



# Add a leather surface to a table

BY STEVE LATTA



A leather top adds pizzazz to a piece, a certain formality typically associated with large executive desks. When leather is touched, its slight springback projects durability, comfort, and almost a sense of kinship. That might sound odd but as humans, we have an ancient relationship with leather that existed millennia before our use of



## Veneer first

Before you get to the leather, you'll apply veneer to one face of each leaf of the top.

**Edge and veneer.** Prior to veneering, Latta glues a ½-in.-wide strip of solid-wood edging to one long edge of each leaf. These edges will be where the top folds when the leaves are hinged. Then with yellow glue, he applies the oversize veneer.



fabric. In my mind, leather's imperfections make it perfect, with its natural defects and wrinkles breaking up the monotony of a static flat plane.

In addition to its good looks, leather is a very pragmatic choice. As a writing surface, it has no equal. Upholstery leather, which I use, requires minimal upkeep. It holds its own against life's daily assaults and I have never had to replace a damaged piece. I wish the same could be said for the countless wooden tops that have left my shop over the years.

With a little experience, leather is easy to work and requires no special tooling. Here's how I added a leather top to the expanding table on pp. 58–65.

### Veneer one side of both leaves

To begin, I took two pieces of ⅝-in.-thick by 15-in.-wide by 24-in.-long Baltic-birch plywood and glued a ½-in. strip of cherry to one long edge on each of the leaves. Once the top is completed, these will be the edges at the fold.

After cutting two pieces of cherry veneer a bit oversize, I laminated a piece to one side of each leaf using yellow



**Vacuum bag it.** Use a vacuum bag or press or clamping pressure to set the veneer on the substrate.



**Remove the excess.** Once the glue is dry, use a single-bevel knife, guided by the substrate, to trim away the excess veneer.

## Get ready for the leather

Prior to gluing a piece of leather to the two leaves, add a spacer between them. And secure the leaves with two tacked strips to ensure they don't shift during the glue-up.



**Anti-stick tricks.** Use clear tape, trimmed to fit, to cover the edging on the inside of the leaves (top). Additionally, wax the thin spacer that will sit between the leaves during the glue-up (above). This way the spacer doesn't become a permanent part of the construction.



**Thin spacer.** This removable strip will create a narrow gap between the leaves during the glue-up, which will allow them to fold after the glue has dried and the leaves are hinged together.

glue and a vacuum bag. When the glue had thoroughly dried, I cut each leaf to 14 in. by 22 in., leaving the cherry strips untouched.

### Add leather to the tops

With the veneering complete, cut a piece of upholstery leather large enough to cover both leaves of the top with a ½-in. overhang all the way around.

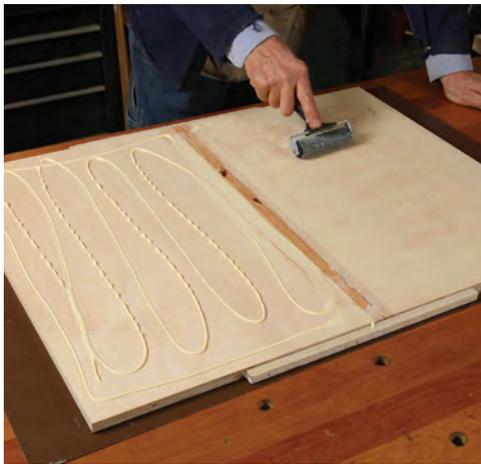
Align the cherry edges with each other and place a strip of veneer between the two. To keep parts from sticking during the glue-up, cover the cherry edges with clear packing tape and wax the strip of veneer. To keep the leaves from shifting in the vacuum press, tack a temporary



**Immobilization measures.** It's vital that the leaves not shift during the leather glue-up. Latta clamps the two leaves to a flat surface and to each other, with the spacer in place, and tacks a temporary cleat to the edge, straddling the two leaves. He tacks another cleat to the opposite edge.

## Apply the leather

Gluing the leather in place is similar to gluing veneer.



**Glue and press.** Spread glue on the substrate, just as you would with veneer. But rather than putting the veneer on top of the substrate, spread the leather (good face down) on a clean, flat surface. Turn the substrate glue-side down and set it on top of the leather.

cleat to the edge, straddling the leaves. Do this on both ends. Roll a nice film of white glue onto the unveneered faces of the leaves. Lay the leather on a flat surface, and set the leaves on top. With the leather side down, put the assembly on a platen in the vacuum bag and let the glue do its thing.

Once the glue has fully cured, pull out the top and remove the cleats, and the spacer between the leaves. The leaves should easily fold onto each other at this point. Take a sharp single-bevel knife and, with the top face down, trim the leather to the edge of the leaves.

### Edge the perimeter

The three exposed sides of each leaf now get edged with a 1-in.-wide strip of cherry mitered at the outer corners. Adding biscuits or splines along the joint will help with alignment and slippage. Take the time to make your biscuit or spline joints extremely accurate, because after the edging is glued it must be perfectly flush with the surface of the leather. The edging can be flushed on the veneered side of the leaf but I don't take that risk on the leather side.

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**Flip and flatten.** After applying hand pressure to keep the leather and substrate together, flip the assembly and use your hands to smooth out any wrinkles, moving from the center outward. Then set the whole thing in the vacuum bag, leather side down, to dry under pressure.

## Post glue-up

Once the glue is dry on the leather, it's time to think about edging the outside.



**Out of the press.** When the glue has cured, remove the spacer from between the leaves and peel off the clear tape from the edges. Then use a single-bevel knife to trim the leather to the substrate.



**Grooves for biscuits or a spline.** It's difficult to flush the edging on the leather side without damaging the leather. So the mitered edging that goes around the perimeter of the top should get biscuits or a spline to keep it from shifting during the glue-up. Latta runs grooves for splines using a handheld router on the substrate and the router table for the edging.



**One piece at a time.** Working around the perimeter of the table, miter, measure, cut, and glue each piece in place.