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Waxing on Wax

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Some of the most useful things in my workshop are often the cheapest – like a tin of paste wax. I use plain floor wax for many purposes. Others swear by neutral shoe polish such as Kiwi Neutral. These waxes are usually a blend of waxes with a solvent to soften them; otherwise they would be too hard to apply directly. Once applied, the solvent evaporates and the wax hardens, so it can be buffed to a shine. The wax is easily removed with a solvent again, such as thinners, so it is not permanent. The manufacturer selects a blend of waxes to give the desired properties, which differ from a shoe polish to floor polish to furniture polish. Beeswax which is soft (and smells like honey in its raw form), may be blended with Carnauba wax (which is hard and brittle), paraffin wax (candle wax) and other waxes. The wax may have colourants added such as shoe polish, some furniture waxes (such as Liberon), and floor waxes.

Paste wax is useful for many things, the most obvious being to polish up your latest masterpiece. Locally produced Woodoc Antique Wax or the more expensive imported Liberon come to mind. I use two or three coats of varnish, with a light rub with fine 320 grit sand paper between coats to remove the rough edges raised by the varnish. Then one or two coats of wax, well rubbed with a cloth gives the piece a soft, glowing look that is comfortable to touch.

When the ways of my lathe look rusty and spotted with finish, a rub with a pad, followed by some floor wax prevents further rust and stops finishes from sticking. Wet oak is particularly corrosive, quickly picking up black stains from steel parts, even from the chuck on my lathe. Waxing the working faces of the chuck and centers helps to reduce rust and stains on the work-piece to a minimum. To stop sap sticking to the faceplate, spin the faceplate on the lathe and apply a coat of wax. If your lathe has a dead center on the tailstock (one that doesn't spin on internal bearings), then a blob of wax on the point will reduce friction to stop burning. If you have a simple pole-lathe, then you are probably used to waxing the centers to reduce friction. A variety of waxes can be used to finish turned pieces, but that is a subject on its own – maybe a future article.

To reduce the effort in feeding large pieces of wood over the tables of my jointer, wax reduces friction, and helps to maintain a smooth feed rate for a better finish. Rust isn't a problem for the anodized aluminum tables of my jointer, but if you have cast-iron tables on your stationary power tools, wax will keep the rust at bay. A couple of coats of wax on the MDF table on my radial-arm saw makes ripping safer because there is less friction: I can better feel resistance to the cut as the wood is pushed through, the better to judge if the blade is binding.

Once old or even antique tools have been cleaned up, a coat of wax will prevent rust and give them a pleasant patina that is easily maintained. Also, it is not permanent, so the tool

will not loose value, if that is important. On hand planes, a light coat of wax reduces the friction between the sole and the wood. Hand saws can benefit from a light waxing to reduce friction and prevent rust.

When driving long screws, lubrication greatly reduces effort and the chances of the screw shearing off in hardwood. I dip the threads of the screws in wax to reduce turning torque. Be wary of compatibility of any excess wax with the finish. However, the wax should be easy to remove if it is a problem. But, maybe you could simply finish the piece with wax as well.

Sticking drawers can sometimes be eased with a coating of wax – paraffin (candle) wax is more durable here, but a paste wax will do as well. I've noticed that the end grain of turning blanks is usually dipped in paraffin wax to control moisture loss and prevent splitting. The wax adheres to the ends, but hardly penetrates enough to spoil the wood.

A word of warning – avoid automotive wax polishes as they often contain silicones and these can have disastrous effects on finishes, being almost impossible to remove from the wood.