

An Oil-and-Wax Finish

This low-luster finish highlights the wood and is easy

I strongly believe that a finish should not come between the end user and a piece of furniture. Hence, I stay away from plastic-type finishes, such as polyurethanes and lacquers or varnishes. These finishes tend to sit on top of the wood rather than soak into it, obliterating the subtle textures left by handplanes. One of the most frequent comments from visitors to my showroom is, “We saw the furniture and came in to feel it.”

All finishes have their drawbacks; this one lacks durability and high-gloss sheen. However, I am prepared to forego the durability because I get repairability (without having to refinish the whole piece) and better aging. My furniture is meant to be functional as well as beautiful: Even if it gets dinged and scratched, an occasional rewaxing and reoilng allows these defects to become part of the piece, making it feel like an antique that has weathered

the storms of time. With a high-gloss finish, the repair of scratches and dings can become a horror story.

Equally important, this finish is low tech. It requires no special tools or a spray booth. In my shop, I don’t employ a dedicated finisher. Each craftsperson builds his piece from rough lumber to buffing the wax finish, a method most readers should relate to.

Surface preparation is the key to this finish

After the wood has been through a thickness planer, handplane all surfaces. On areas in which the grain has torn out, use a card scraper. The aim is for the surface to have that smooth and fresh, straight-from-the-blade look.

Selectively sand with 220-grit paper—There’s still quite a bit of sanding involved, mostly in areas that won’t cut clean, such as difficult grain patterns, end grain, and edges. Sand large areas with 220-grit paper on a palm sander, but be careful not to stray into cleanly planed areas.

When working on confined areas, it’s better to fold the sheet of

1 PLANE, SCRAPE, AND SAND

Good surface preparation is essential for a penetrating oil finish. One of the reasons Shackleton likes this finish is because it doesn’t obliterate faint marks left behind by hand tools.



Smooth all surfaces. Begin by hand-planing the surfaces to level and smooth them (left). Clean up any torn grain with a card scraper (above).



Sand only where needed. Use a palm sander with 220-grit paper to break sharp edges and smooth the end grain. Don’t stray onto areas already planed smooth.

BY CHARLES SHACKLETON

to apply and renew

sandpaper into quarters and sand by hand, working with the grain or close to it. Sandpaper is powerful stuff, and things can happen faster than you imagine, so be careful not to create hollow areas in the surface.

Raise the grain and resand the surface—Wipe down the whole piece with a damp cloth, being careful only to dampen the surface, not wet it. Use distilled water, which doesn't contain minerals that can react with tannin in the wood and cause stains. The moisture causes grain that has been crushed by the planing to rise. After about half an hour, the surface will be dry and noticeably rougher.

Lightly hand-sand every surface with 400-grit paper in the direction of the grain. Working by hand gives you a better feel for what's going on. Don't underestimate the cutting power of even 400-grit paper—you'll be amazed how quickly you can remove the crisp texture of a handplaned surface. A bright light held at a low angle is a great help, but monitor your progress by checking the texture of the surface with your hands.

The final step before applying the oil is to rub down the whole



surface with Liberon 0000 steel wool or a gray abrasive pad. This further smooths and slightly burnishes the surface, which will allow the oil to penetrate the wood more evenly, reducing the chances of blotching.

Be generous with the oil

On most woods I use boiled linseed oil because it gives a darker, aged appearance to the furniture. The exceptions are maple and ash, on which I use pure tung oil to keep the wood's appearance as



2 RAISE THE GRAIN



Wet the wood (left) and let it dry. Then sand with 400-grit paper and rub the surface with either a gray abrasive pad or 0000 steel wool. Burnishing the surface this way (above) lessens the chances of unequal oil penetration and blotching.

3 APPLY THE OIL



Flood the surface with oil. Soak a small piece of toweling in a bowl of boiled linseed oil and wipe the oil generously onto the wood.



Don't forget the end grain. If you leave the end grain until last, it may be hard to blend in darker drip marks.



Wipe off the surplus oil. After an hour, use a series of clean, dry cloths to remove any oil that remains on the surface. Wipe the wood thoroughly to avoid a sticky residue.

light as possible. In either case, pour the oil from the can into a container 6 in. dia. by 6 in. deep. Put on a pair of disposable gloves, immerse an 8-in. by 8-in. bit of toweling in the container, and use it to apply the oil. Slosh the oil over the surface liberally, but make sure you do end grain early on, or you may wind up with drip marks there. As with all finishes, be sure to coat both sides of all surfaces.

Let the oil soak in for about an hour, then wipe off all of the excess, using pieces of clean cloth.

SOURCES OF SUPPLY

BOILED LINSEED OIL

www.woodcraft.com; 800-225-1153

LIBERON STEEL WOOL AND WAX

www.woodfinishingproducts.com; 866-548-1677
www.kingdomrestorations.com; 800-344-9257

ABRASIVE PADS

www.woodcraft.com; 800-225-1153



Let me repeat the warning I give all of my employees about disposing of oily rags in a safe manner: When wadded up, the rags are highly combustible, so hang them outside to dry or immerse them in water before disposing of them.

After wiping off the excess, let the workpiece dry for two days. Then apply a second coat of oil in the same manner as the first coat. This time there should be no areas where the oil soaks in completely, as the first coat should have formed a barrier. If there are areas where the oil does soak in, particularly on surfaces that will be subject to wear, you will need to repeat the oiling process a third time after the second coat has dried for two days.

You may find the dried oiled surface slightly rough, so before going onto the final step of waxing, burnish the surface using a very fine white abrasive pad.

Apply the wax sparingly

The purpose of applying wax is not to feed the wood, as commercials are fond of implying, but rather to give the surface a soft luster

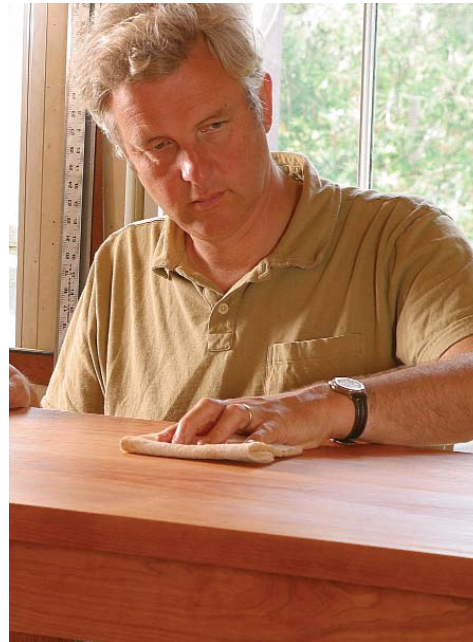


and a silky-smooth feel. You also can alter the wood's tone subtly by using colored wax. Apply thin coats of the wax in a circular motion using a 6-in. square piece of toweling furlled into a ball. This circular motion ensures that the wax gets worked into all of the pores and acts as filler.

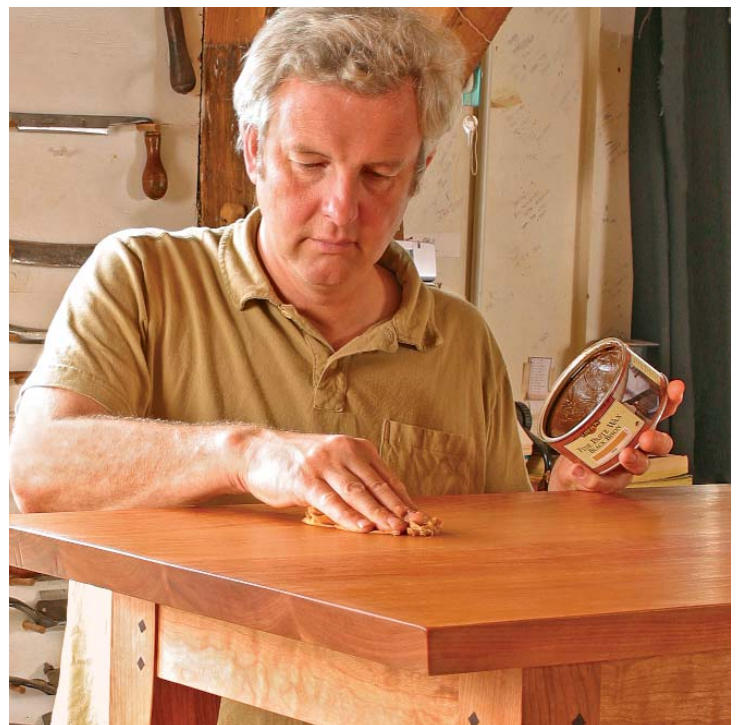
On surfaces where there are multiple boards glued together, work across the surface board by board. Every 20 seconds or so, go back over the last section, wiping it with the grain. This avoids any swirl marks in the dried wax. Check that the wax is being applied evenly and smoothly; little lumps of wax cause big problems later as they smear around when you are trying to buff a shine.

Leave the wax to dry for at least half an hour, then buff it using another piece of toweling and plenty of elbow grease. Your piece should now have a lovely shine.

Any wax finish will lose its gleam over time, particularly if it's a dining table that gets wiped down with a damp cloth after meals. But it is a simple task to apply and buff up another coat of wax. If moisture from a cold glass of water leaves a white ring,



After the last coat of oil has dried for two days, burnish the surface with a white abrasive pad (left) to smooth the surface prior to waxing. Finally, sparingly apply paste wax (below), rubbing first in a circular motion to fill any pores, and then with the grain. A colored wax can be used to darken the appearance of a piece.



you can fix the problem by rubbing the area with 0000 steel wool or a gray abrasive pad.

As I said, I have used this finish for nearly 18 years and have had very few complaints. For some odd reason, the most common complaint (about three times) has been from people who had left a pumpkin to rot on their table. This required us to replane the surface, but I'm sure *Fine Woodworking* readers take better care of their furniture. □

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