

Finishing Frustrations

Bevel Cut – October, 2022

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Earlier this year I came into possession of some cherry – a popular wood that I had never before used in a woodworking project. Some of my stock came from a cherry tree a friend had cut down and some from a purchase I made at a supplier going out of business. A few guild members responded to personal emails I had sent requesting advice on how to best finish cherry – especially dealing with the blotching conundrum. All of which brings me to my topic – frustrations with finishing part one.

I have a 1 ½ inch thick folder of articles on finishing tips and tricks that I have saved from the trade press plus, of course, a few books from well-known finishing experts. My frustrations stem from two major sources, or lack thereof.

Problem #1: More than 13,212,973 options (a well-known Fibonacci number) for each species of wood when you consider the different dye stains, gel stains, penetrating stains, shellacs, generic oils, proprietary oils, polymerized oils, film forming and non-film forming top coats, wood conditioners, glazes, waxes, grain fillers, and gloss levels.

Problem #2: Lack of specificity in the vast majority of books and magazine articles – the focus of next month's Bevel Cut.

How did I calculate 13,212,973 permutations and combinations? For starters:

- Minwax offers 12 different gel stains and more than 200 water-based stains in solid and semi-transparent colors.
- Woodcraft sells 20 different TransTint soluble dyes (now priced at \$23.99 each ☹). Two years ago, when the products sold for ~\$15, I wrote "I have a green Transtint dye that is green when used in water but red when used in epoxy. My cherry brown Transtint dye is also red when used in epoxy, but not the same red as the green!" If you want to experiment with these products by trying out different dyes, be prepared with a fresh credit card.
- There are 38 flavors of TransFast water-soluble dye powders whose intensity can be varied by changing the amount of dye used in a quart of water.
- Rockler carries 7 formulas of Watco Danish oil alone including medium, dark, and black walnut variations.
- General Finishes web site shows 14 oil-based penetrating stains.
- Tung oil and Linseed oil are available in generic and proprietary versions.
- Special effects include bleaching, ebonizing, pickling, and fuming are popular for achieving specific effects.

I guess the good news about finishing is that there are so many options from which to choose. The bad news is that there are so many options from which to choose.

I generally abstain from coloring wood, usually going with a simple oil or oil/varnish finish. Nevertheless, I recently used a penetrating stain plus shellac plus a gel stain to darken the base of an oak side table. This after numerous tests. I also applied a water-based dye to reduce blotching in a cherry slab before coating with BLO. Finishing is one of my many woodworking weaknesses (the others shall remain un-named at this time). My finishing anxiety stems from two sources:

- My technique or lack thereof leads to results that can only be called “lousy.” Either the material was out-of-date or my skills were inadequate. For example, I’ve had poor results with shellac – probably the easiest finishing product in the world. I then make work for myself – applying finish and then removing it to try again.
- The results are fine – I (or my wife) just don’t like the look. I try to avoid this problem by testing finishes first on scrap but sometimes it just doesn’t work out. Such is life.