



REMOVING AN OLD FINISH FROM WOOD

If restoration efforts have not worked or you have decided an old wood finish has to come off, it is time to strip the wood. Make all necessary repairs and remove any hardware, decorative materials, cane or upholstery that may be on the item. Next, choose a safe work area with plenty of ventilation, cover the area with plenty of newspapers or a drop cloth to protect the floor, gather up the supplies needed, and put on your rubber gloves and goggles.

Old finishes can be removed with abrasive materials, such as sandpaper, but many professionals do not recommend the use of sandpaper because the patina (aged look) of the wood may be destroyed, edges may be rounded off, designs may flatten and scratches will often appear on the wood surface. It is strongly recommended that you do not use sandpaper to remove the old finish, but instead use the chemical stripping method described in this publication. (The exception to this rule is when refinishing wood floors. In this case power sanding is the recommended method for removing the old finish.)

The following techniques refer specifically to furniture refinishing, but can be applied to any wood surface. If at all possible, move the furniture to a well-ventilated workroom or outdoors in a dust-free area. Kitchen cabinets can be moved from one location to another by removing the mounting screws or by removing doors for work in another location. If you are working on a wood surface that cannot be removed, such as woodwork, a fireplace mantel or paneling, you will need to protect all other surfaces in the vicinity with newspapers and a drop cloth. Be sure to test the drop cloth to make certain the solvent will not dissolve the material.

Remember that all restoration, finishing or refinishing methods involve the use of hazardous chemicals.

Inhalation of fumes and skin contact with some of the chemicals can be hazardous. Special precautions are necessary to insure their safe use and to protect you. **Always read the manufacturer's label** and follow their recommendations when using these products. Keep these basic precautions in mind as you work:

- Always work in a well-ventilated area (preferably outdoors or in a work area with an exhaust fan and all doors and windows open. If indoors, take numerous breaks in fresh outdoor air to minimize the effects of breathing solvent vapors.
- Do not smoke or work near any open flames when working with solvents, stripping liquids or vents, stripping liquids or finishes. **Most** of these chemicals **are flammable**.

- Handle all chemicals with care. Replace caps immediately after pouring solvents and other finishing products. If chemicals are splashed on you, wash the area immediately with plenty of water.

Wear solvent or chemical resistant rubber gloves and safety goggles when working with solvents or stripping chemicals. Have plenty of rags or other absorbent materials nearby to soak up excess liquids.

- Dispose of oily rags properly; they may combust spontaneously. Keep oily rags submerged in water until you can dispose of them.
- Store solvents and stripping chemicals in original containers away from heat sources and out of the reach of children.
- Dispose of used solvents properly. The recommended disposal for any liquid hazardous waste is to soak up all liquids with an absorbent material, such as cat litter, rags or paper towels. Place the solvent-soaked litter into a leakproof container and dispose of it with normal household trash. These solvent-soaked materials can be burned in a safe incinerator, but **never** put the solvent container in a fire--it will explode!

Stripping

Nearly all types of finishes can be removed with paint and varnish removers. These are expensive, however, and often require a water rinse which will result in some grain raising of the wood surface. A more economical approach that works well on shellac and lacquer finishes is to prepare your own stripper with denatured alcohol and lacquer thinner. There are also commercially-prepared furniture refinishing solutions, such as Formby's Refinisher, Hopes Refinisher* and others, which are a mixture of 3 or 4 strong solvents.

The secret to removing an old finish is to work on small areas at a time. Give the chemical time to work on the finish and then wipe or scrape off the softened finish. The specific application method depends on the type of chemical being used. If the wood has been waxed or polished during its previous "life", it should be thoroughly cleaned with turpentine to remove any wax or silicone residues. If it is not completely removed the residue will interfere with the stripper's actions.

If you are using one of the liquid solvent removers (alcohol/lacquer thinner or refinishing solutions), the best results are achieved as follows:

1. Brush stripper liberally onto a small area of the wood surface.
2. Work stripper into the old finish by rubbing with steel wool, using grade 00 on hardwoods and grade 000 on soft woods.
3. Wipe the wood surface with a rag before the stripper dries.
4. Repeat steps 1 through 3 until all of the old finish is removed.

When using a commercial paint and varnish remover, follow the manufacturer's directions for best results.

The procedure for most of these is to brush the stripper liberally onto the surface, wait a few minutes until the finish begins to blister, then wipe off the dissolved finish with old rags or carefully scrape it off. If using a scraper, work with a dull-edged tool and be careful not to gouge the wood surface. Repeat the applications of stripper until all of the finish is removed. Some of the commercial paint removers require that the remover be washed off with water. If so, follow the manufacturer directions carefully since these removers can discolor the wood if not properly used.

A type of paint made from casein (milk solids) may be found on some old pieces of furniture. This paint is difficult to remove and leaves the wood stained. To remove this type of paint, use plenty of paint remover. To remove the stain left behind, try rubbing with denatured alcohol. If alcohol doesn't remove the stain, try bleaching it. A solution of salt, soda and water can also be used, but this is a hazardous solution and should be used with caution OUTDOORS. The best way to solve the milk paint problem may be to try masking the stain by applying a darker stain over it. If the original stain bleeds through, cover the surface with a coat of thinned shellac (1 part shellac to 1 part denatured alcohol), then restain it.

After the old finish is completely removed wipe the wood thoroughly with a clean denatured alcohol to remove all traces of residue.

Bleaching

In many cases, you may not like the color of the wood after the finish has been removed or you may wish to lighten the natural wood color.

There are three basic types of bleaches commonly used on wood surfaces: Oxalic-acid, commercially prepared wood bleaches (usually oxalic-acid preparations), and laundry bleach.

A saturated solution of oxalic-acid crystals dissolved in water or denatured alcohol (5 ounces to 1 gallon) will bleach out wood stains, ink spots and mineral-type streaks. If you want to lighten the natural color of the wood, the color of previously used wood stains, you can use a solution of ½ pint liquid laundry bleach to 1 gallon water. If you use the commercial wood bleaches, follow the manufacturer's instructions on the product. If you are using oxalic-acid or laundry bleach, the following method will give you good results.

Brush bleach liberally onto the wood surface and let stand for 2 minutes. Rinse with water. Wipe dry with rags. Allow the wood surface to dry thoroughly (at least 1 day in a warm room) before applying a new finish. The white/gray color of the bleached surface can be removed by rubbing with grade 00 steel wool.



Special acknowledgment is given to John R. Shelly, former assistant professor in the Department of Forestry, University of Kentucky for his assistance in preparing these materials.

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LRA Revised 9/95