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# AN OLD COLOR ON NEW PINE

*You don't have to wait years to get the warm look of aged pine. With the right finishing techniques you can easily make pine look old.*

I've always enjoyed spending time browsing through antique stores — especially the ones with lots of furniture. It's a great source for ideas and a little inspiration. And often what catches my eye are the simple old pieces built out of pine. This furniture is often a little beat up, but what more than makes up for this is the rich, warm color of the wood. It's a look that's hard to beat.

And as well as admiring the old pine pieces, I like to work with good pine and create a few new pieces of my own. But working with pine has one minor challenge. I don't necessarily want my pine projects to look brand new. Sometimes I like my new pieces to have that old pine color I've often seen. A little premature aging is what I'm after.

**PINE.** Normally, staining wood to add some "age" isn't a big deal. But pine is a different challenge. Although pine is a soft wood, it's not evenly soft.

There can be a lot of difference in the density of the wood across a board. The softer

wood in the board tends to soak up a lot of stain, while the harder wood blocks it out. The color can end up pretty uneven and somewhat blotchy.

### GOOD SURFACE PREP.

The first step to getting a good stain job on pine is careful sanding. Just make sure all the parts are sanded to the same grit so all the surfaces are an even smoothness. Pay special attention to the end grain. If it's rough, it'll really soak up a stain. As a rule I'll sand pine to 180 grit and I'll sand finer on the end grain.

### AMBER SHELLAC

If you just want to give a pine project the warm glow of slightly aged pine, amber shellac is the way to go. As you can see in the photo in the lower left corner, a single coat will turn raw pine from its natural yellowish-white color to a much more pleasing "pumpkin" pine color. Amber shellac is



▲ The jar of shellac on the right is thinned with two parts denatured alcohol. The color is lighter and it will "flow" much better.

actually a "colored" finish, not a stain. So you can avoid the problems (blotching and uneven color) you might have applying a stain. The application is easy and you'll get a rich, beautiful color on the pine.

**APPLYING SHELLAC.** I start with a small can of premixed amber shellac. But the off-the-shelf commercial mixes are going to be too thick to flow out well. So the first thing to do is thin the shellac. I usually thin shellac at a rate of 1 part shellac to 2 parts denatured alcohol. As you see in the photo above, this lightens the color of the amber shellac considerably and will make it much easier to brush out.

Under the right conditions, shellac



▲ Amber shellac can be a great tool for achieving a slightly aged pine color.



▶ Brushing on a coat of amber shellac will add some instant age to pine. Applying multiple diluted coats gives better control of the final color.

dries very fast — within 5 or 10 minutes. Start by applying a thin coat and when it's dry, sand it lightly. A second coat will give you a little deeper color. Applying multiple light coats gives you greater control over the final color.

**TOPCOAT.** Now although amber shellac is a finish and forms a film on the wood, I'll rarely use it without a harder topcoat. It's just not very water or scratch resistant.

My choice of a topcoat over the shellac is a good quality varnish — either brushed or wiped. Pine is a pretty soft wood, so to me it makes sense to use a pretty hard finish for the best protection. A few coats of polyurethane or a standard varnish will create a tough film and you won't need to “baby” the soft wood.

A second reason I prefer varnish is the little bit of extra amber color it will impart to the wood. A topcoat of varnish over the shellac will really enhance the warm glow of old pine.

## STAINING PINE

But sometimes the old pine pieces that I admire have a much darker, deeper color. In the past pine was often considered an inferior furniture wood, so these pieces were stained to resemble more expensive hardwoods. The stain and the natural aging of the wood and finish makes

for an unbeatable color. So to get this darker, “aged” color, you're going to need to start with a stain. And successfully staining pine requires a slightly different approach.

**FIRST A CONDITIONER.** Before staining pine, I always apply a pre-stain conditioner. A conditioner acts to seal the wood a little bit in advance of the stain. The stain that you apply afterwards can still penetrate, but in a more controlled way. A conditioner will go a long way toward eliminating the blotches and uneven color you may otherwise see on pine.

You can condition the pine in a couple of ways. Sometimes, I'll use a light coat of dilute amber shellac. The shellac will seal the wood just enough to keep the stain from penetrating deeply. You'll get a slightly lighter (the wood won't accept as much stain) but more even color.

Commercial conditioners work a little differently but do the same thing. The ones that I've used are just thin, colorless liquids (like stain without the pigments). You apply it to the wood and let it soak in. The solvent



▲ A simple step-by-step finishing process gave this country-style pine kitchen table the beautiful, warm color of a classic antique.



fills the pores of the wood so that when you apply the stain (while the conditioner is still wet) it won't penetrate as deeply. It's pretty simple and it works well.

**THICK STAIN.** Once the wood is conditioned, the stain can be applied. And choosing the right type of stain is important. I've found that on pine the thicker the stain the better. The thick, gel stains that I like to use on pine are not absorbed into the wood as deeply as the liquid types. This means the pigments in the stain will lay closer to the surface and you'll get a much more even color.

**APPLYING THE STAIN.** When you're staining over a conditioner, you want to make a few minor adjustments to your routine. With the conditioner sealing the wood, the pigments won't penetrate as deeply. So the goal is to leave a little more “color” on the surface.

After applying the stain, I let it dry just a little longer than usual. When the stain has dulled down a bit, I start to clean off the excess, wiping with the grain. Let your rag get a little bit “dirty” with stain (see photo above). Continue to wipe until you have an even, “streak-free” color on the surface. When the stain is dry, a topcoat of varnish will bring out the warm glow you're after. **W**



▲ A pre-stain conditioner followed by a gel stain is the recipe for beautifully “aged” pine.