Fast, reliable way to sharpen a card scraper

BY BOB VAN DYKE

Photos: Barry-NM Dima

Card scrapers are incredibly versatile, making them an essential part of my surfacing kit for any project—so much so that I keep several of them sharpened and ready to go at all times. After all, why not? They're inexpensive and quick to sharpen.

Interestingly, every furniture maker I know sharpens scrapers differently, and all their methods work. Personally, I prefer what's considered a more traditional approach, while tossing in some modern conveniences like push pads and medium- and fine-grit diamond plates. My method guarantees fast, reliable results that let me use this simple tool to its full potential every time. (For more on how to use a card scraper, see "Foolproof Surface Prep," pp. 48–53.)

Polish the faces

Just like with any other edge tool, you start by creating polished planes that intersect, in this case the faces and edge of the scraper. This sets the foundation for the sharpest and longest-lasting burr.

I begin by jointing the scraper's long edge square to its face with a 10-in. mill bastard file. Run the file until it makes a consistent pass, leaving an even scratch pattern. You'll be able to see, hear, and feel when you're there.

Next, lap the scraper's two faces. I find diamond stones to be the best for this step because they are flat and can be used without a lubricant, which would make the scraper slippery and harder to hold. The trick is to apply all your pressure evenly along the face adjacent to the long edge. This is where the push pad comes in; it does the job better than fingers alone. Angle the push pad up slightly and apply pressure next to the edge—not on the whole face. Lap until there are uniform scratches. Work your way from medium to fine stones.

After the faces, polish the long edge. For this, the scraper must stay square to the stone. An easy trick is to hold the scraper against a block of wood while rubbing the scraper (not the wood) over the stone. Again, aim for a uniform polish across the edge before moving on

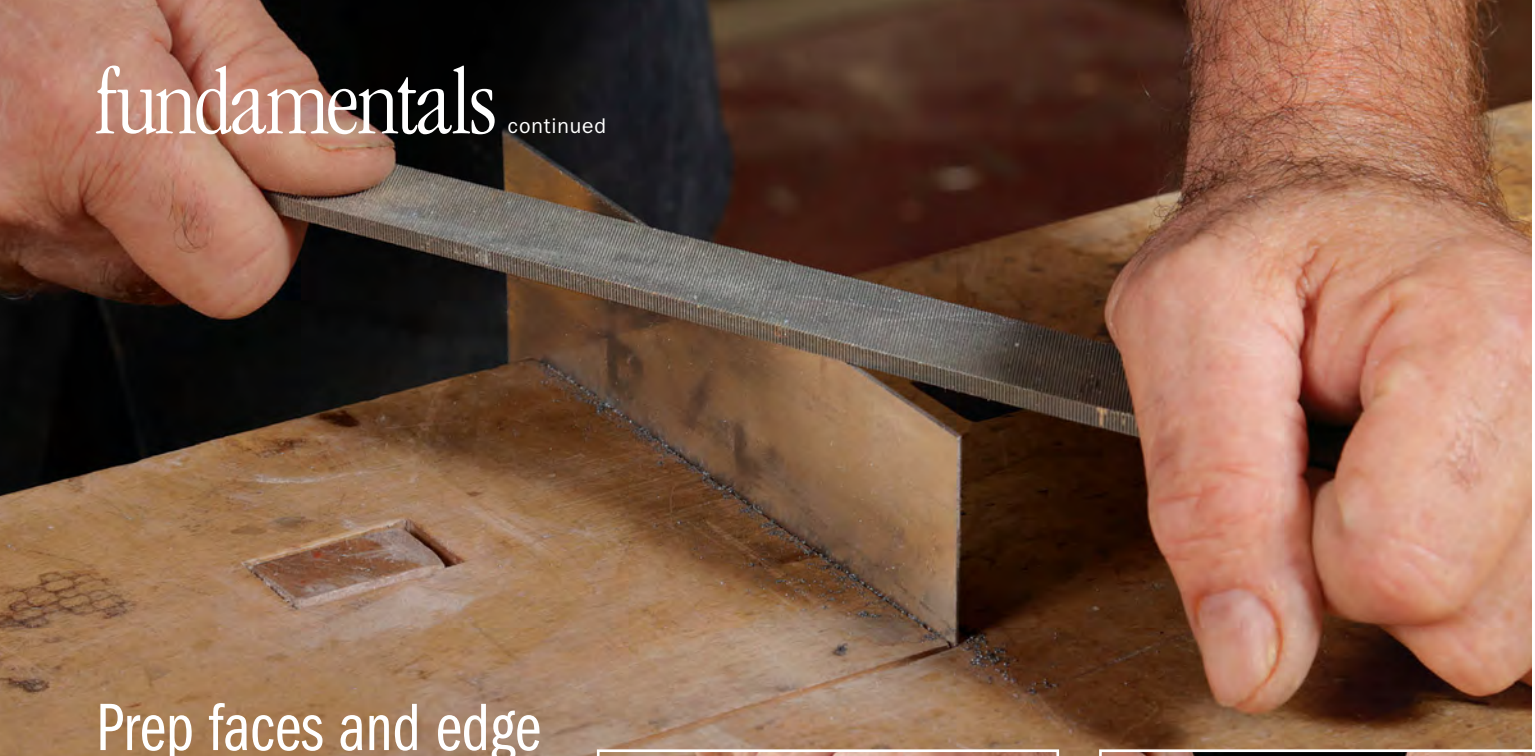
Versatile tool

Van Dyke primarily uses the scraper to clean up tool marks left by jointers, planers, and handplanes, but he uses it to tackle other tasks as well.

SURFACE SQUIRRELLY GRAIN
Light shavings taken with a card scraper can handle even the tightest grain changes on this maple burl.

FLUSH EDGING
With a little practice, finesse tasks like flushing a hardwood edge are easily accomplished.

BANDING IS NO ISSUE
A sharp scraper is perfect for safely leveling inlays and bandings.



Prep faces and edge

To ready the tool for the cutting burr, create smooth and square faces and long edge.

Joint an edge square with a file. *The edge is ready when the file makes a consistent pass, leaving an even scratch pattern. Van Dyke uses a 10-in. mill bastard file.*

to finer stones. I prefer diamond stones for this job, too. If you use another kind, you'll need to continually move the scraper across its surface to avoid quickly wearing a groove.

Form the hook-shaped burr

At this point you can begin burnishing the edge to create the cutting burr. This involves three steps: drawing out the steel, mushrooming it over, and turning the burr.

To draw out the steel, position the scraper near the edge of the bench and run the burnisher on the face adjacent to the edge at a very slight angle while exerting firm downward pressure.

The next step is to mushroom over the burr. Hang the scraper about 1 in. over the edge of the bench and, holding the burnisher square to the face, draw it across the edge four or five times.

Now, turn the burr by angling the burnisher slightly (3° to 4°) and draw the burnisher up and across the edge two or three times. Avoid pressing too hard, since a big burr is harder to use and more fragile than a small one. The

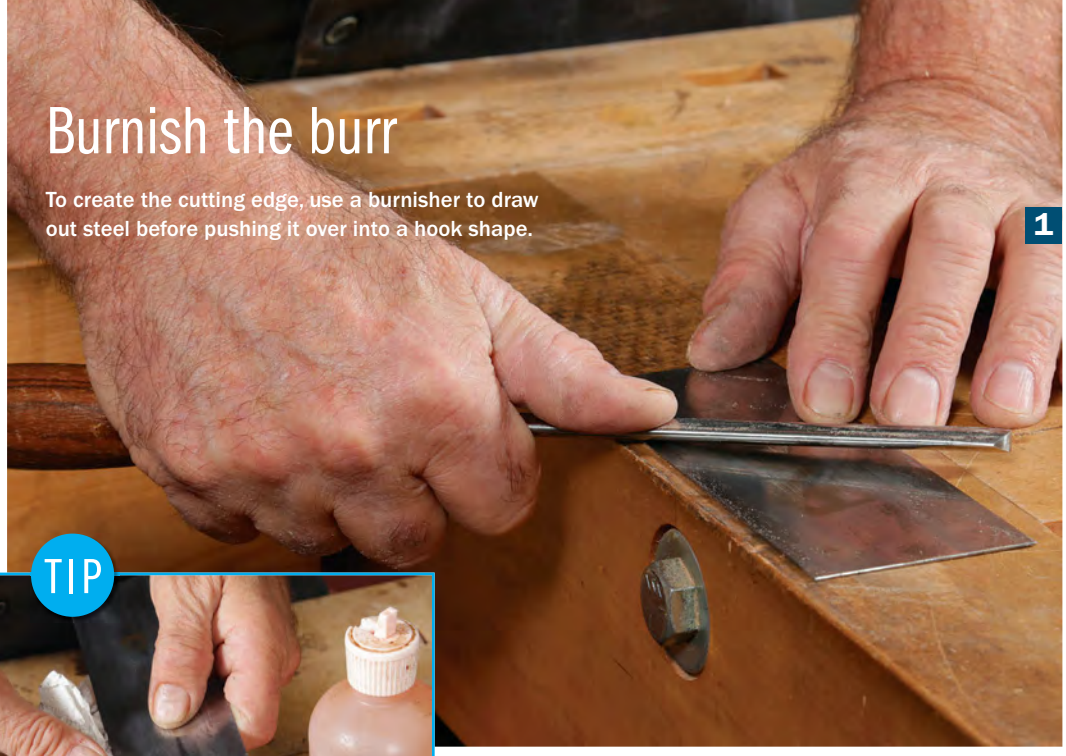
Lap the faces. *To create an even scratch pattern along the length of the scraper, Van Dyke uses a push pad, tipping it slightly to direct pressure along the edge.*

Look for a uniform scratch pattern. *Work your way up to finer stones, lapping the face only near the jointed edge. There's no need to lap the middle of the scraper.*

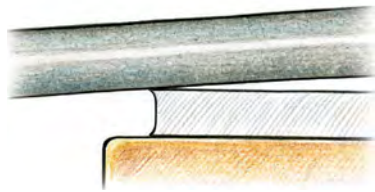
Register against a square block when lapping the edge. *Draw the scraper (not the wood) back and forth over the stone. The wood helps you maintain 90°. Again, aim for a uniform polish across the whole edge before moving to finer stones.*

Burnish the burr

To create the cutting edge, use a burnisher to draw out steel before pushing it over into a hook shape.



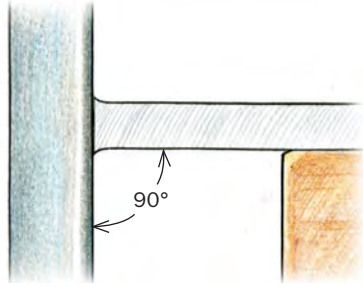
1 ***Draw out the steel.*** *Hold the burnisher at a very slight angle to the face, skew it, and pull it along the scraper while pressing it firmly against the face. This creates a slight burr along the edge.*



TIP

Lubricate with oil. *Running the burnisher on the scraper means metal on metal, so Van Dyke first rubs the scraper with an oil-based lubricant.*

2 ***Mushroom out the burr.*** *With the burnisher square to the scraper's face, draw it across the edge four or five times to mushroom it out.*

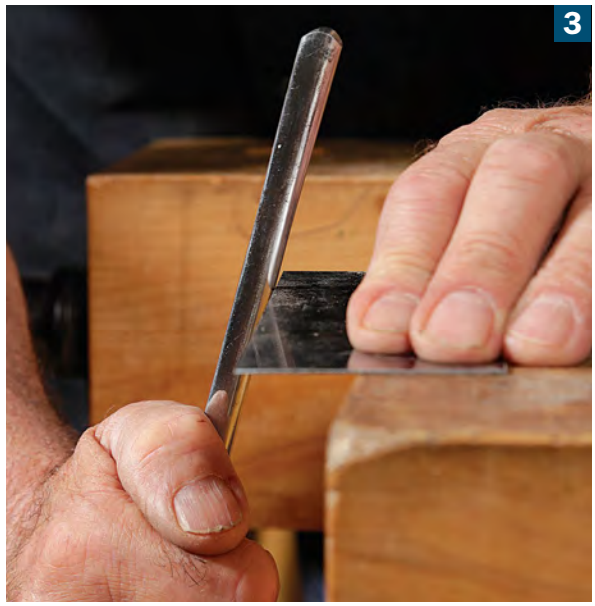


pressure here is surprisingly light—only about 4 oz., according to an early article by Tage Frid ("The Scraper," *FWW* #6).

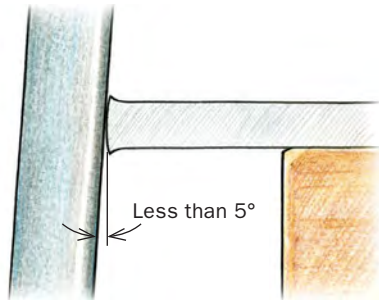
Turning a slightly angled burr allows the scraper to be used almost vertically, which is easier to control. And because the body of the scraper is supporting it, the fragile steel burr lasts longer.

When to resharpen

Don't expect the scraper to cut effectively for more than 5 or 10 minutes of continuous use. When the shavings degrade, stop cutting and reburnish the scraper. If you're just making dust, you've waited too long. Trying to scrape with a dull tool will round over the jointed edge, which means you won't be able to pull a new burr from it. You should be able to reburnish five or six times before the edge becomes too work-hardened and brittle. At that point, go back to the file and start the sharpening process from the beginning. □



3 ***Turn the burr.*** *Finally, angle the burnisher ever so slightly before drawing it up and across the edge two or three times. Don't exert a lot of pressure. A small sharp burr is easier to use and will last longer than a big one.*



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