

## Creative bleaching techniques

BY JEFF JEWITT

Most woodworkers associate bleach with getting rid of stains, whether they occur naturally in wood or were caused by contact with iron or when the wrong dye was applied. But there is a creative side to bleaching wood: You can achieve new looks by removing a wood's natural color; you can produce a neutral base for gray, pickled, and other finishes; and you can match the color in older furniture.

### Use a special two-part wood bleach

There are several products sold as wood bleach, but for this technique you will need a two-part bleach also known as A/B bleach. Check your local paint or

hardware store, or order it online ([www.woodworker.com](http://www.woodworker.com), 800-645-9292). This product is sold as a package of two bottles; part A is sodium hydroxide and part B is hydrogen peroxide.

Sodium hydroxide is particularly dangerous. You must wear eye protection because a healthy splash in your eyes may cause permanent blindness, and wear long sleeves and thick (preferably nitrile) gloves to protect your skin from chemical burns.

**Mix and apply the bleach**—Because bleaching will raise the grain, don't bother to pre-sand beyond P180-grit. Some brands of bleach instruct you to apply first part A and then part B. The brand I used, made by Klean-Strip, said to mix the two parts together in equal amounts in a nonmetallic container. Mix only what you will use; the mixture weakens after three or four hours.

Apply the bleach evenly with a disposable foam or nylon-bristle brush.

The bleach may foam a bit when the wood is wet, a sign that it's working. The results may start to be visible in 10 to 15 minutes, but let the wood dry at least six hours to judge the full effects. If the wood isn't pale enough, try a second application. But be cautious; more than two coats will raise the grain severely and may produce a greenish cast.

**Neutralize the bleach, and sand**—Particularly after a second application, wait at least two hours and then neutralize the reaction with a mixture of white vinegar and water. Follow the instructions for the exact ratio.

Let the wood dry for 24 hours out of direct sunlight, then sand with P180- or P220-grit sandpaper, being careful not to sand through to the unbleached wood.



**Brush on the bleach.** Combine the two bleach components in a nonmetallic container and apply the mixture to the wood.

## Applying the bleach



**Neutralize the bleach.** When the wood is the desired lightness, apply a mixture of white vinegar and water to stop the chemical reaction.



**Sand the surface.** Because bleaching raises the grain, sand the wood with P220-grit paper before applying a finish.

## Finish options for bleached wood

### PRESERVING THE BLEACHED LOOK

If you simply want to preserve the bleached color, just apply a topcoat. On nearly white bleached woods such as ash or this piece of curly maple, use a nonyellowing finish such as water-white, CAB acrylic lacquer; blond shellac; or a water-based finish (see “The Clearest of Finishes” by Peter Gedrys, *FWW* #184, pp. 42-45).



### A PROPER PICKLE

A true whitewashed or pickled effect can be achieved only on bleached wood. A whitewash typically is done on pale tight-grained woods such as maple to give a thin and transparent effect evenly across the wood. A pickled effect is achieved on open-grained wood where uneven collection of the pigment enhances the grain pattern. On this red oak, only the bleached end reveals the pickled effect. Both effects are achieved by brushing on a white pigment stain and wiping off the surplus.



### TRUE GRAYS

To produce certain transparent colors on wood, you need as neutral a base as possible without any of the natural yellows and browns fighting your color. Only by bleaching the wood can you achieve this neutral base for pastel colors such as a true gray. On this tiger maple, the diluted black dye appears dark brown on the unbleached end and the desired gray over the bleached wood.



### REPLICATING ANTIQUE WOOD

Walnut, teak, and mahogany lighten in color with age, and the best way to mimic that look on new wood is to bleach and then dye it. With the original antique within view, apply bleach to the new wood, keeping the surface wet with bleach until you reach the color you're after, or a hair lighter. Immediately apply the diluted vinegar to halt the action of the bleach, let the wood dry, and then sand it. In most cases, as with this piece of mahogany, you'll need to fine-tune the color match using a dye stain.

