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 removed 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, it must be removed. Boiled linseed oil or a furniture paste wax is recommended on surfaces that get very hard use, on those below the surface. These "close to the wood" finishes are more easily removed 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 will be enhanced.

Dusting is a first necessity for cleanliness and to help prevent scuffing. The dusting attachment on a vacuum cleaner is the best device to use. Clean, soft, lintless cloths (no starch added) are the next choice. A dirty dust cloth leaves clouds on the streaked furniture. More dust is retained on 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 oiliness and dullness caused by smoke, grease, and dust. Shake three parts of boiled linseed oil with one part of gum turpentine into a cup with hardwood floor and pour on enough of above mixture to cover the surface. Dip a sponge into the oily layer, then rub on a small area of wood. Use a toothbrush on grooves and crevices. Keep a 3/0 steel wool pad on very soiled areas, rubbing slightly with the grain. Rinse with a clean cloth wrung out of clear, warm water. Rub with a dry cloth. The mixture is not recommended on antique furniture.

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.
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 scuffs. Creams are mixtures of oils with water or dry cleaning solvents, and they have more cleaning ability than the oils alone. The amount of luster varies—from a high 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 slightly in direct sunlight. A chair may be not be a certain object be removed from the surface of wood after being in the light for a time. When objects are moved, even the wood will even up the color, unless finishing is not taken.

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

Scratches may be repaired by gluing felt pads or mollars on the bottom of all hard objects placed on furniture. Deep scratches and mars require skillful repair and may necessitate refinishing. Instructions are available from your 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 sawdust or paste wax. Rub carefully with the grain. The rubbing with paste wax helps conceal checked and cracked finishes.
- Commercial scratch remover

Burns that may not 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 object removed with mineral spirits or turpentine. Sealed finishes or heavy blotters may be placed on a stain and the max melting with a warm iron. The blotter will absorb the wax.

White spots or rings may be caused by moisture, heat, or alcohol. To prevent this, use coasters under glasses, vase, and flower pots. Use pads under hot dishes, salt dishes, perfumed soaps, and cosmetics on small trays, and wipe up any spills immediately. To remove spots or rings, try the following:

- Hot and lint-free oil can be rubbed on the spot, or rottenstone and oil may be used. Common 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, if the polish has not penetrated the finish. Never use nail polish remover because it will soften the finish.
- Print that is fresh 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.

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