

Home, Lawn & Garden

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A bloomin' tough decision

Steve and Daphne Scott of Speyside admire the many colourful box plants available for sale at Sheridan Nurseries Farm Outlet in Glen Williams. Planting season is fast approaching and area garden centres will soon be overrun with the green thumb crowd. Photo by Ted Brown

Choosing the proper wood stain

Many of my woodworking students and clients ask me about choosing the right stain for a particular woodworking project. Following is a summary of some of the more common types of stains and their appropriate uses.

First, consider staining difficult woods like pine. This is a wood used by most do-it-yourselfers. What makes pine difficult to stain is that regular pigment stains (like a common Minwax stain) will appear splotchy because pine has a great density variations on its surface. The more porous areas absorb more pigment from the stain, while the dense areas absorb less.

The usual recommendation for dealing with pine and other "splotchy" species (such as birch and even cherry) is to use a wood conditioner, and then an ordinary stain. The wood conditioner seals the pores of the wood before the stain is applied so that a more even density exists in all areas. This does an adequate job, but in fine furniture work I prefer a different product. It is known as a gel stain. My personal favourite is a product called Wood Kote Jel'd Stain. A gel stain works because of its thick gel or paste-like consistency. It is so thick that it sits on the surface of the wood rather than penetrating. And, if the stain does not penetrate, then varying density of the wood surface becomes irrelevant, and no splotching occurs.

Ordinary pigment stains like the Minwax product do a fine job on species with a more even density, such as mahogany, walnut and sometimes oak. Simply apply the stain according to the instructions on the can, wipe it off and top coat it with the finish of your choice after it dries.

Oak has extreme density variations between the rings that you see (known as earlywood) and the areas in between the rings (known as latewood). An ordinary pigment stain will not cause blotchiness on oak, but the rings will be extremely dark by comparison to the rest of the wood. The rings are so porous that large quantities of the stain's pigment get caught in that area, causing the colour difference. Some people like this look, as the rings really stand out. Others think that the rings look too bold this way. Rather than seeing the furniture piece for its overall form, one is overwhelmed by the strikingly distinct ring pattern. There are a couple of ways to deal with this.

One way is to use a finish that combines the stain and finish in one such as Minwax Polyshades. Since the colouring pigments are suspended in a film finish such as oil-based polyurethane, the colouring is done in successive layers. The only layer that results in some uneven colouring is the first one. The first coat, however, seals the pores of the wood, which does

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