

Oil Finishes

I started doing wood turning several years ago. Oily in my learning, I would turn a bowl, sand it and then slop a little oil on it and called it finished. The little wood turning group I joined had some of the best wood turners I have ever known and the worst finishers I have ever known. The standard finish everyone used was boiled linseed oil. Slop a little on and take it to the meeting for show and tell. The really exotic finishers would apply a little Johnson's Paste Floor Wax and buff it until it was shiny. Quick. Easy. And you could go back to making wood shavings happen. Shavings -- that's what turning is all about, isn't it?

Then an old guy joined the club. He did museum quality segmented turnings. At age 93, he loved to show off his magnificent work. He also did not talk about how he made these premier turnings. After questioning him after the meeting, he would only say "Oh, I do this on a disk sander." Only years later did I figure out that in addition to superb turning, he did not use linseed oil and floor wax. Part of his art was the art of finishing.

Well, I continued to use linseed oil for years. In fact, I tried the old method of oiling with boiled linseed oil once a day for a week, once a week for a month and once a month for a year. Funny, I could never see much difference after a couple of coats. It turns out that is because there isn't much difference. That old method sounds cute, but doesn't really have any basis in fact or science.

Linseed oil comes from the seed of the flax plant. The oil soaks up oxygen and reacts (polymerizes) to form a gummy stuff. That gummy stuff is your finish. In fact a pound of linseed oil will take up a tenth of a pound of oxygen. Oils that do not take up oxygen (mineral oil, Nujol, olive oil, "salad bowl finish", etc.) do not form gummy stuff and don't cure. Guess what? They don't give the wood any protection. One of my favorites for a while was walnut oil. What could be more natural than a walnut bowl finished with walnut oil? Walnut oil does react with oxygen a little bit and it does protect the wood a tiny bit.

Boiled linseed oil does protect the wood a little bit. Then I learned that boiled linseed oil isn't boiled. It only has some "driers" added which help it react with oxygen more quickly. "Raw" linseed oil reacts very slowly so maybe you need to oil once a day for a week, once a week for a month, etc. Maybe that is where that old wives tale originated. Even with driers, the reacted linseed gummy stuff is not water resistant, alcohol resistant, water vapor resistant, and all that. It just does not give much protection.

Tung oil is an extract of tung tree nuts. If you give your turning half a dozen coats of tung oil (waiting a few days between coats), it will develop

a little better water resistance than linseed oil finishes. Better, but not good.

In general waxes are even poorer at wood protection than linseed oil. I turned a big beautiful bowl from wood I brought back from Hawaii. While taking the bowl to a meeting in Ohio where it was given as an award, I got a few raindrops on it. The drops left splotches in the finish. Oh yuck. But there was no turning back.

What to do? Along came some companies selling a new solution. These snake oil salesmen had a new oil product and turners got better results. They sold these under non-descriptive names like "antique oil", "teak oil", etc. Some of them worked nicely. Then we learned that many of these "oils" are not oils at all. They are just varnish that has been diluted with a solvent like mineral spirits. You wipe these oils on with a rag and let them dry. Impossible to say what kind of protection your bowl will get unless you can find out what kind of varnish the manufacturer diluted. Sometimes the label on the can will help, sometimes it will not. However, YOU can make your own "oil" or "wiping varnish" by taking a varnish product you know is good stuff and diluting it. The procedure is simple.

Step 1. Be sure that your homeowner's fire insurance is paid up.

Step 2. Be sure that there are no sources of sparks or fire around and that you have adequate ventilation.

Step 3. READ the directions on the can. Use the kind of solvent that the directions say to use.

Step 4. Add a little solvent and mix well. Try wiping it onto a scrap of wood with a cloth. If too thick and goeey, add more solvent. At some point, you will have a product that is easy to spread with a cloth. You now have a wiping finish.

Step 5. You will also probably be wiped out by the time you complete this process. Open a can of ice cold wiping out solvent made by the Adolph Coors Brewing Company of Golden Colorado. Apply liberally.

There are also several dozens of other oil finishes, oil varnish mixed finishes, and stuff like that. I will leave those along and recommend that you look at other articles on our wood turners website to find a finish that offers better appearance, better protection, and other properties.

Woodturning can be an expensive hobby. However, you don't always have to be well oiled to be well finished. With that, this article on oil finishes is finished.

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