



BEHLEN
Wool-Lube
Lubricant for Furniture
Lubrifiant pour Meubles
B730-1365
CAUTION: Clean and dry surface before use.
For information & instructions see label.
Change instructions as required by product.
KEEP OUT OF THE REACH OF CHILDREN.
Net Contents: 16 Ounces / 473 ml

Water

Dark, Rich Cherry with Household Products

Drain cleaner, roofing tar, and shellac team up for a foolproof finish

BY TIMOTHY PURO

Students often ask me to name my favorite cherry finish. I tell them that there's nothing wrong with using a clear, oil-based finish on this popular hardwood, but I know another finish that imparts deep, rich color and more depth. Better yet, it consists of common products, all available from the local hardware store or home center: lye (in the form of drain cleaner), asphaltum (from roofing tar), and SealCoat shellac.

These inexpensive products darken cherry and highlight the grain in a way that no dye, stain, or oil can on its own, creating

depth and color that attracts attention from across the room. And the shellac makes it durable enough to use on almost any piece of furniture.

The lye reacts with the cherry to create rich color without blotching, and brings out beautiful yellow and orange figured grain lines in the wood. It makes good cherry look great and figured cherry look spectacular. Shellac seals in the first step and lets you then use diluted tar as a glaze, adding more warmth and getting into nooks and crannies to create a subtle aged effect. Used over shellac, the tar glaze is reversible, meaning you can wipe it off if you don't like the look. The final topcoats of shellac deliver shimmering depth and a soft sheen.

I used it on this cherry blanket chest, built by Ralph Buschbacher and his son John, who are woodworkers and clients of mine, and I'll demonstrate the whole process on sample boards.

Prep some sample boards

I always start with sample boards. This is critical for multi-step finishes. One of the main reasons people don't color wood is because they've had bad experiences in the past with dyes and stains, which can be expensive and unpredictable. I'm using inexpensive products and an almost foolproof approach here, but sample boards are still an important insurance policy.

Make yours from the same wood you used to build the actual piece, prepped



Instant aging

To obtain a rich, aged appearance, Puro uses 100% lye drain cleaner mixed with distilled water, non-fibered roofing tar mixed with mineral spirits, and SealCoat dewaxed shellac right out of the can.

LYE ADDS COLOR

The lye imparts a deep, rich red to the cherry. It will look dark at first, but the color will lighten as it dries.



Stay safe. Wearing nitrile gloves and using eye protection, mix up a solution of 2 tsp. of lye powder to 8 oz. of distilled water, stirring it well. Use a foam brush or rag, and get it wet but not saturated. Work from close to far, so any drips go onto wet wood, not dry, where they would cause spots and streaks. The water will raise the grain, but don't sand yet.



Seal with shellac. Use Zinsser SealCoat out of the can (2-lb. cut) and a Taklon brush, applying one thin coat, waiting 20 to 30 minutes, and then applying another. Working with a cork or rubber block, sand with 320-grit paper to level the two sealer coats and the wood fibers raised by the earlier step. Then apply two more coats, sanding lightly afterward.



the same way. On the back of the board, take notes on each step, such as how you mixed and applied the lye to the wood.

The wood for this project was sanded up to 180 grit. Sanding beyond 180 for a film finish like shellac does not make the wood or the final finish any smoother. Whether you go to 180 or to 1,000 grit, that first coat of finish will swell the wood fibers and make them feel a little rough. That's when the finer sandpaper comes in, to level the finish between coats.

Lye adds rich color with no blotching

Lye, used in soaps and drain cleaners, changes the color of the wood chemically, imparting color without blotching or obscuring the wood's natural beauty. But it's nasty to use, so treat it with respect. Wear long sleeves, nitrile gloves, and use eye protection as you mix the lye and distilled water and apply the solution. I use 100% lye (sodium hydroxide) drain cleaner (Rooto is one brand and Red Devil is another). Lye reacts with metal, so use a glass or high-density polyethylene (HDPE) container from the hardware store.

Like any wood, cherry can vary widely, so if your sample board is still too dark after it dries, make a more diluted mixture and try it on a new sample.

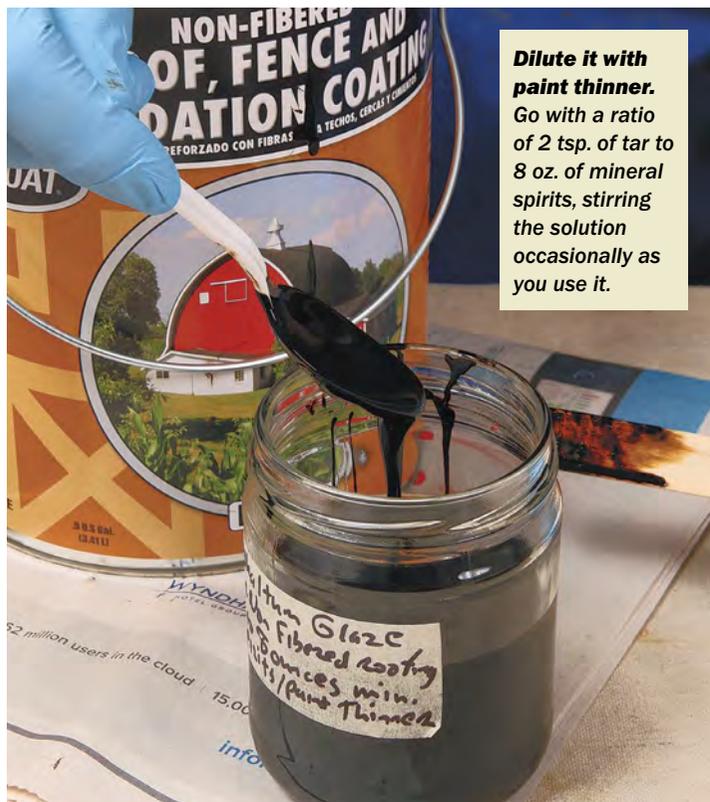
Seal with shellac

The tar will be applied as a glaze, and that requires that the wood be sealed first. The best sealer for this finish is Zinsser's SealCoat, a dewaxed blond shellac that comes in a perfect 2-lb. ratio ("cut") right out of the can. Shellac seals in contaminants like lye really well, but is also a very iridescent finish that shows off color and makes figure shimmer.

I apply four thin coats of shellac, two at a time, using a golden Taklon artist's wash brush. The Taklon brush allows you to quickly apply a very thin coat of shellac, which dries and can be recoated

ASPHALTUM ADDS AGE

Applied over the shellac, the diluted tar acts as a glaze, which is easy to wipe away if you don't like the look.



almost immediately. (I like the 1-in. oval wash Robert Simmons Sapphire #52, available at dickblick.com.) Always pour the finish you need out of the can into a separate container before using it, so you don't contaminate the rest of the finish with any dust, stain, or gunk you pick up on the brush or rag.

After two hours, sand the first two sealer coats smooth and level with a 320-grit, steared sandpaper, such as 3M pro-grade. Change the paper when the shellac builds up on it.

Continue with two more coats of shellac, applied as before. After these cure for a few hours, lightly sand the surface with 320-grit paper, and wipe off the dust with a clean paper towel lightly dampened with water. Don't skip this last sanding step, because the glaze will accentuate any brush marks you leave behind.

Add age and warmth with tar

Asphaltum has been used for generations to add instant age to gilded frames, and it's a secret weapon for refinishing shops that want to make stripped and sanded furniture look old again. Better yet, it is widely available as roofing tar. Look for the non-fibered variety. The only ingredients should be asphalt and mineral spirits.

You will be significantly diluting the tar, creating a thin wash that will subtly mimic the decades of dirt that accumulates on old furniture. Apply the glaze with a rag or a brush to create a warm, rich look. Make sure that you leave enough glaze behind so it is noticeable. I find that people who try the tar glaze for the first time tend to brush or wipe off too much.

Once the mineral spirits flash off, in 20 to 30 minutes, lock in the glaze with a thin coat of shellac—full-strength SealCoat again, applied lightly with the Taklon brush. Don't overbrush it or you



Brush it on. A foam brush works well here, too. Work in the direction of the grain. You can unload the brush on a paper towel as you adjust the look, but leave enough glaze on the wood to have an effect. The glaze is self-leveling, so don't worry too much about brush marks. After about 30 minutes, the mineral spirits will have evaporated and you can move to the next step.

SHELLAC FOR A FINAL FINISH

The final coats of shellac act as a magnifier, and rubbing them out with steel wool creates a soft sheen and a buttery feel.



Final topcoats are just more shellac. Be sure to sand with 320 or 400 grit between the coats, but not after. Let the entire finish fully cure for a few days before rubbing out that last topcoat.

THE MAGIC OF TAKLON

Look for an artist's wash brush, made with golden Taklon fibers, available at art-supply stores. These lay down thin, level coats of shellac, which dry quickly.

will lift the tar. An alternative is applying a thin coat of lacquer from an aerosol can. Don't wait long before sealing in the tar or you will allow more dust to accumulate on the surface. This sealer coat might be a little bumpy because it is resisting the tar, but don't sand it yet. You might sand through. Move on to the topcoats.

Two or three topcoats and you're done

The final coats will magnify the effects of the glaze and give the finish real depth. Apply two or three more coats of SealCoat at full strength, waiting three to four hours between each coat, lightly sanding and leveling each one with 320-grit paper.

When I'm satisfied with the finish's thickness and depth, I let the piece rest for three or four days until the shellac dries fully. Then I rub the surface to a satin sheen with 0000 steel wool, Behlen's Wool-Lube, and water. The Wool-Lube leaves its own slick coating on the surface, so there is no need to apply wax.

If you still aren't convinced by your sample board, make another one with your normal clear coat and ask friends to pick their favorite. When they point to the multi-step finish, you'll have a winner. □

Tim Puro is a professional finisher and finishing teacher in Bloomington, Ind.



Rub out the finish with steel wool and a lubricant. Behlen's Wool-Lube works beautifully. Squirt some on a pad of 0000 steel wool, mist with water, and buff the final surface evenly. Wipe off the water to reveal a soft sheen. There's no need for wax.

