EBONIZING

Making wood look like ebony

It's hard to beat the dramatic looks of a jet-black jewelry box, furniture piece, or accent like that used on the clock on *page 42*. But ecological concerns and the skyrocketing price of ebony (up to $50/board foot) keep lots of woodworkers from using this wood. There is an option, though. With ebonizing, or the blackening of wood, you can transform less-expensive woods into eye-catching pieces and accents.

How ebonizing differs from staining

Ebonizing a piece of wood differs plenty from simply staining it black. How? First, when you stain wood, you coat it with pigments. Finely ground pigment particles bond to the surface and pores of the wood after the liquid carrier (turpentine, solvent, or water) evaporates. And second, since the pigment is suspended in the liquid carrier and has to be mixed, the stain is semiopaque. This creates a cloudiness that somewhat obscures the grain. Because of this, black stain makes a poor choice for ebonizing wood.

On the other hand, aniline dye, a commonly used ebonizing product, behaves differently. It completely dissolves like food coloring does and penetrates deeply, coloring each wood cell.

The advantages of water-soluble aniline dyes

Water-soluble dyes have great penetrating power, and they offer good resistance to fading. Another advantage: You don't have to work with a chemical solvent. Because a water dye does not set up as quickly as an alcohol-soluble dye, it makes a better choice for staining a large surface. Water-soluble dyes dissolve best in warm distilled water because the mineral salts in tap water can affect the color of the dye. About the only disadvantage of a water-soluble dye is that it raises the grain of wood. But as you'll see later, this problem is easy to overcome.

How to achieve true black

When you dye a piece of wood, the end result combines the colors in the dye and the natural color of the wood. Most ebony or black aniline dyes are actually made from dark blue and/or green dye powders. To achieve true black in ebonizing certain woods with aniline dye, you should add a very small amount of a red- or orange-colored aniline dye powder to the solution. This will cut down on the blue-green appearance and make the dye a truer black. If you add too much red or orange, however, you'll change the color altogether. Experiment by adding small amounts and then testing it on the wood you'll be using.

It's off to the shop for a trial run

Following label directions, mix one packet of powder to one quart of warm distilled water. Be sure to wear rubber gloves, as the mixture stains skin as well as wood. Sal Marino recommends, "You should always wear gloves and a respirator when applying all types of dye stains. Dye stains in powdered form can cause allergic reactions in some people."

After stirring the mixture vigorously for several minutes, strain the mixture through a disposable cone filter (see the photo *above*) to remove any undissolved powder.

Then, sand the wood pieces with 100-, 150-, and 220-grit sandpaper. Now, moisten a sponge with water and wipe down the areas to be stained to raise the grain. About 30 minutes later, lightly resand these areas with 220-grit sandpaper to smooth the raised grain.

Stir the mixture thoroughly, then using a foam brush, sponge, or even a clean cloth, wipe on the dark mixture.You'll be immediately astonished at just how black the wood becomes. But, it will dry somewhat lighter about 20 minutes later. Apply the dye generously with the applicator. It's important to test-dye scrap stock first to determine if one coat will be sufficient or if you'll need two. Don't forget to apply finish to the test scrap too. As shown on the test block *above* and furthest to the *right*, the area with a lacquer finish looks much darker and richer than the adjoining stained but unfinished area.