

Restoration magic

Refinishing made easy

REFINISHING WOOD — whether it be a flea market "find," an unfinished furnishing or a precious family heirloom — has become one of the more popular, not to mention one of the easier, do-it-yourself trends around. It doesn't require a workshop full of tools and you can begin with a small project and ease your way into more complicated ones.

Gene and Katie Hamilton, home/workshop journalists and do-it-yourself consultants to the Minwax Co., tackled their first refinishing project more than 20 years ago when they refinished a small oak desk that cost \$15 at the Salvation Army. As their confidence grew, so did their skills. Over the years they've tackled everything from dining room and bedroom furniture to a household of oak woodwork and moldings. (For a free booklet about wood refinishing, write to the Hamiltons at P.O. Box 300, Elmhurst, Ill. 60126.)

The Hamiltons gained most of their experience through trial and error. Here are four common mistakes they've already made . . . so you won't have to.

UNEVEN SANDING: "We found it's most important to sand the wood surface uniformly," said Gene Hamilton. "We used to sand the flat surfaces with great vigor, but lost steam on the edges and legs. The result was a finish that looked blotchy and with too many different shades. This is especially true with pine."

The Hamiltons like to use a sanding block and No. 120 grit sandpaper to remove dirt and smooth the grain and imperfections on flat surfaces. To sand round, curved surfaces, they make their own sanding strips. Simply stick a piece of masking or duct tape to the back of a piece of sandpaper, then cut the tape and paper into strips the exact width that you need. Work the strips like dental floss. These strips make sanding round furniture legs or spindles an easy job.

"Don't forget to rub down all surfaces with a tack rack just before applying the finish," said Katie Hamilton. "We prefer a penetrating stain."

DARK END GRAIN: After the Hamiltons stained their first pine footstool, they noticed the edges of the stool and parts of the legs turned out darker than the other parts. Later, they discovered the reason — the end grain areas absorb more stain than the rest of the wood. They found the easiest solution is to seal the troublesome end grain with a wood conditioner. They coat the entire piece after sand-

ing and before applying any finish. The Hamiltons also use it on their hardwood projects before applying a dark-colored finish, although dark tones tend to come out lighter after an application of wood conditioner.

UNEVEN-LOOKING STAIN: On their first few projects, the Hamiltons tried to apply the stain too heavily. Most manufacturers recommend you apply their stain in several light coats, wiping off the excess between coats. Following the manufacturers' advice, the Hamiltons now apply penetrating stain with a rag, allowing it to soak into and become part of the wood. Then, after five to 15 minutes, they wipe up the excess stain with a clean rag. The Hamiltons like the even, professional-looking finish they get with two light coats of a wood finish, instead of one heavy one.

PROPER LIGHTING: The Hamiltons discovered good lighting, especially backlighting, is a key element in obtaining a good-looking high-gloss finish. Place a bare bulb behind the work you are finishing. Then you can see the reflection of the light in the wet finish and tell instantly where the missed spots, runs or drips are. This is most important when you're applying a high-gloss finish, such as polyurethane, but it applies to all finishing projects.

They also found inexpensive clip-on light fixtures handy for this job. Another useful tip is to raise the project up to a comfortable working height by placing it on sawhorses or a table.

Here are a few quick tips that will help you achieve a professional-looking finish.

Between finishing applications, wipe the wood down with a wood-finishing pad. It is easier to use than steel wool or sandpaper and does a better job.

To rejuvenate a worn or lightly scratched finish, apply a protective topping of paste finishing wax. Just scoop a small amount of wax into the center of a folded piece of cheesecloth. Then rub, squeezing the cheesecloth gently to allow the minimum amount of wax to come through. Let it dry a few minutes and buff lightly.

Avoid the urge to refinish outside. Dust adheres to the finish and tiny seedlings, bugs and other minute particles often blow onto the finish. You may not be able to see them at the moment, but just after you've worked on a spot and moved on to another, they'll surely show up. You've got to select a dust-free environment for this type of work.

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