

Choosing the right wood stain

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not allow penetration of subsequent coats of colouring pigments. Therefore, all subsequent coats will leave a more even layer of colour trapped within the film finish.

Another way to avoid the dark ring problem with oak is to use a dye instead of a stain. Although less commonly available, they can nonetheless be purchased with relative ease. Although there are different types of dye stains, they all share one important characteristic. Each "unit of colour" so to speak, is a single molecule in size. This means that the mixed stain is actually a solution—you do not have to constantly mix it and pigments do not settle out at the bottom. Because of the extremely small size of the colouring medium, dyes colour all areas of the wood quite evenly, which makes the rings on oak stand out less.

Dyes are also useful for extremely dense woods such as hard maple. Maple has such a tight cell structure that ordinary pigment stains don't have any large nooks and crannies to get caught in. If you wipe a pigment stain on maple and then wipe off the excess, you will remove most of it due to the high density of the species. Although a pigment stain can be sprayed onto maple to achieve better results (due to the fact that the surface isn't being physically wiped off), most do-it-yourselfers don't have, or want to use, spray equipment. The answer is to use a dye, which can be wiped on and off and still leave significant colour on the wood. Dyes do a remarkable job of staining maple and are my stain of choice on dense woods. Another huge benefit is that dyes are totally transparent. Even black dye lets the wood grain show

through! Pigment stains obscure the natural wood grain, especially when sprayed on in several coats.

One last staining product I should mention is tinted Danish oil. You may have seen Danish oil under product names like Watco and Deft. They are available in a natural colour, as well as in numerous colours like "dark walnut" or "cherry". When you buy the coloured varieties, they are a pigment stain floating within the Danish oil, much like the Polyshades type products. You must shake the can before use and keep stirring the finish during use to ensure an even distribution of pigment. However, these products use a different type of pigment call "asphaltum." It is a very fine pigment that does a better job of colouring splotchy woods like pine. Gel stains still do a far better job in my opinion, but tinted Danish oil does a respectable job and is very quick and easy to use. I use it often where cost considerations are important, particularly black cherry, walnut, and quartersawn red oak.

Unless the product you are using is a stain-and-finish-in-one product, you always need to topcoat the stain with a suitable finish. An ordinary pigment stain only adds colour to the wood, not protection. A proper finish is required for physical protection of the surface and to slow humidity penetration into the wood, which will cause warping and checking.

—Contributed by Hendrik Varju of Passion for Wood. Varju is a designer and builder of fine furniture in the Acton area. He also teaches one-on-one woodworking lessons and provides a do-it-yourselfer consultation service. For more information, call 519-853-2027.

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