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## Using Wood Dyes for Decorative Embellishment



**Sample pack of concentrated spirit stains.**

**Wood Dyes Overview:** When I first opened my studio almost twelve years ago, I considered myself a purist of sorts when it came to finishing woodturnings. I steadfastly resisted experimenting with coloring wood, because I felt that the natural color of the wood looked better. However, as an artist you have to continually challenge everything you do and embrace new artistic techniques and protocols to insure your growth as an artist. If you don't embrace new ideas, you will eventually stagnate and you'll hit a creative wall that will be difficult to overcome without a fresh perspective.

One of the harder embellishments for me to embrace in my studio was coloring wood. However, through the years, I gradually changed my mind and I now use color frequently on some of my projects. Looking back, I'm glad I took those first few steps to experiment with color and its effect on wood.

One of the more popular ways to enhance the visual look of your woodturning is to change its color. By using various wood dyes and other coloring products, you can easily transform a bland piece of wood into something spectacular. Because the wood will accept the color less in side grain areas and more in end grain areas, delicate and subtle grain figure can be significantly enhanced.



**Fiddleback silver maple with orange spirit stain.**

Pale timbers can be made to look vibrant and glowing through the use of wood dyes. Dark timbers can also benefit from coloring, adding warmer

and richer undertones and highlights. If you've never experimented with coloring wood before, don't worry. It's an easy technique to learn and the products are usually inexpensive, allowing you to freely experiment on various projects.

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### **Types of Wood Dyes**

There are many different types of dye and coloring products available for wood. Two popular dye types are spirit-based (solvent) dyes and water-based dyes. Of the two, the spirit-based dyes are easier to use if you're just getting started, as they are virtually goof-proof within the modern dynamic of a woodturning environment. Spirit-based dyes dry very quickly and most are fully intermixable, allowing you to achieve almost any color from a few base colors. In addition, most spirit-based dyes are lightfast, which means that the color is resistant to discoloring when exposed to light.

Water-based dyes can also be used to color wood, but they are not as easy to use as their spirit-based counterparts. Water-based dyes take much longer to dry and also raise the wood grain, requiring an additional step to remove the raised grain prior to finishing. In addition, some water-based dyes are not lightfast, which means that they may discolor when exposed to light.

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### **Wood Dyes: Application Quick-Tips**

- Spirit-based dyes can be applied by numerous methods including brush, rag, paper towel or dip bath. For finer detail and control of the color application, an artist's airbrush, H.V.L.P. sprayer, or a small disposable sprayer can be used. If you wish to layer (a gradual blending of one color into another) multiple colors onto a project, a simple artist's airbrush can be used. These can be obtained inexpensively at most major craft stores.
- Wood dyes will accentuate any residual sanding scratches, or bruised grain areas on the surface of your project! Therefore, always insure the surface contains no defects and sand to a minimum of 600-grit (1,200 grit or higher for gallery quality work) before applying wood dyes onto the surface of the wood.
- To limit the color to a specific area such as the rim of a platter, turn and sand the area that you wish to color. Leave the rest of the project rough turned. When you have finished applying the color to the desired area and it has fully dried, finish turn the rest of the project. Then, using your gouge cut into the colored area to remove any unwanted color and clean up the edge boundaries. This will create a knife-edge between the colored and uncolored areas on the project, creating a crisp visual transition.



### Numerous colors of spirit stains are available.

- To color the entire project with a single color, or several colors, turn and sand the entire project before applying your chosen colors. It's very easy to mix the colors right on the surface of your project, creating additional colors in areas where different colors blend together.
- If you prefer a very light blush of color on your project, simply add a small amount of your chosen color to a thin lacquer, or alcohol based finish and mix thoroughly. This will create what's called a *tone-spray effect*. This produces a very translucent color that is almost imperceptible, enhancing the piece in a provocative, yet subtle way. This effect can only be achieved when the thinned color is sprayed onto the surface. By spraying, you can easily control the depth and intensity of each layer, while maintaining smooth transitions between individual colors.
- Most spirit colors are too intense to use straight out of the bottle. You can easily thin the color by decanting some of the concentrate into a metal can and adding the appropriate solvent. I like to thin most spirit colors 50/50, (solvent to color concentrate by volume) before using them. This creates a light wash color, which is very easy to control as you are building your color on the surface.
- When using wood dye concentrates, only decant enough to complete the project you will be working on. This keeps your original color fresh in the container and ready for your next use. To prevent cross-contamination or dilution of the original color, never return used concentrate or thinned wood dyes to the original container.



Coloring your work is a simple way to begin your exploration into decorative embellishments for your woodturnings. These and other creative explorations, focus your inner muse in new and exciting ways as you continue to define your own unique style. Always strive to challenge your artistic beliefs and values. Through the years, I have developed and matured as an artist by getting out of my comfort zone and challenging myself creatively.

My artistic vision today bears little resemblance to the one I originally envisioned twelve years ago. It continues to evolve as I open new creative doors



**Figured box elder  
with green spirit  
stain.**

and explore what can be achieved, when I take those first few steps into the unknown.

Don't be afraid to experiment with new products and protocols in your studio. Take that which you always said you would never do and master it. You might just find out (like I have done so many times through the years) that creative explorations may be difficult at times, but they frequently yield spectacular and rewarding results. Good luck to you and best wishes in all of your creative woodturning endeavors!

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**Safety Note:** Always follow all manufacturers safety instructions before working with your lathe, or any of the tools or products you may use. If you are unsure about any operation, obtain competent professional instruction before proceeding. Use and wear all necessary safety devices during turning and observe safe woodturning practices to prevent accident or injury.

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Steven D. Russell is a professional studio woodturner, teacher and writer. He has written numerous articles for international woodturning magazines, which have been published in more than 78 countries around the world. Steve has demonstrated in numerous cities across the United States. His studio, Eurowood Werks, specializes in bowls, platters and hollow forms with unique visual and tactile treatments.

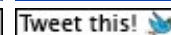
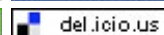
Steve is also a regular featured writer for the Guild of Master Craftsman's "Woodturning" magazine, published in London England. Woodturning magazine is the world's leading magazine for woodturners. Look for his monthly articles covering technical topics, or project based articles in each issue.

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