



## SECRETS TO WIPE-ON FINISHES

*With the right wipe-on and a little know how, you can finish like a pro.*

**W**hat's not to like about a wipe-on finish? Wipe it on with an old t-shirt or sock, wipe off the excess, and you're done. No brush marks, lap marks, or drips to worry about. You'll get a top-quality finish in a fairly short time without a lot of hard work. That's why I turn to wipe-on finishes time and time again.

The only real catch is trying to decide which wipe-on finish to buy (see photo on page 2.) You'll have plenty to choose from, so take a little time on the following pages to find out which are best suited for your particular wood-working project.

### LINSEED OIL

One of the oldest wipe-on finishes you'll still find on the shelf is boiled linseed oil. The word "boiled" refers to a heat process once used to make the finish dry faster. Today, metallic dryers are added.

The best thing about linseed oil is the warm, amber color it gives to the wood. Beyond this, it has little to be desired. Linseed oil dries very slow and forms a thin, soft film, giving you little if any moisture or scratch resistance. Even after applying multiple coats, linseed oil will never give you much of a build or sheen. At times,

I'll use a coat of linseed oil just for the color it adds. But then I always put a harder finish over it for extra protection.

### TUNG OIL

Next in line is pure tung oil. Although it's only a small step up from linseed oil, it dries a little harder and provides some extra moisture and scratch resistance. Still, after multiple coats you'll only see a thin build with a slight sheen. Keep in mind that a coat of raw tung oil can literally take several days to dry, so don't look to tung oil if you're looking for a quick finish.



## WIPING VARNISH

Take a drying oil (linseed, tung, or even soybean), add hard varnish resins and some mineral spirits, and you'll have what's called a wiping varnish.

Wiping varnishes have most of the good qualities of a brushed-on varnish without the hassles. You'll get a decent build with a nice sheen and plenty of protection. And with a wiping varnish, you're applying thin coats of finish, so the drying time is cut way down. You don't have the worry of dust settling in the finish.

But there are a couple drawbacks to wiping var-

nishes. One is that they can dry *too* fast. You can't just wipe on a coat and leave it for an hour before wiping it down. It will tack up leaving you with a sticky mess. The second drawback is that you'll get a pretty slow build (film thickness) compared to a brushed-on varnish. But I prefer the "in the wood" look of a thinner finish.

## OIL/VARNISH BLENDS

A lot of the wipe-on products you'll find on the shelf are oil/varnish blends (*Watco Danish Oil*, *Minwax Antique Oil*). These products are basically a dollop of oil (linseed or tung), a

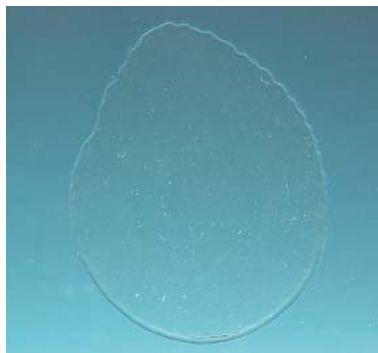
dollop of varnish and some thinner. They have some characteristics of both a pure oil and a varnish.

The oil in the mix slows the drying time so the application task is a little more leisurely. You'll have more time to let the finish "soak in" before it tacks up.

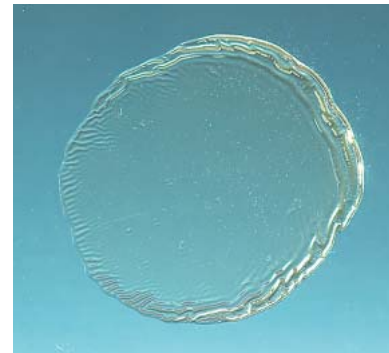
Keep in mind that an oil/varnish blend won't give you the hard film of a wiping varnish and won't build as fast to a high sheen (the oil "softens" the sheen a little). But it will provide a harder and quicker build than a pure oil, giving you a fair amount of moisture and scratch resistance.



▲ A pure oil (tung or linseed) dries soft, wrinkled, and very slowly.



▲ A wiping varnish will dry smooth, hard, clear, and quickly.



▲ As you might guess, an oil/varnish blend is somewhere in between.

## WHICH IS WHICH?

You can't rely on the can or bottle to tell you exactly what's in your wiping finish. A lot of what you read on the label is just marketing hype. A good way to get an idea of what you have is with a "puddle test." Just pour a small "dab" of the finish on a piece of glass and let it sit. The photos on page 2 show how the different types of wiping finish will dry. The length of the cure time and the look after drying will give you a pretty good idea of what's in the can or bottle.

## APPLICATION

When I have to brush on a finish, I'm always a little nervous. There's a lot that can go wrong. But I actually enjoy applying a wipe-on. It's so easy that you can enjoy watching the finish bring out the color and grain of the wood.

## WIPE ON/WIPE OFF

No matter what type of wipe-on finish you're using, the process is pretty much the same. You wipe it on and then you wipe off the excess. Pretty simple.

I don't worry too much at the wipe-on stage. You can

just pick up a lint free rag (old t-shirts are great) and go to work. I put the finish on pretty wet to make sure I get into all the grooves and corners. Don't worry about runs, they'll get cleaned up later. Just don't get too far ahead here. Depending on the finish, you might not have much time to start the wipe-off before the finish starts to tack up.

The wipe-off stage is where you need to pay a little more attention. A wiping varnish is going to tack up pretty quick. Don't let it sit for more than a few minutes before you start wiping off the excess. But with an oil or an oil/varnish blend you've got plenty of time. You can afford to let it soak in. When I do the "wipe down," I try to be thorough. This will give you a more even build and sheen.

A minor problem to watch for is "bleedback." This is when the finish comes out of the pores of the wood and forms spots on the surface. If they don't get wiped off before they dry, they'll be difficult to remove.

## COATS

With either a wiping varnish or an oil/varnish mix,

a little light sanding or a rub-down with some steel wool between coats is a good idea. Most wipe-ons take at least three coats to get much of a build, but this depends on the type you're using. A wiping varnish is going to build a little faster than an oil/varnish blend. One of the best things about wipe-ons is that the thin coats give you control over the build and the sheen. You can get just the right finish to bring out the best in a project.

## RECOMMENDATION

Most of the time when I go with a wipe-on finish, it's a wiping varnish. They can be a little trickier to apply, but I like the advantages they offer. The quicker build, better protection, and fast drying time are what I'm after. But I'll switch to an oil/varnish blend if I'm taking on a large project. It's more relaxed. Either way, you'll get a great finish with minimum stress.



## MAKE YOUR OWN

### Wiping Varnish

2 parts varnish  
(any type)  
3 parts mineral  
spirits

### Oil-Varnish Blend

1 part varnish  
(any type)  
1 part linseed  
or tung oil  
1 part mineral  
spirits