

# Care of Wood Finishes

## Types of wood finishes

Wood furniture, cabinets, doors, and paneling usually are given a clear finish which shows the grain of the wood, or are coated with an opaque paint, enamel, or lacquer. These finishing materials all provide beauty, preserve the wood, and make cleaning easier. Care of the clear finishes will be given primary consideration in this fact sheet.

**Gloss variations** in finishes are due to the types of finishing materials and methods used. The results range from a high gloss, as light reflects from smooth surfaces, to no gloss from the relatively rough surfaces of flat finishes. Care products all provide some sheen, and some give a high shine. The desired gloss is an important factor in selection.

**Sealed and unsealed** is another way to distinguish wood finishes.

Only the true oil finish does not seal the pores of the wood. This finish needs periodic treatment with more oil. The wood does not have as much protection with an oil finish, but scratches and mars are easily repaired with fine steel wool and more oil.

Finishes that seal the wood pores include shellac, lacquer, varnish, polyurethane, and paint. When applied as a surface film, they give protection to the wood. When this film is badly scratched or marred, however, skill is required to repair the damage without refinishing the entire surface. Diluted varnish products, called "penetrating sealers" and "Danish oil" finishes, seal the pores below the surface. These "close to the wood" finishes are more easily repaired than the surface films.

## Routine beauty treatment

The finish applied to furniture and other wood surfaces needs to be kept clean so the beauty of the finish and the wood underneath can be enjoyed.

**Dusting** is a first necessity for cleanliness and to help prevent scratches. The dusting attachment on a vacuum cleaner is the best device to use. Clean, soft, lintless cloths (no starch) are the next choice. A dirty dust cloth causes clouded and streaked furniture. More dust can be retained in a cloth that has been sprayed with a special product for this purpose, or one treated with a drop or two of liquid wax or polish. Too much wax or polish will cause streaking.

**Washing** wood surfaces should be done cautiously, and never on shellac finishes. Use a sudsy mixture of

mild soap or detergent and water. Dip a clean, soft cloth in the solution and wring out. Wash, rinse, and dry a small area at a time, overlapping washed areas.

**Thorough cleaning** involves removing wax or polish as well as dirt. A cloth moistened with mineral spirits or synthetic turpentine can be used. Warning: Do not let the cloth or solvent stand on the finish.

**Cleanser-conditioner** not only cleans wood finishes but also disguises scratches, retards checks in the finish, and removes cloudiness and dullness caused by smoke, grease, and dust. Shake together three parts of boiled linseed oil with one part of gum turpentine. Fill a cup with hot water and pour on enough of the above mixture to cover the surface. Dip a soft cloth into the oily layer, then rub onto a small area of wood. Use a toothbrush on canings and grooves. Use a 3/0 steel wool pad on very soiled areas, rubbing lightly with the grain. Rinse with a clean cloth wrung out of clear, warm water. Rub with a dry cloth. Discard mixture when cold—do not attempt to reheat.

## Special care

**Unsealed finish (true oil)** needs renewing several times a year. If wax has been used (not recommended), it must first be removed. Boiled linseed oil or a furniture polish that does not contain wax should be applied generously and allowed to stand several minutes, then wiped off. Rub the finish vigorously with a clean cloth.

**Sealed finishes** may be maintained with any furniture wax or polish, or with the cleanser-conditioner. (Do not use cleanser-conditioner on paint.) The choice should depend on the amount of protection and the degree of luster desired. Follow directions on the labels carefully. A small quantity usually gives best results.

**Paste wax** gives the most protection from wear and liquids. Since the paste contains very little solvent, it has almost no cleaning ability, is somewhat difficult to apply (use a slightly moist cloth), and after thorough drying it must be buffed to get a high luster. Paste wax is recommended on surfaces that get very hard use, on checked, crazed, or scratched finishes to help conceal defects, and to retain the lustrous patina from many waxings on antique furniture.

**Caution:** Cloths containing wax, turpentine, oil or polish are a fire hazard. Keep them in covered metal containers.



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**EXTENSION SERVICE**

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*Liquid wax* that requires buffing is sold mainly for floors, but is suitable for furniture, cabinets, and paneling where a medium high luster is desired. It is easier to apply than a paste wax, and the high solvent content provides excellent cleaning action. Do not use on antique furniture, as it will remove the wax patina.

*Cream wax* does not alter colors, so it is recommended for light wood and paint or enamel. Cream wax also should be used when a soft luster is desired for furniture with a low gloss finish.

*Silicone waxes and polishes* are easily applied and give a high shine without buffing. Many furniture care products sold today contain silicones. The directions usually say to "wipe" rather than rub or buff. Silicones give good protection against moisture on finishes. The liquid form should be used on high gloss furniture about twice a year for greatest protection, with the spray form used in between. The sprays can be used as the furniture is dusted.

Silicones are not compatible with some refinishing materials. Instructions on removing silicones can be obtained from county Extension offices.

*Polishes and creams* are oil-based products that give luster and have some cleaning action, but do not protect against scratches and mars. They help keep liquids off the finish. Many products today that are labeled "furniture polish" or "furniture cream" list wax as an ingredient. Other polishes are simply lightweight oils, often with color added to cover up scratches. Creams are mixtures of oils with water or dry cleaning solvents, and they have more cleaning ability than oils alone. The amount of luster varies—test on an inconspicuous portion of the furniture or wood panel to determine the results. An oil polish should not be used over wax, as it will soften the wax.

### Wood finish "happenings"

**Sunlight** on wood finishes should be avoided if possible. Although finishing materials may not fade, the wood itself can change color, especially in direct sunlight. A change may be noted when objects are removed from the surface of wood after blocking the light for a time. When objects are moved, only time will even up the color, unless refinishing is undertaken.

**Some rubber and vinyl products** may react with furniture finishes. Bases of lamps, telephones, radios, rubber mats, and coasters should be separated from the wood finish by felt pads.

**Scratches** may be prevented by gluing felt pads or moleskin on the bottoms of all hard objects placed on furniture. Deep scratches and mars require skillful repair and may necessitate refinishing. Instructions are available from the county Extension office. Scratches or blemishes that have not penetrated the finish can be made less noticeable in a variety of ways:

- Furniture wax, polish, or cleanser-conditioner.
- Broken nutmeats (pecan, walnut, brazil), rubbed diagonally along scratch.
- Colored crayons rubbed into the scratch. Melt crayons to blend colors and fill holes.
- Colored shoe polish, applied with a cotton-tipped toothpick, buffed dry.

- Iodine of a suitable color: new iodine for red mahogany; aged iodine for brown or cherry color; diluted iodine (50% denatured alcohol) for maple.

- Color-in-oil thinned with turpentine.

- Rottenstone and salad oil made into a paste.

Pumice powder can be used instead of rottenstone if a medium luster is desired rather than a high sheen. Use a soft cloth to rub with the grain of the wood, wiping frequently to check results. Entire surface may need light rubbing for even gloss.

- Steel wool (3/0) used with salad oil or paste wax.

Rub carefully with the grain. This rubbing with paste wax helps conceal checked and crazed finishes.

- Commercial scratch removers.

**Burns** that are minor may be treated as above for scratches. Deep burns require refinishing skills. Fire insurance may cover the cost of professional repair.

**Candle wax and melted crayon** should be scraped off gently with a plastic scraper, then the remainder removed with mineral spirits or turpentine. On sealed finishes, a heavy blotter may be placed on the stain and the wax melted with a warm iron. The blotter will absorb the wax.

**White spots or rings** may be caused by moisture, heat, or alcohol. To prevent them use coasters under glasses, vases, and flower pots, use pads under hot dishes, set medicines, perfumes, and cosmetics on small trays, and wipe up any spills immediately. To remove spots and rings, try the following:

- Salt and lightweight oil can be rubbed on the spot with your finger.

- Rottenstone, pumice powder, or steel wool with oil can be used as directed under "Scratches."

- A thick, clean blotter, pressed with a warm iron over the spot, may remove a ring caused by moisture. Repeat until the ring disappears.

- Household ammonia or denatured alcohol may be put on a cloth and whisked over the spot lightly and quickly. Do not rub, as this softens the finish.

- Commercial products are available for removing white spots and rings.

**Milk** contains lactic acid. If spilled milk is allowed to remain on a furniture finish, the finish may soften. If damage occurs, allow the area to dry, then rub with furniture polish, wax, or rottenstone and oil.

**Nail polish** can be removed with 3/0 steel wool and oil, if the polish has not penetrated the finish. Never use nail polish remover because it will soften the finish.

**Paint** that is fresh can be removed with 3/0 steel wool and oil. Dried paint should be saturated with linseed oil and allowed to stand until the paint softens. Wipe off with a cloth wet with linseed oil. If any paint remains, remove with 3/0 steel wool or rottenstone and oil.

**Ink stains** that penetrate worn, damaged, or unsealed wood finishes are almost impossible to remove. When the finish has been protected with wax, ink often can be blotted up immediately without leaving a spot. If there is a spot, pat with a damp cloth, turning the cloth to a clean area each time. A cleaning wax may remove the spot, or rottenstone and oil may be used.

Prepared by DOROTHY F. BROWN  
*Home Furnishings Specialist, Oregon State University*