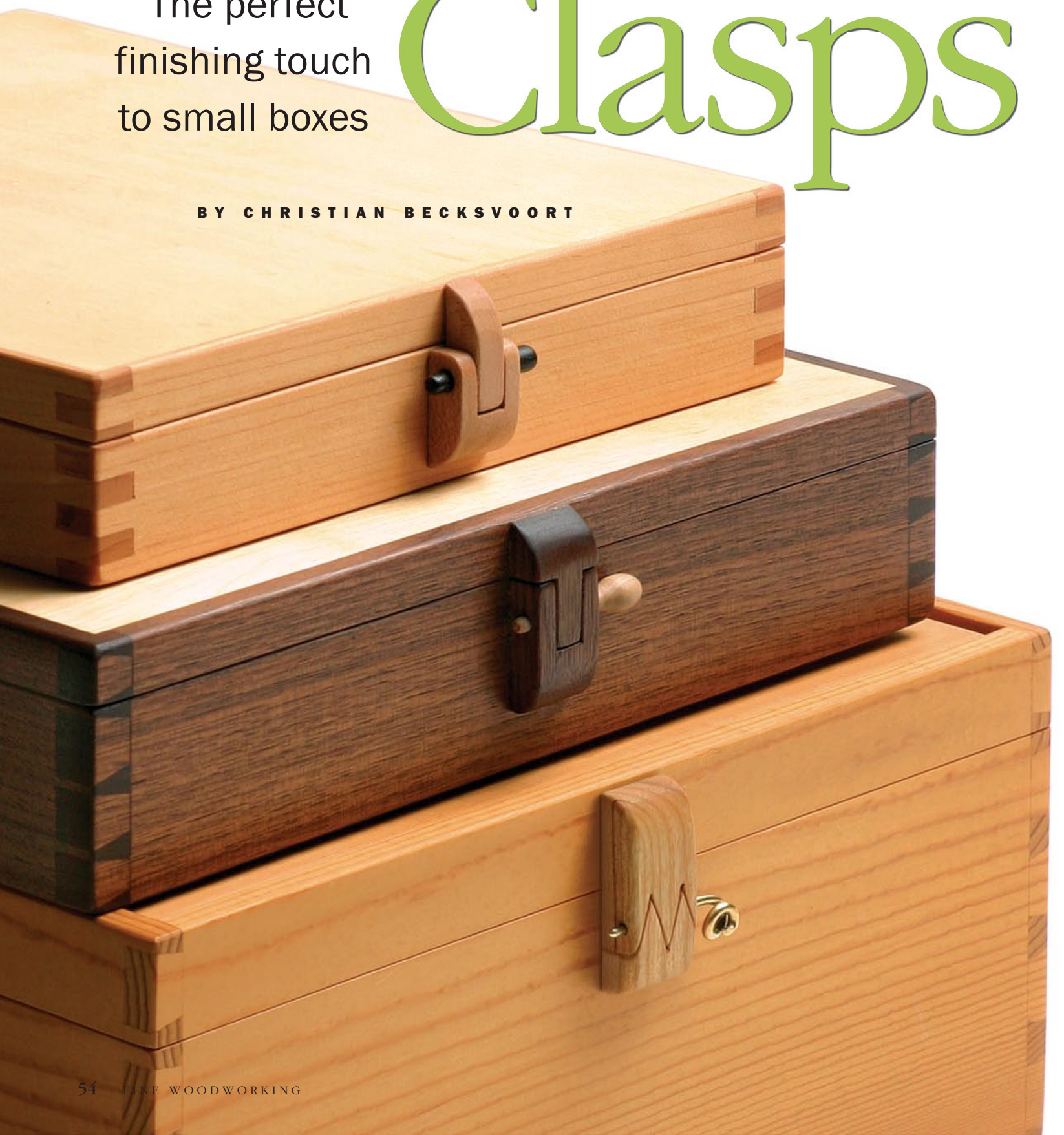
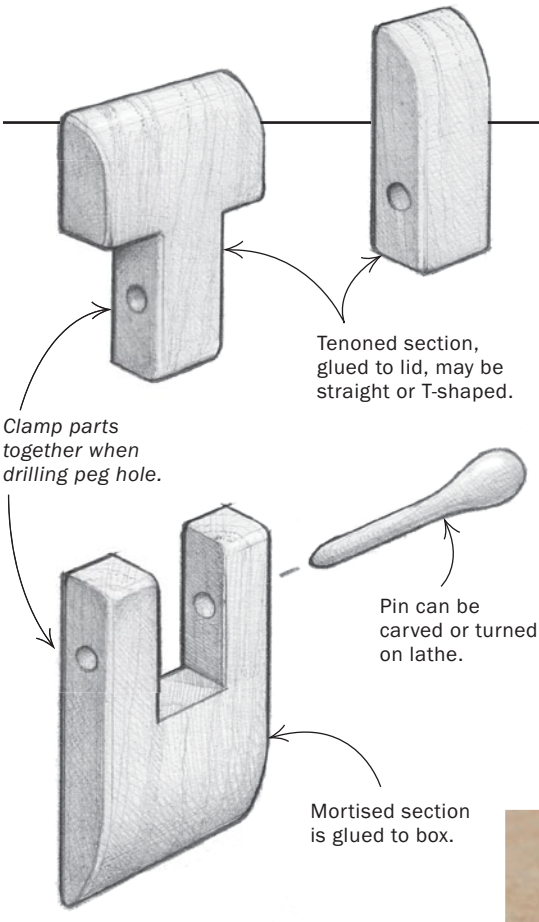
Custom-made Clasps

The perfect finishing touch to small boxes

BY CHRISTIAN BECKSVOORT



Single-prong clasps



1 ***Cut the mortised piece first.*** *Using a block of wood clamped to a miter gauge and the tablesaw fence to support the workpiece, cut the open mortise.*

2 ***Mark and cut the tenon.*** *Stack the mortised piece on top of the tenon blank, aligning the edges of both pieces. Use a knife to get accurate marks for the tenon (left). Cut the tenon on the tablesaw (right). Adjust the fit as necessary with a chisel and cut both pieces to length.*

3 ***Drill both pieces at once.*** *Clamp the mating pieces together and use a drill press to bore a hole for the pin.*

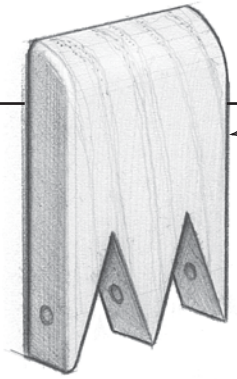
After spending hours building a dovetailed box, you need a clasp for the finishing touch. A search through your hardware catalogs turns up nothing distinctive. Why not create your own clasp of matching or contrasting wood, with a hand-turned pin? They're easy to make, in whatever wood and size you choose.

The wooden clasps I often make are nothing more than locking finger joints. Start by selecting your wood. I've found that tight-grained woods such as cherry, maple, hornbeam, dogwood, or apple work best. After choosing the wood, decide what size to make the clasp. Remember to keep it in proportion to the box size. For jewelry, keepsake, or presentation boxes, the smaller the better. Most of the clasps I've made have been between ¼ in. and ⅜ in. thick. For larger, wall-mounted cabinets, you could use ½-in. or even ¾-in. stock. It may help to experiment first with a scrap of pine or some cardboard to see what looks right.

With a little creativity, a simple clasp can take on a variety of appearances. The single-prong clasp, a simple tenon into an open mortise, is the fastest and easiest to

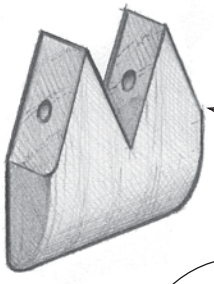
Photos: William Duckworth; drawings: Bob La Pointe

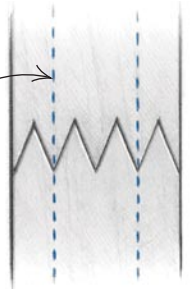
Multiple-prong clasps



The longer half of the clip is glued to the lid.

The shorter section is glued to the box.





TIP: *Saw more teeth than you need and choose the best section for the clasp.*

1 ***Mark wider stock than you will need for the finished pieces.*** *Use a bevel gauge to mark a row of triangular teeth, and then cut the teeth with a dovetail saw.*

2 ***Mark the matching teeth.*** *Use the first section as a template for the second, cutting several more teeth than you'll need in the finished clasp.*

3 ***Complete the clasp.*** *Choose the best-fitting teeth and rip both pieces to width on the tablesaw (top). Then clamp the mating pieces together and use a drill press to bore a hole for the pin (left).*

make, but with a little more time and effort, you can customize the design. With a dovetail saw, you can cut triangular teeth that fit together like a finger joint.

Cut the joints in larger pieces

Start by milling the stock to the appropriate thickness. Leave plenty of extra width and length so that you'll have something to hold onto while machining the workpieces. For example, I often start by milling a couple of pieces 5⁄16 in. thick by 2 in. wide by 6 in. long.

For simple single-prong clasps, I use the tablesaw to cut the open mortise and the tenon pieces. I cut the open mortise first. Then I butt the second piece against the one just cut, making sure they are flush side to side, and mark the location of the matching tenon with a sharp knife. I use the knife marks to cut the tenon piece. To get a good, tight fit and clean up the tablesawn surfaces, it's sometimes necessary to shave the mating surfaces with a chisel.

For clasps with triangular teeth, use a dovetail saw to cut two pieces of stock into mating rows of teeth, making sure that you've cut several more teeth than you'll need in the finished clasp. Then choose the best-fitting ones and rip the parts to their final width.

USE YOUR IMAGINATION WHEN DESIGNING THE PIN. IT CAN BE ANYTHING FROM A CARVED TWIG TO TURNED EBONY.

After you've cut all the parts to size, clamp the two pieces together, and use a drill press to bore a hole for the dowel or the wire pin that holds the two pieces in place when the box lid is closed. Round over sharp edges with rasps, files, or sandpaper.

Glue the top portion of the clasp to the lid of the already assembled box, and the bottom portion to the case. Check for glue squeeze-out between the pieces, or they may end up accidentally glued together.

Use your imagination when designing the pin. It can be anything from a carved twig to turned ebony. I've also used brass brazing rod or stainless-steel bolts, whose threads may be filed off. □

Christian Becksvoort is a contributing editor to Fine Woodworking *and the author of* The Shaker Legacy *(The Taunton Press, 2000).*

Turning small pins

You can turn a variety of pin profiles on the lathe. First turn a piece of stock between centers to make a spindle. Then use a drill chuck to complete the profile.

Taper one end. *Chuck a piece of stock in the lathe and create a gentle taper.*

Round the other. *Reverse the workpiece in the chuck and turn the larger end to a rounded shape.*

Complete the pin. *Fine sandpaper applied to the spinning pin gives it a smooth surface.*