

Stripping Finishes from Wood

Learn the right techniques for using furniture strippers and how to avoid the most common problems people have when using them.

In the last issue I described the characteristics of all the common paint-and-varnish removers and how to choose among them. Here are the steps for using these products and dealing with the most common stripping problems.

1 Work outdoors in the shade or in a room where you have arranged cross-ventilation provided by fans. Don't work near an open flame (such as a gas water heater or furnace) or a source of sparks if you're using a flammable stripper.

2 Remove hardware and difficult-to-reach wood parts that can be easily disassembled. Soak hardware that requires stripping in a coffee can filled with stripper.

3 Wear a long-sleeved shirt, chemical-resistant gloves (butyl or neoprene) and eye protection.

4 Spread newspapers on the ground or floor to catch the waste.

5 Shake the container of stripper, then cover it with a cloth and open the cap slowly to allow the pressure inside to escape. Pour the stripper into a large can, such as a coffee can.

6 Brush the stripper onto the wood using an old or inexpensive paintbrush. Avoid unnecessary brushing; you want to lay on a thick coat, but also minimize solvent evaporation. (Be aware that some synthetic bristles will dissolve in methylene-chloride-based strippers.)

7 Allow the stripper time to work. Test the paint or finish occasionally with a putty knife to see if you can lift it from



When refinishing, you should take safety precautions seriously. That means heavy duty gloves, eye protection and even long sleeves.

the wood. Apply more stripper as the original dries out. All strippers will lift many layers at once if the surface is kept wet so the stripper has time to penetrate.

8 Remove the dissolved, blistered or softened paint or finish using one or more of the following methods.

- Use paper towels to soak up and wipe off the dissolved finish.
- Use wood shavings from a jointer or planer to soak up dissolved finish. Then brush off the shavings with a stiff-bristle brush.
- Scrape the film off flat surfaces into a bucket or cardboard box with a plastic scraper or a wide, dull putty knife. Keep

the putty knife clean and smooth, and round its corners with a file so it doesn't scratch the wood.

- Break blistered or softened film loose from mouldings, turnings and carvings with #1 steel wool or a Scotch-Brite pad.
- Pull a coarse string or hemp rope around the recesses of turnings to work out blistered paint or finish.
- Pick the softened paint or finish out of cracks and recesses with sharpened sticks or dowels, which won't damage the wood as metal picks will.

9 Wash the wood with paint thinner, naphtha or lacquer thinner to remove wax residue left from strippers containing

wax. You may also wash with a strong detergent and water, or simply with water if the stripper is “water-washable,” which means it already contains the detergent.

10 Let the solvent evaporate out of the stripping sludge, then dispose of it in the trash unless local laws forbid this. (The dried sludge is what was on the furniture before you stripped it, so it is no more polluting than tossing the entire painted or finished object into the trash.)

Common Problems

If you’ve ever done any stripping, you know it’s seldom as easy as the step-by-step instructions suggest. Here are some of the most common stripping problems and their solutions.

The Stripper Doesn’t Work

If the stripper you’re using doesn’t dissolve, blister or break the bond of the paint or finish film, either you need to allow more time for the stripper to work or to use a

stronger stripper.

First allow more time. Strippers work much slower in temperatures below 65 degrees. Keep the surface wet by applying additional coats of stripper or covering the surface with plastic wrap to prevent evaporation.

If you still have problems, try a stronger stripper. The only paint or finish that can’t be removed with a solvent-based stripper is milk paint. It was used in the 18th century and in rural areas of the United States in the 19th century. You can remove it with lye.

Some modern coatings are very difficult to strip. Rough them up with coarse sandpaper to increase the surface area, then try again with a strong methylene-chloride stripper.

You Can’t Get Paint Out of the Pores

Paint is softened by the stripper but doesn’t come out of the pores until some mechanical force is applied to it. Stripping

shops often use water under high-pressure. You can use a brass bristle brush (available at paint stores), which won’t damage hardwoods.

Apply more stripper to the surface, then scrub in the direction of the grain. Remove the gunk with rags or paper towels. Repeat until the wood is clean.

You Can’t Get the Stain Out

There are several types of stain, and whether a stripper removes the stain depends on how that particular stain is affected by the stripper. If the stripper doesn’t remove the stain, use household bleach to remove dye stains, or scrub the wood with a brass bristle brush together with more stripper to remove pigment stains.

You don’t have to remove stain, however, if you intend to restain darker than the color of the stripped wood. Simply restain right over the remaining color.

You can tell that all the finish is off when there aren’t any remaining shiny

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places on the wood or in the pores when the wood is dry.

The Stripper Streaks and Darkens the Wood

Lye and any stripper containing an alkali may darken wood. The darkening often shows up as ugly streaks. To bleach out the dark stains, make a saturated solution of oxalic-acid crystals, available at pharmacies and many paint stores.

Brush the solution over the entire surface, not just over the stains. Let the oxalic acid dry back into crystal form. Then wash the crystals off the wood with a hose or well-soaked sponge or cloth. The crystals will cause an uncontrollable coughing if you brush them into the air and breathe them.

Oxalic acid will also remove black water rings and rust stains. It has little effect on the natural color of the wood.

Sandpaper Clogs After Stripping

Clogged sandpaper indicates that some finish remains on the wood, or that the stripper hasn't completely evaporated. As long as all the finish has been removed, sanding isn't necessary if the wood is smooth. Sanding will remove the wood's patina (the appearance of age brought about by light and use).

Wood Won't Stain Evenly

You may not have removed all the old finish. If this is the case, you'll have to resume stripping until all the finish is removed. Uneven stain penetration can also be caused by uneven density or swirly grain in the wood itself.

The New Finish Won't Dry, or it Peels After it has Cured

Both of these problems are caused by wax left on the wood by the stripper. All strippers based on methylene chloride and acetone, toluene and methanol (ATM) contain wax. The wood must be washed thoroughly (not neutralized as most directions suggest) with a detergent or solvent for removing wax. Flood the surface, then wipe with a dry cloth, turning it frequently so you lift the wax from the wood rather than just move it around. **PW**

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