

# Peasant Chair

A wooden peasant chair with a Celtic knot backrest and a sword leaning against it. The chair is made of light-colored wood and has a simple, sturdy design. The backrest features a complex, interlocking knot pattern. The sword is positioned vertically, leaning against the chair's backrest. The background is a dark, textured wall, possibly stone or brick, with some greenery visible on the left side.

*Here's an easy way to cut your teeth on chair building without taking a bite out of your schedule.*

**L**ike many woodworkers, I am a closet chair -ophobe. I'm fascinated by the old styles but have always been intimidated by the joinery and compound angles.

The peasant chair shown here is a German chair with obvious Celtic influences. (Considering the Celts originated in Europe, this isn't too much of a stretch.) It has ancestral links to the Windsor style and dates from the early 18th century. Style aside, it's remarkably easy to build, and that's why I chose it.

Construction didn't involve much complex joinery. But I've done a lot of the hard work for you. I used the computer software that I use for our magazine's illustrations to draw the chair in three dimensions. So, before I even cut the first board, I felt comfortable with the dimensions of the chair. Still, I made a particleboard seat and tried my legs and back on it for size — I had to see it for myself before I cut up a bunch of nice oak.

*By Jim Stuard, associate editor,  
Popular Woodworking*

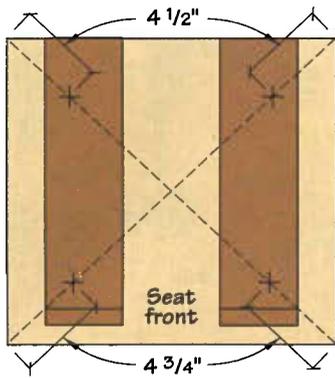
Schedule of Materials: Peasant Chair

No.	Item	Dimensions T W L	Material
1	Seat	1" x 16" x 17"	Oak
4	Legs	1 1/2" x 1 1/2" x 18"	Oak
2	Battens	1" x 4" x 15"	Oak
1	Back	3/4" x 13" x 18"	Oak

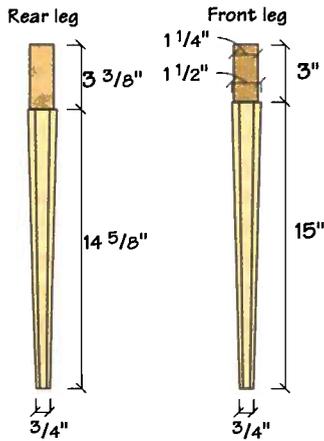


Are we on target?

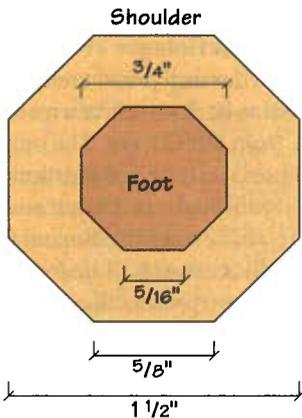
To see more projects like this in future issues, circle "P9" on the postage-paid card in the Resource Directory.



Plan of hole drilling layout

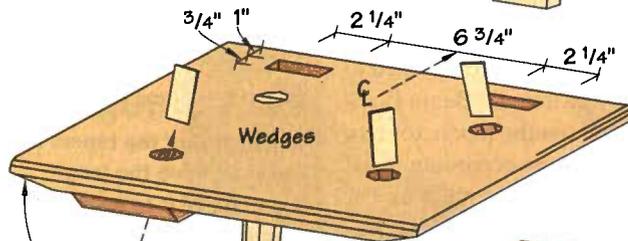
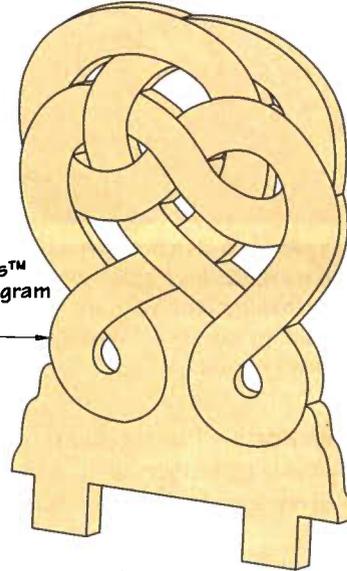


Elevation of legs



Full-size diagram of leg taper layout

See PullOut Plans™ for a full-size diagram of the back.



Front legs are drilled at 12° to seat corner.

Back legs are drilled at 15° to seat corner.

Hand saw kerf cut into 1 1/4" tenon.

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**1 PLANE** • Clamp the leg in a vise and plane the tapered surfaces flat, then mark the legs again for the octagonal tapers according to the diagram. With the legs again clamped in the vise, plane to the second taper to finish shaping the legs as shown above.

**STEP 1 “Roughing” the Parts** • Peasant chairs were crude affairs, usually made by farmers in the winter, after their harvest. They used crude tools and methods, and the results reflected this.

Start by cutting out the parts according to the Schedule of Materials. While the seat, back and battens can be of figured wood, the legs need to be straight-grained for strength. Begin shaping the legs by laying out the tapers for two front legs and two back legs according to the diagram. The shorter measurement on the back legs will make the seat sit at a comfortable angle.

Now comes the fun part — getting a round tenon on a square leg. Each leg will have about 3" of a 1 1/4" round tenon at the top. I tried forming this tenon with a drawknife and chisels on one leg to see if it could be done. It is painstaking work that is done better in much less time on the lathe. After turning the leg tenons, cut the first tapers on the legs using a band saw. This leaves you with a tapered, four-sided leg with a round tenon. Next, clamp the legs in a vise and shape the legs with a bench plane. You could make all of these taper cuts on a jointer or a table saw, but it sure feels good to kick up some shavings in a nice quiet shop and get a feel for how our woodworking ancestors did things.

Next up is making the two battens. After cutting the pieces to size, cut a 30-degree angle on one end of each batten. The angled end will face forward and serves to lighten the look of the seat assembly. For now, lay the battens cross grain to the seat bottom, two inches in from the ends, and temporarily clamp them in place. With the battens in place, lay out the leg hole and back mortise locations according to the seat detail in the diagrams. Draw a diagonal line from each corner across



**2 DRILL THE SEAT** • Clamp the seat upside-down with the diagonal layout line oriented roughly perpendicular to an imaginary line running from the drill bit to the drill press post. If you are using a press that angles front to back, orient the layout line *with* the imaginary line.

the middle, then measure in from the outside corners approximately 4 3/4" for the front legs and 4 1/2" for the back and mark the leg locations.

Mark the batten locations on the seat, then remove them and drill oversized pilot holes for six #12 x 1 1/2" flathead screws in each batten, avoiding the areas where legs will be. The oversized pilot holes will allow for wood movement. Attach the battens (with the batten ends flush to the back), applying a little glue to the center of each batten only. This allows the seat to move from the center out.

Now the seat edges can be profiled. Rout a 1/2" quarter-round profile on the sides and front of the seat. Cut an angle according to the diagram on the underside of the seat sides on the table saw. Using a block plane and rasp, blend all of these profiled edges together.

**STEP 2 The Right Angle on Holes** • To drill the holes for the front legs, set your drill press' table to a 12-degree angle. Our drill tilts front to back — unlike a machinist's style drill press, which tilts from left to right. The only difference on a machinist's drill press will be how the seat is oriented. Drill a hole completely through the batten and seat into a backer board with a 1 1/4" Forstner bit. Repeat for the other front leg, then set the drill press to a 15-degree angle for the back legs and repeat the above process. Keep in mind that accuracy isn't absolutely necessary, but it helps. The legs can be adjusted at the feet to get the seat level after assembly.

**STEP 3 Drilling Mortises** • Finish the seat by drilling out the 3/4" x 2 1/2" mortises for the back tenons according to the diagram. They are set at 7-degree angles, 1" in from the

### Don't pitch that wedge!

When cutting the tapers on the legs, keep the falloff. You can use it to wedge the tenons in the seats when you assemble the chair.



**3 SQUARE THE MORTISES** • Use a chisel to clean up and square out the through-mortises for the back tenons.

### Leave some for later

Cutting the tenons to leave a predetermined amount is easy using a small piece of cardboard to hold the saw blade up from the chair seat. Cut a 1½" hole in the cardboard and place it over the tenon. Lay the saw flat to the cardboard and simply cut through. What's left of the tenon will be the height of the cardboard thickness.

back edge of the seat. Cut the mortises completely through the seat and battens. After drilling, use a chisel to clean up the mortises and square them up.

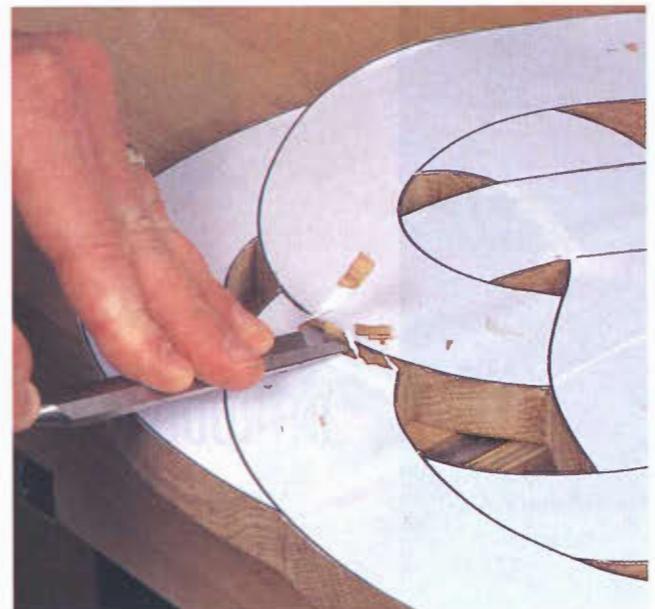
**STEP 4 Scrolling the Back** • The back is a simple affair that has a scrollsawn pattern with low relief carving. Begin by attaching the pattern supplied in the PullOut™ Plans to the back using rubber cement. Scroll saw the waste areas from the back and band saw the outside edge of the pattern. Clean up the rough edges of the cuts with a rasp and sandpaper.

Next, cut the tenons on the bottom of the back and fit them into the through mortises in the seat. When fit, cut a 7-degree angle on the bottom edge of the back that contacts the seat using a small trim saw or jigsaw. It doesn't have to be perfect, just enough to make the back-to-seat joint less noticeable.

**STEP 5 Carve the Knot** • The Celtic knot is simply a low-relief carving that can be done with a chisel (see photo). After carving, the last task is to assemble the seat, legs and back. Take the legs and place them into the seat. Trim the tenons to 1/8" above the seat, then remove the legs and move over to your bench vise. Using a European-style back saw, cut a kerf into the end of each tenon at about a 30-degree angle off the grain orientation at the top of the leg to help prevent splitting. Apply glue to the tenons and re-insert them into the seat so the kerf is at an angle to the grain of the seat. Drive a wedge (made from the scraps left from the leg tapers) with

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**4 BACK PATTERN** • Drill small holes into the waste areas of the back for your scroll saw's blade.



**5 CARVE** • Start by cutting straight down at the lines of the knot under-cut. Then, with the chisel slightly angled off of the back, cut the waste out of the way. Finish the cut by smoothing the edge of the overlapping curve. With a little practice the back will be ready in no time.

some glue into the kerf. Tap it in good and snug but not enough to split the seat. Clean up the excess glue on the tenon and cut the wedge flush with the tenon end.

Using 80-grit paper in a random orbit sander, sand down the tenon ends until there is a small bump with the edges of the tenon flush with the seat. This gives an authentic look. The seats on the antique chairs were not glued, they just rested in their mortises. This might have been done in order to store the chair more easily.

After finish sanding, apply a generous coat of glaze and let it dry. Apply three coats of paste wax, then take a break on your new chair and be glad you're not a peasant. Because with their tools, this chair would have taken a lot longer to build. **PW**