

Pop the Curl in Curly Maple

Woodworkers choose this species for its stunning figure. Here are four goof-proof steps to bring out the best in this premier wood.

BY JEFF JEWITT



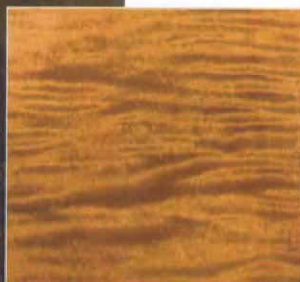
FIRST Raise the surface grain of the wood with a diluted dye stain, as the author is doing in the photo at left.



SECOND Add more color to the wood with a second coat of full-strength dye stain.



NEXT Add depth to the curl with a liberal coat of oil.



LAST Topcoat with a clear finish to make the curl shimmer. The topcoat on the armoire (facing page) is shellac.

The question from one concerned woodworker was direct. "I built an entertainment center out of curly maple. I want to finish it so that it looks a hundred years old—you know, that caramel color with real dark curl that jumps out and follows you around the room. I spent months sweating over this project, and the stuff was a bear to work with. I really don't want to mess it up. How

should I put a finish on this project?"

I understood his concern. I went through the same scenario years ago when I built my first piece out of curly maple. As one of our premier native hardwoods, curly maple is a rough wood to work: The wood is dense, and the alternating grain makes it tough to plane, cut and shape. However, the rewards of this challenging wood pay off when it comes time to put a finish on it.

Using the armoire shown above and on the facing page, I'll show you how to apply my favorite finish for curly maple—one that's virtually goof-proof. I'll also provide some recipes for other color options (see the story on p. 41).

Start with the right stain

Pigment-based stains, which are made of fine, colored powders suspended in a

You call this stuff stain? The first step toward finishing curly maple is to apply a highly diluted water-soluble dye stain. This step raises the grain of the wood.

medium, don't bring out the best in curly maple. The pigment tends to mask both the grain and the figure. For that reason, I prefer to use the more transparent water-soluble dye stains, which are user-friendly. Dye stains can be used one of two ways. In diluted form, they highlight the curl a bit, making it just a tad darker. And used in a stronger solution, they can color the wood and accentuate the curl even more. As always, practice on some scraps first to get the color you want.

Darken the curl and raise the grain—To slightly darken and accentuate the curl, apply a diluted brown dye stain as the first



step. I dilute it eight times the recommended concentration, or until it's the color of strong tea (see the photo above). After sanding the wood through 150-grit paper, lay on this dye as a grain-raising step. Wipe or spray it quickly all over the wood as evenly as you can, then let it dry. Sand the raised grain with 180-grit paper. Sanding will remove almost all of the dye color

from the surface that has no curl, but some of the color will remain in the curl figure. This is exactly what you want. If you like the color of the wood, leave it this way and move directly to applying an oil sealer. But if you want to add more color, follow this step with a darker coat of dye stain.

Add color and highlight the curl even more—If you decide that you want more color, apply the dye stain you've chosen at its full strength (see the left photo below). Wipe or spray it on evenly and then—while the surface of the wood is still wet—wet-sand the dye into the wood with a maroon Scotch-Brite pad. (Don't use steel wool because the iron in the steel might react with the water and cause black stains that will ruin the finish.) The Scotch-Brite will denib any additional grain raising that occurs. Let the wood dry at least overnight.

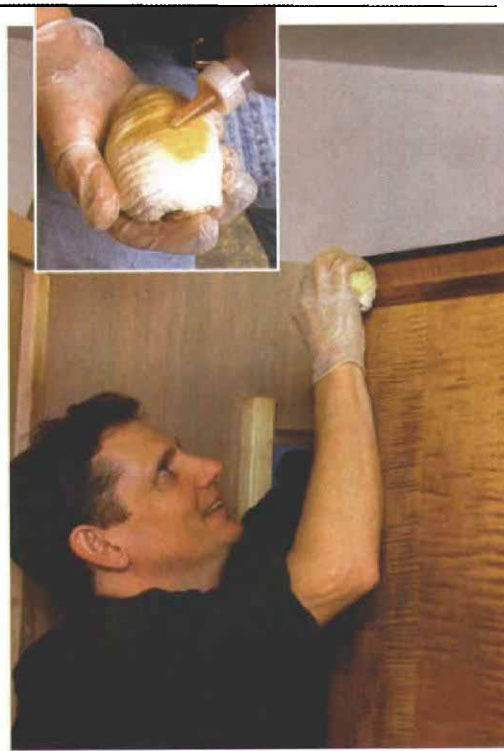
Seal the wood with a liberal coat of oil Sealing the wood with oil adds real depth and some luster to the surface of the wood. I prefer to use boiled linseed oil, but you can use just about any oil finish you prefer. Flood the oil all over the surface of the



A second stain for more color. The author sprayed this layer of concentrated stain for a quick and even coverage. While the wood was still damp, he wet-sanded the surface with a maroon Scotch-Brite pad.



Treat the wood like a thirsty dog. When applying a coat of boiled linseed oil, flood the surface liberally and give it as much as it will drink in.



Pads lay on shellac in thin coats. Once you get the hang of it, padding on shellac with a rag can offer advantages over brushing it on. Pads conform to odd-shaped moldings and don't leave thick brush marks in the finish.

wood (see the middle photo on the facing page) and add more oil to the figured areas as they absorb each coat you lay on. Keep checking the wood every 15 minutes or so, adding oil when necessary. When you reach a point where the wood won't drink in any more oil, take a break and let the oil set for an hour or so. Wipe the excess off and let the wood dry overnight. (You can't be too cautious with oil-soaked rags. Dispose of them properly.)

The next day, spread a light coat of oil over the surface and wet-sand lightly with 400-grit wet-or-dry paper. Don't sand too vigorously—especially on the edges—or you risk cutting through the dye. (If you do go through, mix some alcohol in the dye and dab some on the areas that need touch-up.) Put the workpiece aside and let the second coat of oil dry for a couple of days before moving on to your finish coats.

Topcoat with the film finish of your choice

Although oil is an attractive finish when it's freshly applied, it doesn't stay that way, and it isn't very durable. A topcoat will not only toughen the surface, but the clear film over the dyed and oiled surface also acts as a lens to bring out shimmer and depth in the figured wood.

You can use any one of a variety of topcoats. Varnish will add durability, but my two favorites are shellac and lacquer. Shellac can be applied easily with a brush or a pad (see *FWW* #112, pp. 60-63, for tips on padding shellac), but lacquer looks best when it's sprayed on. Also, because shellac comes in different colors—ranging from a pale straw to a dark garnet—you can shade the surface to tint the final color of the workpiece. Lightly sand the dried oil with 400-grit paper and wipe off the residue before laying on your topcoats.

I apply at least four coats (see the bottom right photo on the facing page), but you can apply more or fewer, depending on your tastes. You can rub out your last coat with 0000 steel wool and thinned paste wax (cut with mineral spirits) for a soft, satiny sheen. □

Jeff Jewitt has written extensively for Fine Woodworking. He is currently working on a step-by-step finishing book to be published by The Taunton Press next year.

Light or dark, how do you want your curl?

HERE ARE A FEW OTHER RECIPES FOR FINISHING CURLY MAPLE. THESE ARE NOT RULES WRITTEN IN STONE: YOU CAN VARY THE COLORS AND TECHNIQUES AND EXPERIMENT FOR DIFFERENT EFFECTS UNTIL YOU ARRIVE AT THE FINISH THAT BEST SUITS YOUR TASTES.

AU NATUREL

If you simply wish to keep the creamy natural color of maple, here are two easy options. You can spray a water-white, nonyellowing CAB-acrylic lacquer (cellulose acetate butyrate), which will retain the creamy white color of the wood without imparting an amber cast to it. Or you can brush on several coats of a water-based acrylic lacquer. With water-based finishes, I wipe on the first coat quickly with a rag, then brush on the final coats.

Of these two finishes, I prefer the look of the solvent-based CAB-acrylic lacquer because it kicks out the curly figure better than the water-based finish. Neither of these finishes will turn yellow over time, but the maple underneath the finish will invariably change color.

ANTIQUÉ MAPLE

Darken the curl and raise the grain with a light-brown water-soluble dye stain. Lightly sand the surface with 180-grit paper, then apply a yellow, caramel-colored dye stain. (I find the stock solutions a bit dark, so I dilute them with double the amount of water.) After the stain has dried, lightly scuff the surface with a maroon Scotch-Brite pad. Apply a coat of oil, let that dry, then seal the surface with one coat of a freshly mixed batch of dewaxed shellac.

When the shellac is dry, scuff-sand with 220-grit paper, then apply a glaze made from van dyke brown or burnt sienna Japan color, thinned with mineral spirits. Just brush it on and wipe it off, leaving a little extra in crevices and corners to simulate an aged appearance. When the glaze has dried for a couple of days, apply the topcoat of your choice. If you're using a water-based lacquer, it's always a good idea to seal in the glaze first with dewaxed shellac.

TWO-TONED EFFECT

Dye the bare wood with a concentrated dark-brown dye stain. Sand the wood level with 180-grit paper, then seal the surface with shellac. Spray on a dye-based toner of your favorite color shade. Primary colors like red and blue will yield some striking effects.

To make a dye toner, dissolve or mix some powdered or pre-mixed dye into a compatible finish and spray it lightly over the surface. Work slowly up to the final color you want. When the toner has dried, seal it in with clear topcoats.-JJ.