

Foolproof Recipes for 3 Favorite Finishes

Dyes and gel stains work better together

BY PETER GEDRYS



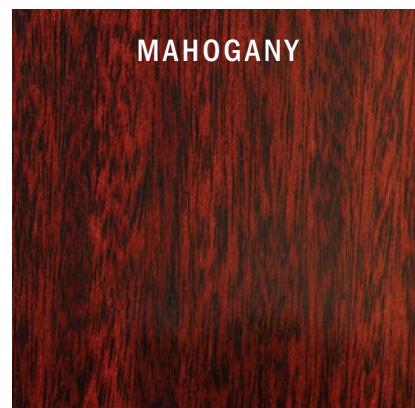
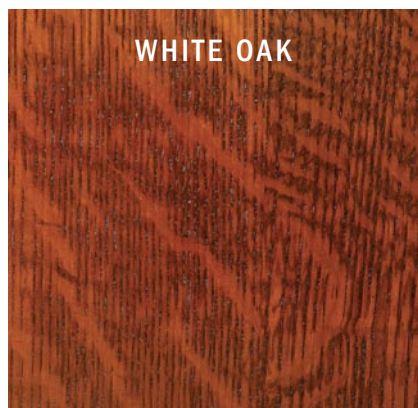
Gel stains have grown in popularity in recent years. Their viscosity and wipe-on/wipe-off application method make them easy to master, and compared with penetrating oil stains, they cause far less blotching on certain woods. However, using them on bare wood is often not the best method. Because of the pigment in gel stains, multiple coats tend to obscure the wood grain. And they come in a limited range of colors.

A better way to use them is in conjunction with dyes. You can apply gel directly over a dye to emphasize the grain and pore structure, or you can seal the dyed surface first and then apply the gel stain. Known as glazing, this is one of the most versatile and forgiving steps in the finisher's arsenal because it's so easy to change or even remove the glaze before it dries. I'll demonstrate on three popular woods—white oak, pine, and mahogany—and give finishing recipes for each.

THREE WINNING LOOKS

Dye powders come in a huge range of colors and their clarity doesn't obscure the wood. Used on top of the dye, gel stains allow you to tweak the color and highlight the grain.

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Mission oak

Transform pale white oak into the rich, deep brown reminiscent of fumed oak without using hazardous concentrated ammonia.



White oak is one of my favorite woods because it takes colors and finishes in a very predictable fashion. On this table, I'll show you how to create a deep, rich brown reminiscent of fumed oak, the signature finish of so many Arts and Crafts pieces.

The process starts with a water-based dye, which is used to lighten up or subdue the base or background color of the wood. Water-based dyes are economical and come in a huge range of colors. My choice for this table was Lockwood's English Brown Oak, a cool, deep brown. Dissolve ½ oz. of powder in 8 oz. of warm distilled water, let it cool, and then filter it.

THE RECIPE

- Lockwood #871 English Brown Oak water-soluble dye
- General Finishes Brown Mahogany gel stain
- Oil-based varnish

After sanding the table to P180 grit, blow the dust out of the pores, wipe the surface clean with a dry cloth, and apply the dye with a small pad. Use a brush to help dab the dye into corners. Be generous applying the dye, but wipe off the excess. Once the dye is dry, wipe on a coat of gel stain directly over it and wipe off the surplus after a couple of minutes. This helps make the grain

and pore structure more pronounced, while leaving the ray-fleck pattern pale. I used General Finishes Brown Mahogany, a deep, warm brown. This dye-and-stain combination results in a deep, aged brown like you'll find on many antiques.

Allow the gel to dry completely (about 24 to 36 hours) before applying a topcoat. If you're not sure it's dry, do the smell test: If there is a strong, discernible smell of oil, wait. I applied three coats of an oil-based varnish to give the table decent protection. If you want to use a water-based finish, seal the gel stain first with a coat of dewaxed shellac. Zinsser's SealCoat works very well and can be used at its regular 2-lb. cut.



DYE COLORS THE WOOD

Filter first. Before using the dye, pour it through a fine paint filter to remove any lumps of powder.



Apply dye liberally. Use a folded piece of cloth or paper towel to dye the wood (above). After a minute or two, wipe off the surplus with a clean cloth (right).



GEL STAIN POPS THE GRAIN



Wipe on, wipe off. Applied straight to the dyed wood, the gel stain packs the pores and emphasizes the grain pattern of the white oak.

Antique pine

Sealing the surface is the secret to an even color on this notoriously blotch-prone wood.

If white oak is predictable when finishing, pine is anything but. A soft wood, it can take dye stain in a very uneven way and leave dark blotches. If the dyed sample boards indicate blotching, apply one or two washcoats of a 1-lb. cut of SealCoat shellac (three parts shellac with two parts denatured alcohol). When the shellac is dry, sand it with P220-grit paper and clean off the dust.

For this shelf, I used Early American Maple medium-yellow dye. I mixed roughly $\frac{1}{4}$ oz. of powder in 8 oz. of water so that it would have just enough color to give the pale pine a little boost. When dry, apply a coat of undiluted Seal-Coat, and when this is dry, sand it with P320-grit paper to flatten the surface.

Now that the surface is sealed, the gel becomes a glaze. Instead of quickly soaking into the wood, it sits on the surface and you can move it around. You can leave it denser in corners to simulate aging, or even remove it altogether if you don't like the appearance. When using any stain in this way, you need to dilute it by about 10% with mineral spirits to extend the working time. Don't overthin, or the gel will become watery and you'll lose the color strength.

Instead of mineral spirits, you can add a little colorless glaze base such as Benjamin Moore's Studio Glaze to get even more working time and control over the color.

The gel-stain glaze can be applied with a pad or brush, but if you choose a pad, use a dry China-bristle brush to feather out any application lines. Let the glaze dry prior to topcoating.

Because the shelf won't see as much wear and tear as the table, I used SealCoat shellac as a topcoat (three coats). When brushing on the first coat, use as few brush strokes as you can. If you work the shellac too much, it could pull the pigment and leave a patchy appearance. When the third coat of shellac is dry, lightly sand the surface with P320- or P400-grit paper. A coat of wax is an optional final finish, but it gives the piece a soft look and a nice feel.

THE RECIPE

- Lockwood #142 Early American Maple Medium Yellow water-soluble dye
- General Finishes Prairie Wheat gel stain
- Blond shellac

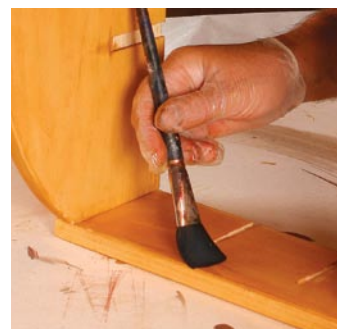


SEAL FIRST

Sealing is the solution. This pine needed only a thin, 1-lb. cut of shellac. Wipe it on, let it dry, and then apply the dye.



DYE, THEN SEAL AGAIN



Yellow adds depth. Wipe the sealed pine with the yellow dye (left). Apply a 2-lb. cut of dewaxed shellac (right) to seal the dye before using the gel stain as a glaze.

STAIN BECOMES A GLAZE



Reversible color. When applied to a sealed surface, the gel stain becomes a glaze and can be wiped on and off until the appearance is just the way you want it.

Glowing mahogany

A vibrant dye brings the wood to life while a layer of dark gel stain adds depth to the appearance.

Instead of the normal mahogany brown, let's have a little fun with this mahogany jewelry box (www.bartleycollection.com). Start with a Bismarck Brown, but don't be fooled by the name; this alcohol-soluble dye is a deep, fiery red.

With an open-pored wood like mahogany, sealing is optional. If you want to emphasize the pore structure, skip this step. Just be aware that the gel will be darker on raw wood. In this case, the grain pattern was nothing special so I sprayed on a single coat of SealCoat shellac. For the glaze (gel stain), I used Bartley Espresso. I added a second coat of glaze to the bracket feet to deepen them. After applying the glaze coats, let the piece sit for a few days to dry completely and then seal it with shellac.

You now have a choice. For a high gloss, rubbed-out finish, follow the steps in my article "Bring Out the Best in Mahogany" (*FWW* #197), but instead of varnish, spray on two or three coats of solvent lacquer. If you don't have a spray outfit, aerosol cans are fine for a small project like this. For a softer sheen, smooth the finish with 1,000-grit CAMI-grade wet-or-dry sandpaper or a 1,000-grit Abralon pad, and then rub it down with 0000 steel wool and wax.

THE RECIPE

- Lockwood #350 Bismarck Brown alcohol-soluble dye
- Bartley Espresso gel stain
- Solvent-based lacquer

SOURCES OF SUPPLY

LOCKWOOD POWDERED DYES
www.wdlockwood.com

GENERAL FINISHES GEL STAIN
www.generalfinishes.com

BARTLEY GEL STAIN
www.lawrence-mcfadden.com

TRY AN ALCOHOL-BASED DYE



A brighter option. Powders dissolved with denatured alcohol are more vibrant.

Seal by spraying. When sealing an alcohol-based dye with shellac, spray it on. Brushing or wiping could pull the dye and leave a blotchy appearance. SealCoat is available in an aerosol can.



GLAZE IS A COOLER BROWN



Another shot of color. Wiped on over the shellac, the Espresso gel stain becomes a glaze. Use a dry brush to remove pad marks.