

The Right Way to

Make your furniture stand out by combining different grain,

BY GARRETT HACK

Contrast can add drama to any design. The Egyptians understood this when they embellished their furniture with ivory, ebony, and gold. It's why craftsmen working in the Biedermeier style highlighted golden birch surfaces with dark details and moldings. Even the Shakers combined bird's-eye maple drawer fronts with cases made from quieter woods, and used bright contrasting washes of reds, yellows, and blues on some parts.

Figure, grain, and color can all create contrast, but a little goes a long way. The challenge is to understand what type of contrast to use and where to use it. Overdo it and the effect will be garish or gaudy. Keep a few principles in mind, and you'll take your work to another level.

Big areas, mild contrast

When using contrast in big doses, make the contrast more subtle.

Subtle is good

For this Arts-and-Crafts-style blanket chest, Jeff Dilks of Washington state combined a frame of quartersawn white oak with panels of European beech. The lighter beech works well with the slightly darker oak, and the oak's more pronounced grain and figure complements the subdued grain of the beech.



Go figure

Two types of the same wood can provide all the contrast a piece needs. In this table by Michael Pekovich, FWW's art director, contrast is created by the different figure in the bird's-eye maple and curly maple.



Age can be your friend

When Hack made this table, the figured maple and pearwood seemed quite different (left). Over time, however, the woods changed, becoming more harmonious (above).



Use Contrast

figure, and colors. Just don't overdo it

When introduced to the broad spectrum of beautiful woods, many budding furniture makers overdo it. But broad swaths of highly contrasting wood can shout instead of sing. The first rule is to choose woods that relate well together, such as maple and cherry. The photos on pp. 42–43 show 15 combinations, good and bad.

Unless you are doing marquetry, you should use no more than three or four woods in a piece (secondary woods that don't show don't count). With too many contrasting materials, the piece will have no focal point. One wood (or two if they are similar) should dominate. Hierarchy is important; use the boldest wood to deliver emphasis where you want it. A little goes a long way, particularly with high-contrast combinations such as holly and ebony. I reserve them for small inlays or flourishes. Too many different materials or large areas that stand out boldly can be hard to take. Even if

Sing, don't shout

Purple is an uncommon wood color that's too different from the golden-blond tones of maple, at least on this piece. Padauk or redheart are similarly gaudy and don't pair well with maple.



Use a hierarchy of woods

On this William and Mary highboy, Miguel Gomez-Ibanez combined cherry, madrone, Carpathian elm, and bloodwood. Note how he used color and grain to draw the eye to the drawers first.

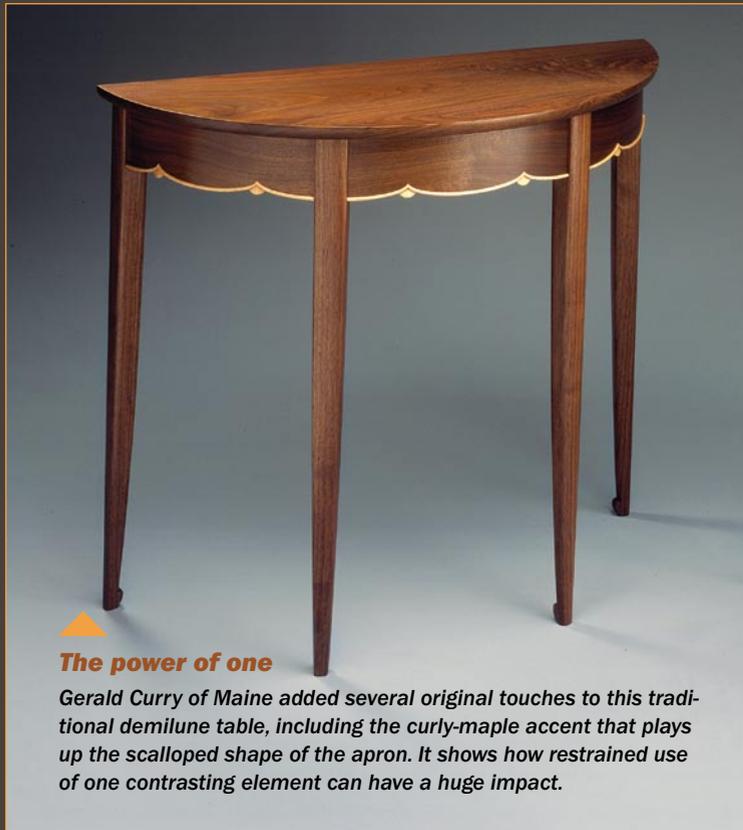


Take a breather

When using large amounts of highly figured wood, balance it with less dramatic, neutral areas. In this writing desk by Don Green of New York state, a dyed-mahogany base balances and offsets the strong shape and bold grain of the sapele top.

Save high contrast for small touches

Highly contrasting woods are best for smaller details, working to break up large surfaces and draw the eye to the form and lines of a piece.



The power of one

Gerald Curry of Maine added several original touches to this traditional demilune table, including the curly-maple accent that plays up the scalloped shape of the apron. It shows how restrained use of one contrasting element can have a huge impact.

that's the intent, give the viewer some quiet areas to retreat to—areas that use a bland grain or a neutral color.

Use contrast as a road map

Mixing dark and light woods makes both seem brighter or more intense. The viewer's eye is drawn to this difference, which is useful if you want to accentuate some area of a design, such as the shaped edge of a light wood table outlined in ebony, or a door panel highlighted with wood of dramatic color or figure. I like to play with this idea by embellishing legs or table aprons with string inlay. These fine lines of contrasting color act almost like the center line of a highway to guide the eye.

The stronger the difference in color or figure between the parts of a piece, the more each stands out from the parts around it. For example, you can visually separate a tabletop from the base by making it a distinctly different color or material. I like to use contrast at transition points. The contrasting element need not be large, just bold enough to be noticed. At the cuff of a leg, for example, where I often start a secondary taper, I'll inlay a banding of ebony and holly. A waist molding between two



Small but bold flourishes

Hack used jet-black ebony and pure-white holly in small doses on this cherry table. Quarter-fans and stringing decorate the top, and black-and-white stringing works with a flame-birch panel to emphasize the shape of the legs.



Mark transitions

In this sideboard, Hack used contrasting woods at transitions. A thin ebony bead defines the bottom of the case and outlines the shape of the center drawer. Holly-and-ebony cuffs near the bottom of the legs mark a change in the angle of the taper.

cases can stand out in the same way. A dark inner molding around a door frame creates a frame within a frame.

Allow for aging and consider the finish

Over time, many woods fade or darken to some shade of brown. That can frustrate your desire to produce a piece with lasting contrast. Although tropical hardwoods hold some color, the purples and reds, darks and whites of most woods don't last. Where you want lasting impact, use contrasting woods that don't fade much, like holly and ebony.

Finally, don't ruin good contrast with poor surface prep or finishing. Scraping and planing are better than sanding, which generates color-muddying dust. A sealcoat of thin, clear shellac can prevent dark colors from bleeding into lighter ones. To spot problems early, test finishes on sample boards. If bleeding seems to be a problem, give the lighter wood a couple of light sealcoats. All finishes tend to yellow over time, but lacquer and water-based finishes tend to yellow very little. They're the best choices for preserving contrast.

Garrett Hack is a contributing editor.



Define structure

California furniture maker Roger Heitzman used ebony accents on the base, the legs, and the stretcher to draw the eye to the structure of this table and help define its form.



Outlines and accents

For this sheet-music cabinet, Canadian furniture maker Christopher Solar used darker woods in the case to frame the curly-maple veneer of the door panels. Edge-banding further defines the shape of the case. And curved inlay draws the eye across the doors to the handmade brass pulls.

Contrasting woods: A slightly arbitrary guide

Use the samples shown here as a starting point. Some of the contrasts are color-related. With others, the grain or figure provides the contrast. In a few instances, I've added a bead in a third wood to play off the other two. Try not to take the pairings too literally. For example, even though one photo shows a mahogany frame and a cherry panel, you could swap them. Be careful, though: It's often nicer to have darker woods frame lighter ones. You can also try woods that are similar to the ones shown; several of the captions list possibilities that may be less expensive or more readily available.

Not-so-perfect pairings

PURPLEHEART, MAPLE

A typical frame has almost as much surface area as its panel. So the very high contrast between the maple and purpleheart is overwhelming. Padauk or redheart also don't work well with maple.



MAPLE, WALNUT

Over time, the maple darkens and this can be a handsome pair. But initially, a light maple frame intensifies the dark walnut panel, making the frame seem to disappear.



CHERRY, WHITE ASH

White ash has a strong grain that remains prominent even as the wood darkens over time. That makes for a jarring combination with cherry's subtler grain. Red oak also has prominent grain and tends to overpower some woods.



Happy couples

CHERRY, MAPLE

Over time, this combination works very well. The amber in the aged maple balances the dark browns and deep rust tones of the cherry. Both woods have mild grain.



RED OAK, WHITE ASH

These strong-grained, golden-hued woods have similar visual strength. Also consider white oak or elm with either of these woods.



BUTTERNUT, BLACK WALNUT

The warm, golden color of the butternut contrasts well with the walnut's deeper chocolate brown. An ebony bead adds an interesting accent.



BEECH, QUILTED YELLOW BIRCH

These woods make a powerful combination that ages well. Both woods are blond, with understated grain and fine, dense surfaces. Bird's-eye maple or curly maple would also work well with either of these woods.



MAHOGANY, CHERRY

Rich red coloring and subtle grain help these woods complement each other. Leaving the mahogany pores unfilled creates additional contrast, in surface texture. An ebony or rosewood bead would enhance the pairing.



CHERRY, MACASSAR EBONY

Black is always elegant and hip. The brown and reddish streaks in the ebony play off nicely against cherry's deep, rich reds. Rosewood also works well against cherry.



MAHOGANY, CURLY MAPLE

The golden hue of the maple lights up against the reds and browns of the mahogany. The rippling curly maple figure adds further interest. Satinwood also contrasts well with mahogany—it's a traditional, high-style pairing.



WENGE, WALNUT

These woods share a dark chocolate-brown color and subdued grain. A rosewood bead, with its deep reds and streaks of black, adds a bit more contrast. Mahogany's warm reds and browns would also contrast nicely with walnut.



ZEBRAWOOD, BUTTERNUT

The color of both woods is a combination of golden browns and lighter hues. Darker streaks in the zebrawood play off well against the mild grain lines in the butternut.



PEAR, BEECH

The pink tones in pear contrast nicely with the colors in beech. Flecks in the beech show up well against the uniformly smooth appearance of the pear. Both woods age to similar warm colors. Maple, either plain or figured, would be a good alternative to beech.



CHERRY, SYCAMORE

Quartersawn sycamore has dark flecking, which works well with the grain lines in the cherry. A quilted-birch bead would add further contrast with both color and figure. Beech would also provide interesting contrast with sycamore.



BIRD'S-EYE MAPLE, TIGER MAPLE,

You don't need different wood species to get a striking contrast. These light woods age to an amber color, and the combination delivers understated elegance. An ebony bead makes an elegant outline.

