

Inlaying ornamental bellflowers

BY STEVE LATTA

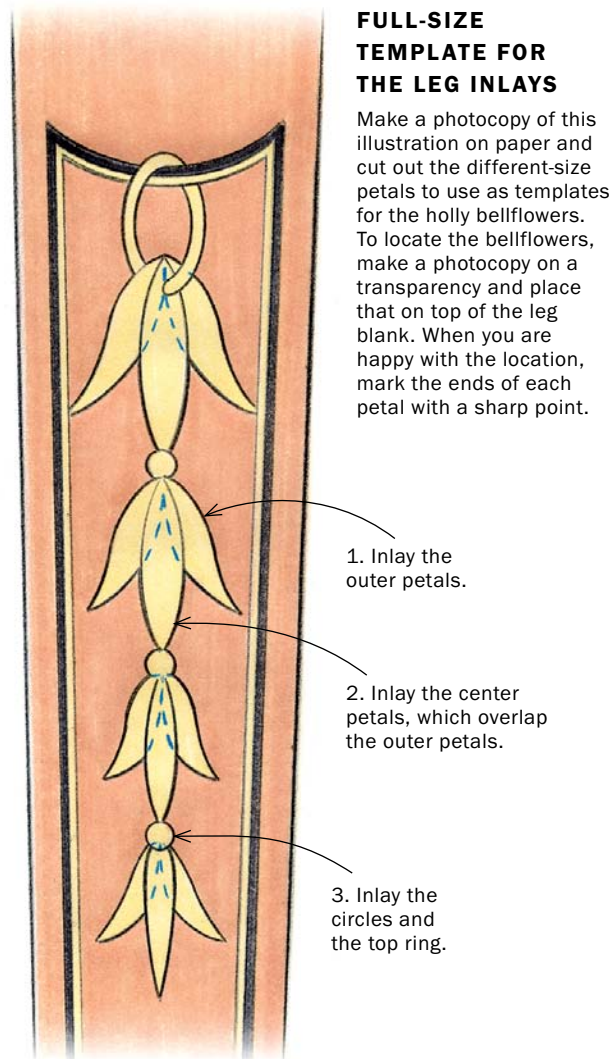
Bellflower inlays come in many variations, but the type used on the card table I built (see “Federal Card Table,” *FWW* #180, pp. 54-63) are common to Baltimore work and are extremely beautiful.

If you’ve never attempted this type of inlaying before, I urge you to go ahead, but to practice first on a dummy table leg. You’ll need a bright light and a steady hand, but with a little patience you’ll raise your woodworking skills to a new level.

Prepare the petals

Use the full-size image at right to photocopy each of the four outer and four center petal sizes. Spray-mount these onto a sheet of holly veneer and punch them out with carving gouges, (primarily #7-20mm and #8-7mm). Then use these petals as templates to lay out identical petals.

Try to arrange the petals in rows with the long axis parallel to the grain. After layout, cut the veneer into single-row strips so that when you cut the petals free with the gouges, the veneer won’t split across an adjoining line



FULL-SIZE TEMPLATE FOR THE LEG INLAYS

Make a photocopy of this illustration on paper and cut out the different-size petals to use as templates for the holly bellflowers. To locate the bellflowers, make a photocopy on a transparency and place that on top of the leg blank. When you are happy with the location, mark the ends of each petal with a sharp point.

1. Inlay the outer petals.

2. Inlay the center petals, which overlap the outer petals.

3. Inlay the circles and the top ring.

Create the petals



Lay out the petals. Cut out one petal of each size and use that as a template. The points of a divider work well to hold down the petal as you draw around it with a sharp pencil.



Chop out the petals. Use different-size carving gouges to slice out the petals from the holly veneer.



Scorch the petals in hot sand. Dip the petals into fine sand heated on a hot plate. The graduated shading will give the petals a three-dimensional appearance.

Inlay the petals



Lay out and outline the bellflowers. Position a transparency of the flowers on a leg and then mark the tips of each petal with a sharp point (above). Use dabs of hide glue to stick the outer petals in position temporarily, and outline them with an X-Acto knife (right). When done, pry off the petals with a chisel.

of petals. Be sure to make several extra petals in each size. To keep the different sizes separate, I made a special holder from a piece of scrapwood with four rows of three 1½-in.-wide holes.

To give the petals a three-dimensional appearance, I scorched certain edges in hot sand to darken them. The key to even shading is to use very fine sand, about the texture of table salt. Coarse sand will cause parts of the holly to burn but will leave adjacent sections white. I used sand brought back from a family holiday in Siesta Key, Fla., but I'm sure you can find equally good supplies at craft stores. Place about an inch of sand in a cast-iron skillet and warm it on an electric hot plate or stove. Use some of the extra petals to test the length of time to immerse the holly for the most attractive shading.

Trace and inlay the petals

The easiest way to locate the flowers on the leg is to photocopy the full-size image onto a transparency. Copy centers or office-supply stores can do this. Position the transparency on the leg and then mark the location of the tips of the petals with a sharp point. Note that the top two petals stray over the stringing.

Remove the transparency, and then tack the correct sequence of outside petals to the leg using a couple of small dabs of hot hide glue—dabs, not droplets. If you use too much glue, you'll have a terrible time getting your petals off in one piece. I prefer hot hide glue because it sets up quickly and fills any gaps during the actual inlaying. White glue is an acceptable alternative.

Once the glue is dry, scribe around the petals with an X-Acto knife, cutting with the flow of the grain. Apply firm, controlled



Excavate the recesses. Latta uses a Dremel tool fitted with a router base and a small spiral bit to remove the bulk of the wood (top). He cleans up the cut with a narrow chisel (above) and a router plane fitted with a pointed blade.



Glue in the pieces. Start with the outer pairs of petals, using a clamping caul lined with clear tape to prevent sticking. The next day, you can inlay the center petals.

Complete the inlay



Custom plug cutter. The author files teeth on the end of a brass rod (above) and uses a drill press to drill the holly plugs. Clear tape prevents the plugs from falling out when slicing them free with a handsaw (right).



Inset the plugs. Drill holes for the circles with a brad-point bit and insert the plugs with a little hide glue. When dry, pare them flush with the leg.

Delicate work. Make the loop that suspends the bellflowers from laminated holly veneer to prevent it from breaking. Inlay the two pieces in the same way as the petals.



pressure; the cuts should go fairly deep. Carefully pry off the petals with a chisel and put them aside in the correct order. Use a small router plane, or a rotary tool with a base (like a Dremel) to remove the waste. Clean up the recess with your router plane or a narrow chisel. Use a syringe to apply a film of hide glue into the cavities. Glue all four sets of outer petals into place, clamping them with a block covered with clear tape to prevent sticking. When dry, scrape or pare away the outside leaves until they are just proud of the surface, and repeat the inlaying process with the center petals.

Create and inset the circles

The bellflowers are connected by circles that are actually holly plugs. Because you are unlikely to find a $\frac{5}{32}$ -in. plug cutter, I made my own from a section of brass tubing available at most good hobby stores. Take a triangular needle file and form teeth in one end. Gently chuck the tubing into a drill press and cut a series of plugs in a block of holly. To remove the plugs, lay a piece of clear tape over them, saw behind the plugs, and peel them away. Use a matching size brad-point bit to cut the holes, then glue in the plugs.

A ring and an oval finish the job

The top ring that suspends the bellflowers has left and right sections and also is punched out with chisels. However, unlike the single veneer used for the petals, because the ring pieces are such erratic shapes, I make the inlay from two pieces of thin holly glued cross-grain to each other. This helps them to hold together better when cut.

The ornamental thistle was made using a similar method to one discussed in my earlier article, "Federal-Style Oval Inlays" (*FWW* #138, pp. 70-75). Alternatively, you can buy ready-made ovals (www.doverinlay.com, 301-223-8620). The oval is inlaid in exactly the same way as the petals. Do a final sanding when all the inlays have been scraped roughly level with the leg. □



Crowning glory. The pilaster of each leg is decorated with an oval inlay that can be bought or shop-made.