

## Dyes bring out best in figured maple

BY JAMES CONDINO



If you've ever attended an outdoor custom-car show, you've noticed how some paint schemes appear to change color. That '49 Mercury appears black from a distance, but closer inspection under the sun's rays reveals a dark-purple shimmer with a subtle iridescent red.

This multidimensional, layered color is what I try to accomplish on figured maple, a wood uniquely suited to being enhanced with dyes. First, the wood's light-blond color puts no limit on your imagination (I'll stick with wood tones, but my process works just as well with other, brighter colors). Second, the striped and quilted figure becomes almost three-dimensional with added color. This is because the ripples present alternating sections of long grain and end grain to the viewer.

### Prep the surface and select your colors

Your goal is to reveal the depth and clarity of the wood, so use a finely burnished scraper to remove tearout or machine marks. Vacuum fine dust particles; don't blow them into the pores.

Once you have a color scheme in mind, test it on some scrap, ideally from the same boards as the workpiece. Take careful notes on dye concentrations, color combinations, and the number of coats. I use water-soluble dye powders ([www.wdlockwood.com](http://www.wdlockwood.com)). They penetrate the wood, giving me a margin of error if I accidentally sand through the shellac later.

### The wood is alternately dyed and sanded

To prepare the dye, mix the powder in hot, but not boiling, water. The ratio is 1 oz. of dye to 1 qt. of water, but you'll need only a few fluid ounces of each dye. So just gradually add dye powder to the water until a maple stirring stick turns roughly the color you want. Allow the mixture to cool and then strain it through a piece of old T-shirt or a paper coffee filter.

To apply the dye, I use a pad similar to that used for French polishing. Cut out two 5-in. squares of lint-free cotton cloth (well-washed T-shirts work great). Fold one of them to form a 1-in.-wide strip, and then fold the strip into a 1-in. square. Wrap this in the other piece, and secure the ends with rubber bands

## Start with a dark dye



**Good preparation is key.** To avoid tearout, smooth the figured maple with a scraper rather than a handplane. If you sand, vacuum the dust thoroughly.



**Water-based dyes.** After mixing the water-based dye, strain it through a cotton cloth (above). After dampening the wood, rub in the first, dark dye (right).





## Sand and repeat with lighter dyes



**Sand back to mostly bare wood.** Use P220-grit sandpaper to remove most of the dye, leaving darker stripes in the end-grain figure, where the dye was able to penetrate deeply.



**Warm up the figure.** Apply red or dark amber to add a subtle secondary color to the figure, which will be revealed when the piece is clear-coated later.



**An overall tone is the final color.** After sanding away most of the second dye, apply a coat of yellow dye to give the whole piece a warm or antique look.

to give you a handle. You'll need a pad for each dye, so make several. To prevent the wood from absorbing too much dye initially, I first rub the wood with a damp pad, using distilled water.

With the wood still damp, apply a very dark base coat—dark brown or, in this case, black. Dip the pad into the dye and then rub it lightly into the wood in overlapping small circles.

After the dye has dried, sand the entire surface back to natural wood with P220-grit sandpaper, leaving only the figure darkened. Repeat the wetting and dyeing, this time using a warm dark color—amber or even a dark red. Once it is dry, sand this coat back until the figured grain stands out against the natural wood. Although you won't

see it until the clear finish is applied, the two dyes will come out subtly when your viewing angle changes, just like when you walked around that '49 Mercury.

You can test the finished look by wiping the surface with denatured alcohol. Be careful not to make the figure

too dark and unnatural looking.

Now that you have brought out the curl and figure, apply an overall tone to the piece, perhaps yellow or light amber for an antique tiger-maple look.

### A coat of oil adds depth

After letting the piece dry overnight, the brilliant image that you created will appear somewhat dull and washed out. But don't worry; the next two steps will more than restore the appearance.

## Oil and seal



**Pop the curl.** Rub in a very thin coat of a drying oil to bring out the three-dimensional shimmer of the maple's figure (above). Then apply a thin, clear, glossy topcoat such as shellac (right).



To bring out the huge curl and deep figure in the maple, apply a thin coat of walnut or boiled linseed oil. Add a few drops of oil to a pad and very gently coat the entire surface you are working on. Then wipe it off with a clean cloth. This brings out the wood's depth and luminosity, making the grain appear to move as your perspective changes.

### Seal the surface with a high-gloss clear coat

The final step is to apply a clear coat to enhance the three-dimensional look of the wood. The finish needs to be as thin as possible with a high gloss. French polishing is the best method for this effect, and I urge you to try it (see *FWW* #155, pp. 38-43).

Alternatively, you can brush or spray on a few coats of super-blond shellac, or for a more durable finish, seal in the oil with a coat of dewaxed shellac, and then apply some lacquer.

The reaction from woodworkers and non-woodworkers alike when they see the finished piece will be, "Wow." □

### Online Extra

To learn how to work with dyes to form a sunburst pattern, go to [FineWoodworking.com/extras](http://FineWoodworking.com/extras).