Spot reparability is a real plus in oil finishing. Becksvoort has many customers who need to take out a scratch or water ring or need to re-oil their tabletops every couple of years. He supplies them with a maintenance sheet, #0000 steel wool, paper wipes and a small bottle of oil. No other equipment is required, nor is a degree in chemistry. One of his favorite reasons for using oil is because the natural color, or patina, develops in a matter of months, not years.

