

# Hardwood Edgings for Plastic Laminate

The secret is to glue on oversized pieces, then trim them flush

by Paul Levine

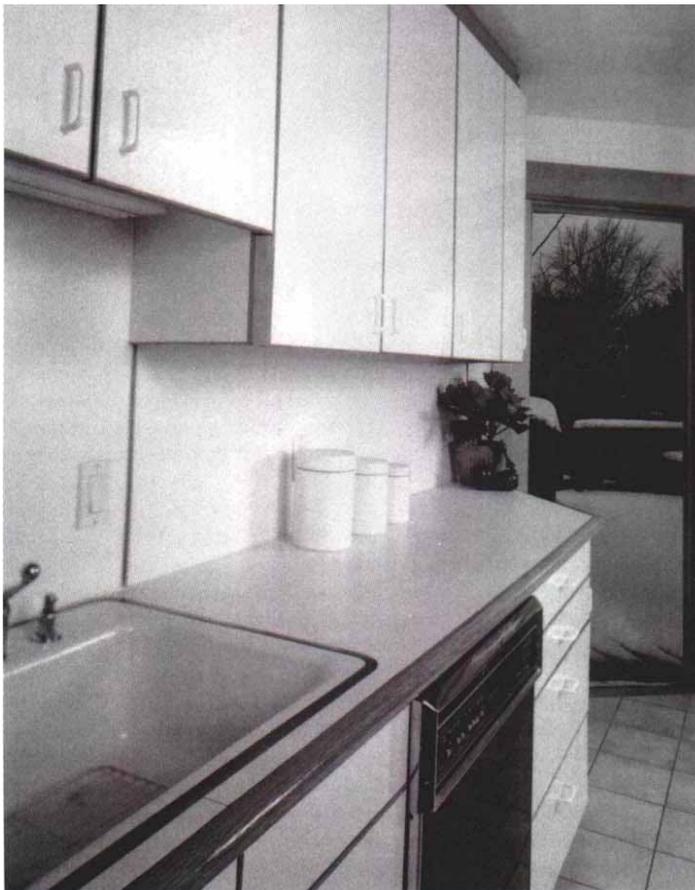
**T**ake a look at a European-style kitchen, and you'll probably see a lot of plastic panels: plywood or particleboard covered with plastic laminate. So much plastic can give a kitchen an austere, almost clinical look. That's why I use solid hardwood edgings (photo below) with plastic laminate. Besides being more durable than edges of plastic laminate or veneer, solid wood is nicer looking, and it's easy to add attractive design details by subtle shaping.

**Cut it on the table saw**—For starters, smooth, square edges mean a crisp fit between the plastic and the hardwood. So when I'm making cabinets and countertops, I glue the laminate to oversized pieces of plywood and then cut each piece to its final size on a table saw. This way, the laminate edges are perfectly flush with the plywood edges and much cleaner than those produced with a trimmer bit. For this operation, I use a triple-chip design,

80-tooth, crosscut blade. I also made an auxiliary fence that has a ½-in. by ½-in. wood strip attached ⅛ in. from the table surface (top drawing, below). When I cut the pieces, the straight edge of the plywood, not the excess laminate, rides against the wood strip, and I'm guaranteed a straight cut.

Sometimes prelaminated plywood is too cumbersome to cut on a table saw. That's when I follow the traditional method—cut the substrate to its final dimensions first, then apply the laminate and trim it to size with a laminate trimmer (for more on working with plastic laminate, see *FHB* #75, pp. 60-65).

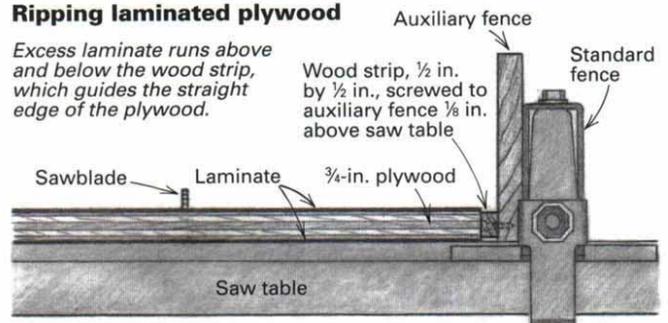
**Jointed edges glue better**—I like to rip my edging about ¼ in. wide for door and drawer panels. This dimension is both visually pleasing and wide enough to clamp easily. To provide one clean edge for gluing, I joint the stock before ripping each ¼-in. strip from it. Edging should be at least ⅙-in.



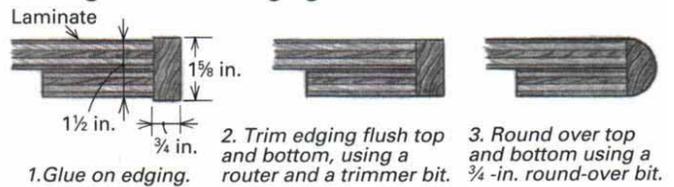
**Easy on the eye.** Besides covering the plywood edges, hardwood edging adds a warm accent to plastic laminate. Doors and drawers are edged with ¼-in. strips while the countertop has a ¾-in. bullnose.

## Ripping laminated plywood

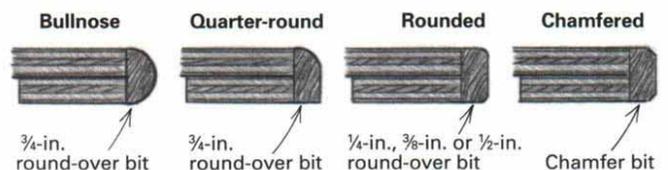
Excess laminate runs above and below the wood strip, which guides the straight edge of the plywood.



## Making a bullnose edging



## Hardwood-edging profiles



thicker than the panel's thickness to allow for flush trimming after it has been applied.

Make all your edging at one time to ensure consistent dimensions throughout. If some of the strips emerge wavy or crooked, start afresh with another board with straighter grain. Wavy stock is difficult to glue up, and later, when it's time to flush up the edging with a hand plane, wavy grain will be more likely to tear out.

**Mitered corners**—There are two ways to join edging at the corners of a door or a drawer. A mitered joint looks better than a butt joint, but it's also more difficult to achieve. If you choose to miter the corners of the edging, measure the two long pieces first (most doors and drawers are rectangles), mark the edging and cut a miter on both ends. I like to cut the edging slightly long first and then trim a hair off, testing the fit between cuts. If I cut too much off, I just use the piece on a shorterside.

Once the edging fits perfectly, spread yellow glue on it and then seat the edging, sliding it back and forth a bit to make the glue tacky. Masking tape will help hold the edges in place. Then clamp opposing sides, leaving them clamped for at least two hours. If you use pipe clamps, ½-in. wooden shims placed under the pipes will hold them off the laminated face of the door or the drawer. This will keep clamping pressure parallel to the edging and will also prevent the iron pipes from staining the material. Scrap stock the same length as the edging makes a good clamping pad that will help distribute pressure evenly along the joint. Scrape off excess glue or remove it with a damp rag to save cleanup time later.

After the glue has cured, the edging must be trimmed flush with the face of the panel. With a 1-in. long ball-bearing trimmer bit in my router, I remove most of the excess (left photo, below). The bearing runs against the face, leaving the edging slightly proud of the panel surface. To avoid tearout, I run the router from right to left (against the rotation of the bit), then make a final cleanup pass in the opposite direction.

Next, trim the slight lip that remains with a block plane that's set to take a fine shaving (middle photo, below). This may take some getting used to, but with practice—and as long as you keep the tool level—you can get a sharp plane iron to ride across the surface of the plastic without scratching it. Use straight-grain edging, plane with the grain and keep the plane sole flat on the laminate surface. Follow these precautions, and you'll probably never damage the laminate. Still, any accidental nicks can be repaired with Kampel SeamFil (Kampel Enterprises, Inc., 8930 Carlisle Road, Wellsville, Pa. 17365), a puttylike filler for plastic laminate. To avoid tearing out the edging at the corners, start at each corner and plane toward the center of the edging.

How do you know when to stop planing? One indication is when the plane no longer cuts. Another is when the slight buildup of glue squeeze-out disappears, exposing a clean, crisp joint.

Once the edging is flush, chamfer or round-over the front corner with a sharp chamfer or quarter-round router bit equipped with a ball-bearing pilot.

Feed the bit into the work slowly, and you will be rewarded with a surface that requires no sanding. The back corner of the edging, which faces the inside of the cabinet, should be eased with 100-grit sandpaper.

**Butted corners**—I think a well-mitered corner looks best, but a neat butt joint beats a sloppy miter. The methods I use make butt-jointed edging even easier to apply. Panels should be ripped to their exact height but left about ¼ in. wider than the finished size. Then cut the horizontal edging no wider than the width of the plywood and glue it to the top and bottom edges.

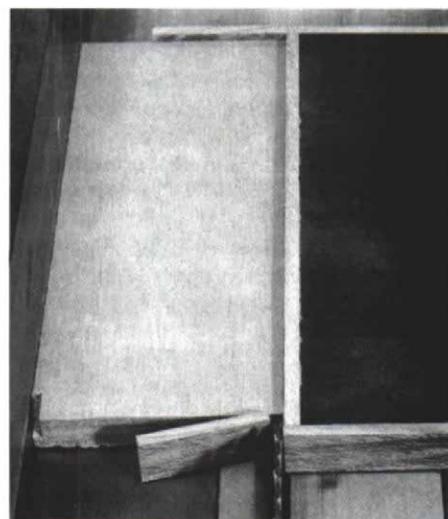
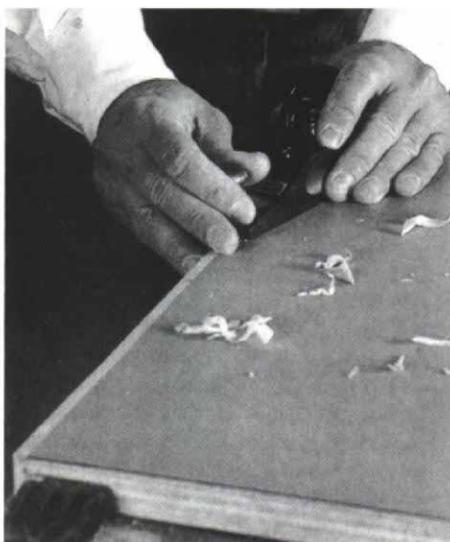
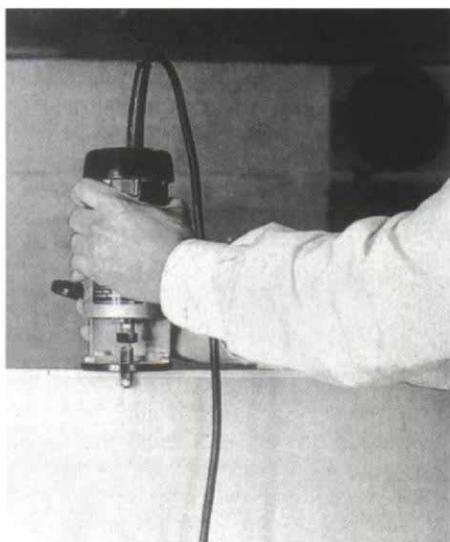
Next, trim the edging flush to the laminate surface with a trimmer bit in the router. Then cut the panels to their exact final width, less the thickness of the vertical edging. This way you'll be cutting the horizontal edging flush with the edge of the panel in the same operation, which saves a lot of fussy fitting and ensures a perfect butt joint.

When the vertical edges of the panel have been trimmed, glue on the remaining edging, letting the pieces run long. After the glue has set, trim the excess edging on the table saw (right photo, below). I lay a block of plywood on the table saw as if I were going to take a blade's width off it. I use this block as an auxiliary fence; with it I can trim the long edgings nearly perfectly and fine-tune the results with some sandpaper. Be consistent in the way you orient the butt joints. If you apply the horizontal edging first on one panel, do the same for all the other panels. Just remember that the sides you edge first will have the exposed butt ends.

**A nose for countertops**—My countertops typically overhang doors and drawer faces by ¾ in., or the thickness of the wood nosing that I usually apply, which looks just right. Again, the surface will have to be laminated before you apply the nosing. Once the surface laminate has been applied, even up the front edge either on the table saw or with a laminate trimmer.

The ¾-in. wide nosings I install are about 1⅝-in. thick, or slightly thicker than the countertop, and are applied in the same manner as the edging on doors and drawer faces (bottom drawing, facing page). First, glue and clamp the nosing to the front edge of the countertop using yellow glue. When the glue has dried, use a 1-in. trimmer bit to remove most of the excess wood on both the top and the bottom of the counter and plane the nosing flush with a hand plane. That done, you can give your nosing any profile you like. I prefer a bullnose, so I use a ¾-in. radius round-over bit in a router fitted with a ½-in. collet. (I would not attempt it with a ¼-in. shank bit.) This is too big a cut to make in one pass, so I make two passes on each edge. To minimize tearout, I run the router from right to left for the first cut, then finish it off in the opposite direction. After routing, I carefully sand the bullnose with an orbital sander, using 100-grit and then 150-grit paper. □

*Paul Levine is a cabinetmaker in Sherman, Conn., and author of Making Kitchen Cabinets (Taunton Press, 1988) from which this article is adapted. Photos by the author.*



**It's a nose, not a lip.** After the glue has dried, run a router fitted with a 1-in. trimmer bit along the face to trim edging nearly flush. Then shave the stock flush with a block plane.

**Taming the wild edges.** Butt-jointed edging is applied long, then trimmed on the table saw. A block of plywood provides a reference edge.