

Get a Handle on Your Chisels

Invest new life into old tools with shopmade handles

BY BOB SMALSER



Have some old socket chisels around that need handles? If not, perhaps you should. Even with today's high collector interest, flea markets, estate sales, and auctions still provide excellent values in tools if you can make your own handles. I prefer my own handles anyway, as I custom-fit them to the size of my hands and to my working style.

What's the big deal about old socket chisels in the first place? They generally are premium tools, made when chisels were drop-forged instead of investment-cast. Except for price (a handle-less old chisel often can be had for less than \$5), the differences between an old Thomas Witherby or James Swan and a modern chisel are subtle, but many of my generation still consider them to be the best compromise between edge retention and ease of sharpening in a factory-made chisel. They also are relatively plentiful—there were a couple dozen premium chisel manufacturers in the decades before World War II, not just the two or three best known. I like to see those heritage tools in the hands of users instead of collecting dust.

To make a good handle, any dense hardwood will do. Use what you have locally so you can make matching handles later. The original factories used common woods like hickory, ash, and oak pretty interchangeably. I suppose the hardest, toughest, and heaviest woods with interlocked grain are best—woods like dogwood and hop hornbeam—but I haven't found one species to outlast another in normal use. A teenager with a framing hammer can destroy any one of them as easily as another.

Here in the hardwood-scarce Northwest, I use Pacific madrone, simply because it's the densest of the three hardwood species growing in my woods.

I use a lathe, but you can make handles without one. Anything done on a lathe can be done as well, just not as fast, using a drawknife, a spokeshave, rasps, and files.

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FineWoodworking.com

No lathe? Learn how to shape a chisel handle with hand tools.

1. Shape the handle



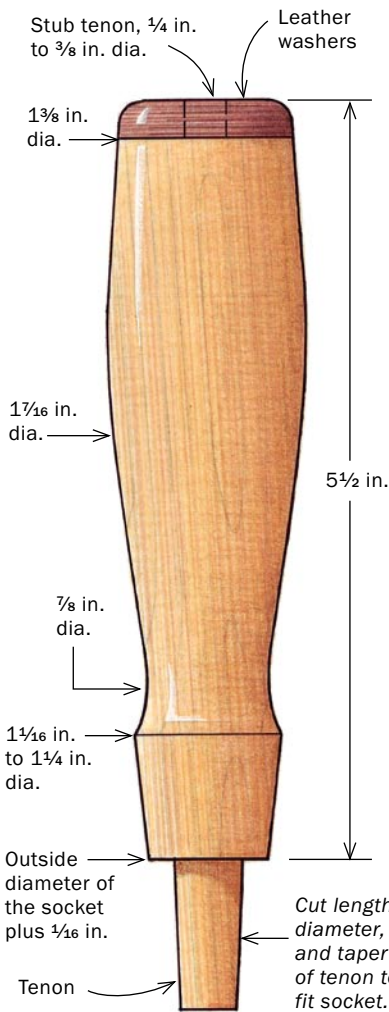
Start by turning a stub tenon. Smalser uses a parting tool to form the tenon, and then glues leather washers over it to create a durable striking surface.



Establish the tenon shoulder. Use the parting tool to mark the start of the tenon that fits in the chisel socket, then shape the adjacent tapered section with a small gouge.



Cut the handle to final shape. Use the small gouge followed by a skew chisel for cleanup. This design relies on subtle curves for comfort.



HANDLE DIMENSIONS

After turning more than a hundred handles for himself and tradesmen friends, Smalser finds these dimensions most comfortable for a man with large hands.

2. Shape the tenon



Use an inside-outside caliper. Transfer the inside diameter of the socket mouth to the tenon shoulder, checking progress as you cut the top of the tenon to size with a parting tool.



Finish the taper. Gauge the socket's depth and its diameter at the deep end. Use these measurements, and the parting tool, to cut the small end of the tenon to size. Finish the taper by pulling a small skew from the tenon shoulder to the pointed end. Leave the tenon slightly oversize for hand-fitting later.



3. Sand and finish the handle



Begin sanding with 120-grit. Work through the grits up to 320-grit.



Raise the grain. Wipe the handle with a damp towel between each grit. The water swells and loosens the wood fibers in the scratches, so less work is required to sand them off.



Apply the finish. Smalser prefers a thin wiping varnish formulated for gunstocks (Tru-Oil or Lin-Speed), rubbed out with paste wax and #0000 steel wool after curing.

4. Fit it and set it



An age-old fitting trick. After securing the blade in a vise, insert the tenon firmly and twist it a full revolution. A dirty socket will leave dark patches on the high spots; file these away using a fine rasp. Repeat until you have full wood-to-metal contact for a perfect fit.

Fixing a tenon that's too small

A tenon that's too skinny won't fit securely. Simply cut a piece of cloth to fit the tenon's length and circumference, wrap it around the tenon, and glue it in place as a shim. Once the glue dries, drive the handle into the socket.



Drive the socket tenon home with a mallet. Leave a gap between the socket and the tenon shoulder. This helps prevent splitting. You also can seat the tenon and shoulder in epoxy to prevent the handle from coming loose when the handle shrinks in the dry season.

