

Workbench Finish



Workbench Finish - This article by Steve Mickley originally appeared on the WOOD Magazine Finishing and Refinishing Forum in March 2005

In his introduction to *The Workbench Book*, author Scott Landis writes; "The workbench is to the dedicated woodworker what an instrument is to the virtuoso musician. In the hands of a master, the bench can be made to produce works of brilliance; it can be 'played' with an almost audible clarity. Like a musical instrument, however, the bench is no better than the person using it. At the same time, even the most skilled craftsman with the finest tools will be limited by a poorly made or ill-conceived workbench."

To the last sentence I would add that an inappropriate or poorly applied finish will also limit the effectiveness of your bench. Far too many woodworkers view the application of finish as a chore; as a step to be avoided or hurried thru as quickly as possible. As a result, little thought is given to the role of the finish in the completed project. Keith Stephens, host of the WOOD ONLINE Woodworking Woods forum has examined a number of woods that will do well in your new workbench. I would like to point you in the direction of a finish schedule that will not only highlight your craftsmanship, but will also give your new (or refinished) workbench a proper and easily maintained working surface.

When selecting the appropriate finish for any woodworking project the first question you should ask is, what is the purpose of the finish I will apply? What are the hazards faced by the item that I have made, and how will the options available protect against those hazards? Applying the wrong finish; selecting a finish that does not address the requirements presented by the environment in which the item will function, may be worse than applying no finish at all. So, with that in mind, let's examine the unique requirements of what is arguably the most important of all tools in your shop. Then, let's see which of the finish choices available is best suited to the task.

We all understand that a workbench must be strong enough to support the items that we make, and it must be designed to hold them firmly enough for the operations that we perform. What we sometimes fail to understand,

however, is that the workbench top is not furniture; the workbench top and its associated vices and hold-downs is a tool—it is where work is done. Heavy items are slid across its surface. It is used to support both surfaced and rough lumber while faces and edges are planned, mortises are chopped, tenons are cut, and holes are bored. It is often the recipient of unintended chisel cuts, arrant hammer blows, and dropped tools. Items large and small are routinely pushed across its surface as we sort thru the "clutter" looking for the right tool. All manner of impromptu jigs and hold-downs are designed as needed and clamped to its surface. Finally, in a perfect world; a world with plenty of shop space, we would do all assembly and finishing on another worktable and reserve our workbench for cutting, milling, and shaping operations. But, in this world, many of us also use our workbench for assembly and light finishing. That means that the surface is subject to glue squeeze-out and an assortment of finish spills and splatters. In short, the hazards found in the workbench environment far exceed anything your kitchen table will ever experience, even if yours is the most active family in your community.

Given this description of the workbench environment, permit me to begin my examination of appropriate finishes by eliminating a type of finish that, in my opinion, is not appropriate. The work surface of your workbench is not the place for a film forming finish—any film forming finish! Even the most "abrasion resistant" finish film will not survive long in this environment. It will quickly become scratched and cut. Soon after it will begin to flake and chip-off. Renewal of the damaged finish will require its complete removal. If you want to use varnish, lacquer, a water-borne finish, or even paint on your workbench legs and storage compartments, fine. But please, don't use a film forming schedule on the workbench top.

For the top of your bench you are looking for a finish:

- That will "seal" the wood so that glue squeeze-out and finish spills are easy to remove.
- That will allow you to easily slide work across the surface with little resistance.
- Will offer enough resistance to stop items before they slide off the bench and hit the floor.
- That is both durable and easy to maintain and renew, and of course.
- A finish that will highlight and accentuate your workmanship.

I believe that the best finish schedules to accomplish these objectives are found in a number of options that rely on simple oils, pure gum turpentine, and various waxes. My preferred workbench finish consists of gum

turpentine, beeswax, and boiled linseed oil (BLO) blended and applied as follows:

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- Shave a hen's-egg-size chunk of beeswax (about 2-ounces) into thin strips using a knife or food grater.
- Put the beeswax shavings into a pint (16-ounces) of pure gum turpentine and cover until the wax is dissolved into a butter-like blend.
- Next, add an equal volume of BLO and stir until the mixture is combined into a thick liquid. Brush or wipe the blend over your workbench and allow the "finish" to be absorbed into the wood for an hour or two before you squeegee off the excess. (Put the excess in a tightly sealed container—it is still good and can be used to renew the finish in the future.)
- Allow the finish to "cure" for a few days and then buff to a soft shine.

The original version of this very old recipe called for raw linseed oil. This finish, or something very close to this finish, was most probably used on most of the surviving 18th and 19th century work benches.

Bob Tarule uses an almost identical blend; but, his application technique is a bit different. He applies the mixture in a thinner coat once a day until the bench top will absorb no more (about one-week).

If you want a bit more penetration you could apply a heavy coat of BLO first, allow it to soak into the wood for about thirty minutes, wipe off the excess and then apply the turpentine/beeswax blend.

Tage Frid was partial to a similar mixture in which he combined melted paraffin wax with turpentine and then spread the mixture over his BLO coated workbench surface.

Another acceptable (and perhaps less pungent) blend combines melted paraffin wax with mineral oil in a ratio of about one-part wax to 6-parts heated oil. This is the same finish frequently recommended in the pages of this forum for finishing working wooden kitchen countertops. This mixture is spread over the surface of the bench and the excess is scraped off after it cools and the wax solidifies.

The advantage of any of these finishes is that they are easy to apply, are very durable, are easy to renew, and they truly add beauty and luster to your prized workbench. Further, they will perform equally well on bench tops made from domestic or exotic imported lumber.

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