

Dye and Liming Wax Finish

Betty J. Scarpino



Ash bowl, 8" (20cm) diameter, before and after application of dye and liming wax.

The grain patterns of ash are often quite striking, but its color tends to be drab. Dye and liming wax can make this plain wood come to life, and because ash is a ring-porous wood, it is an ideal choice for this technique. The lead photos show an ash bowl before and after its grain pattern was enhanced with dye and liming wax. I always use dry wood.

Wood selection

Wood is a complex substance and is difficult to classify or describe in general terms; the distribution of pores in various species is an excellent example. There are ring-porous,

diffuse-porous, and semi-ring-porous woods. In ring-porous woods, such as ash, the pores are significantly larger in the early-growth part of an annual ring. In diffuse-porous woods, such as maple, the pores are relatively evenly sized throughout the entire growth ring. Semi-ring-porous woods, such as walnut, contain pores that are somewhat larger in early wood than in the later, summer-growth portion of an annual ring. Compare an endgrain view of ash with that of walnut and you will be able to see the difference (*Photos 1, 2, respectively*). This technical information aside, to achieve the most dramatic results with liming

wax, select a ring-porous wood. Ash is my favorite, but other species will work: oak, elm, honey locust, or Osage orange.

Materials

Liming wax is readily available from a variety of sources, but it is not the only substance that can be used to fill pores. I have tried with varying success liquid acrylic paint, tile grout, and gold metallic powder. Liming wax is white, but it can be dyed using powdered pigment.

Some sort of dye is often used, but it's not necessary to color the wood. For instance, instead of dyeing the wood a darker color and filling the pores with white liming wax, a light-colored wood could simply be spray-finished, and then dark filler applied, which will make the grain pattern stand out. Or the wood could be bleached and colored liming wax applied. The combinations and possibilities are endless.

The third ingredient is some sort of finish to seal the wood. I have had the most success with Deft semigloss spray lacquer in a rattle can. Depending on the dye you select, it may be possible to use a wipe-on finish or oil to seal the wood. Whatever finish you use, though, it's important to make sure the pores do not become filled.

Procedure

To illustrate the process, I turned a bowl out of dry ash and sanded its surface to 320 grit. Dyeing wood will make sanding scratches and torn grain highly visible, so be sure to sand carefully.

After sanding, I apply Behlen-brand Solar-Lux™ blood-red dye (*Photo 3*). It is alcohol-based and does not raise the grain. Wear nitrile gloves—this dye

Endgrain comparison



Ring-porous woods such as ash (*left*) are a good choice for a dye and liming wax finish. The effect is more dramatic than it would be in other woods such as walnut (*right*), whose pores are closer in size throughout the growth ring.

Dye, lacquer, liming wax



3 Saturate the wood with dye. Wear nitrile gloves. After the dye is dry, you may need to use 0000-steel wool to smooth the surface before spraying with finish.



4 The bowl with three light coats of spray lacquer.



5 Apply liming wax liberally, then wipe off with a paper towel. The wax will remain in the open pores, accentuating the grain. After wiping off the excess wax with a paper towel, a “foggy” layer will remain but can be removed with 0000-steel wool.

lasts under fingernails for days. Pretty much any other dye will work also.

I let the dye dry thoroughly and then spray two generous coats of lacquer (Photo 4). It’s important to use enough finish, but don’t over-saturate the wood; not enough finish won’t seal the wood and too much finish will close the pores. The object is to seal the wood, but not completely fill the pores.

At this point you may want to use 0000-steel wool to smooth the surface. Again, this is a case where too

much can be detrimental. Don’t vigorously rub, as you might remove too much of the finish. If too much finish has been removed, however, simply spray on more.

After the finish is cured, apply liming wax to the entire bowl, gently rubbing it into the pores (Photo 5). I wear nitrile gloves because liming wax is a petroleum product. Wipe off the excess using a paper towel. There will be a light coat of wax remaining, which will look foggy. To remove this

wax, use 0000-steel wool to gently rub the surface. Beware—buffing with a buffing wheel is too aggressive and may remove all the finish and dye.

I don’t spray additional coats of lacquer, but after the wax has dried, which takes several days, an additional coat can be sprayed. Others have reported good results.

If you have inadvertently closed a few pores from finish dripping, use a fine needle to poke holes through the finish to open the pores. This will allow the liming wax to enter. In fact, if you wanted to experiment, you could create your own patterns with a needle, spray a finish, and apply liming wax, reminiscent of tattooing.

Durability

This finishing technique is not intended for anything other than decoration. Lacquer will not hold up to getting wet; even water spots will mar the surface. In addition, if the surface gets dinged or scratched, it’s a bit tricky to repair. Small repairs can successfully be made, though, with patience. Nonetheless, with care, this bowl will be beautiful for many years. ■

Betty J. Scarpino lives, works, turns, carves, and writes in Indianapolis. For more, visit bettyscarpino.com.



Ash eggs, natural color wood, spray finish, pores filled with white liming wax.

Photo: Judy Ditmer



Outrageous Egg, 2014, Ash, walnut, dye, liming wax, bleach, 22" x 45" x 3" (56cm x 114cm x 8cm)

Photo: Wilbur Montgomery