

A Classic Finish for

Layering stain, shellac, glaze, and polyurethane creates a gorgeous look with an old-style feel

BY TIM LEAHY

One way to create a wood floor that looks old is to install flooring made from reclaimed or salvaged lumber. But if the high price, long lead time, and limited availability of antique flooring put you off, there's another option that my company likes a lot. By using a combination of stains, glazes, and clear topcoats, it's possible to give a newly laid wood floor a convincing antique appearance. You can effect this transformation using standard finishes and equipment available from any paint supplier or home center.

The technique discussed here was done on quartersawn white oak and works best on open-pore woods like oak, hickory, and ash. Starting with a level sanded surface is important, as is making sure you have all the resources necessary to tackle a floor-finishing project—including extra help. Because some finishes (shellac, for instance) dry quickly, it's wise to have more than one person applying them.

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WATER OPENS THE PORES

STEP 1 Wetting bare wood with water sounds like a bad thing to do, but it can be beneficial to the overall look of the floor's finish. When wet, the wood's pores open, allowing the color to penetrate for a richer, deeper tone. Use a 50/50 mix of

denatured alcohol and distilled water, though water alone works, too. The alcohol quickens the drying time, but be sure the room is ventilated sufficiently. Don't use tap water, because it contains minerals that adversely affect the coloring process.

The floor should be wet but not soaked. Application goes quickly with a sponge or mop. Allow the floor to dry for two to four hours, then lightly sand off the raised fibers by hand using 180-grit sandpaper. Vacuum the floor before continuing to the next step.

a New Wood Floor



STEP 2

OIL-BASED STAIN SETS THE TONE

One coat provides a base color that will be refined or toned by the glaze coat that follows. I use oil-based stains for the base because I like the richness they provide. Latex stains are fine, but the tones aren't nearly as

rich. Although dyes can be used, they are tough to apply uniformly to large unfinished surfaces. To arrive at the custom color for this project, I mixed a gallon of Minwax's Colonial Maple with a gallon of Golden Pecan stain.

Apply the stain liberally. With the walls protected by resin paper and tape, use a brush to cut in around the edges and a lamb's-wool applicator to spread stain over larger areas of the floor. Spread the stain uniformly; don't let pools develop.

Don't let the stain sit. After a minute or two, wipe stained areas with soft cloths (100% cotton cloths work best). The longer the stain sits, the darker the color gets, which lessens the contrast with the glaze coat. Give the stain a final wipe in the direction of the grain.

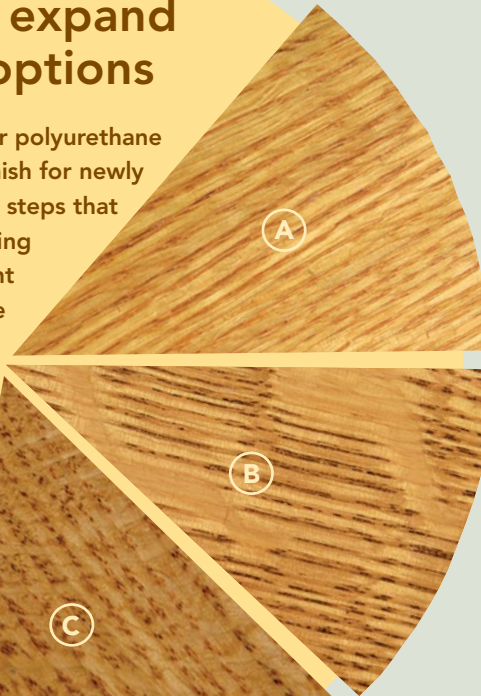


WORK SAFELY

Safety precautions are crucial when using all finishing products, especially oil-based finishes. Read all the instructions on the cans of finish you use. Make sure the room has good ventilation; if good ventilation isn't possible, wear a chemical respirator equipped with filter cartridges rated for use with organics, vapors, and solvents (OVS). Minimize skin contact by wearing protective gloves, and remember that oil-soaked rags and sawdust pose a serious fire hazard. Place these materials in an airtight, water-filled container, and dispose of them in accordance with local fire regulations.

Glazes expand your options

An oil-based stain with a clear polyurethane topcoat is a common floor finish for newly sanded wood (A). The added steps that I take highlight the grain, giving the wood a richer look. A light stain followed by a dark glaze coat (B) celebrates the wood's figure the most. A dark stain combined with a dark glaze (C) also can have a dramatic effect. Be sure to test your ideas first on a scrap piece of flooring.



SANDING SEALER LOCKS IN THE COLOR

STEP 3 Use dewaxed shellac sanding sealer, which can be topcoated with almost any finish; traditional shellac contains a wax that can keep some topcoats from adhering. The sealer locks in the base color and enhances the grain definition in the wood, but straight from the can, it is too thick for this process. A sealer coat that's too thick won't allow the glaze coat to penetrate sufficiently.

I use a 1-lb. cut, or thinned mix, of the dewaxed shellac. I thin the shellac with denatured alcohol, following the directions on the can.



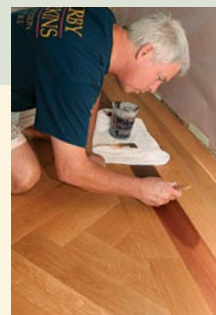
Apply a thin, even coat. You can apply the shellac with a brush or synthetic pad, but I prefer to spray it on because spraying is faster than other methods. Whatever technique you use, don't apply a thick coat. The sealer dries fast, so work quickly and maintain a wet edge. Depending on humidity level and temperature, the floor will be ready to sand in two to three hours.



Sorry, but hand-sanding works best. The purpose here is to scuff-sand the sealer to a dull finish. I do this by hand because I am less likely to penetrate either of the preceding layers. Although 220-grit sandpaper does the job, fine sanding sponges work better because they don't clog as easily. Vacuum the floor completely after sanding.

A GLAZE COAT POPS THE WOOD'S FIGURE

STEP 4 A coat of colored glaze highlights the grain and pore structure of the wood. The effect can be mild, extreme, or anywhere in between. For this step, I mixed a quart of Aged Oak with a quart of Walnut gel stain (quart is the largest size available). Gel stains are easy to use and dry overnight. The color of the gel stain directly affects the overall outcome and look of the finish. A glaze much darker than the base color creates a more dramatic effect than a similar color (see sidebar, p. 61). The overall process is similar to applying the base coat, except that the gel should be applied only with a brush.



Touch up the border with gel stain

The mahogany border here is a nice accent, but it had some lighter boards that looked awkward next to darker ones. I used a gel stain that closely matched the darker boards to stain the lighter boards. Gel stains are easy to control, almost like paint. Lightly feather the color back into the darker boards with a brush. Test small areas first to see how the stain matches.



Force the color into the pores. Using a 4-in. natural-bristle brush, apply the gel stain liberally. Spread only as much as you can reach from one spot without moving your position. Then use two cotton cloths to wipe up the stain: one for the initial wipe and a second, cleaner cloth for the final wipe. Let the glaze coat dry for 12 to 14 hours before applying the final polyurethane coats.



CLEAR POLYURETHANE PROTECTS THE FINISH

STEP 5

I prefer to use oil-based polyurethane as a topcoat for floors because of its proven durability. A minimum of three coats provides years of trouble-free service. Here, I used two coats of clear gloss to start because I like the clarity it provides. I followed with one coat of satin for a hand-rubbed look.

After the first coat dries, lightly scuff the floor with a fine sanding sponge, which removes bits of dust or small imperfections from previous layers. Vacuum and wipe the floor with a tack cloth. Repeat the process for the second coat; then apply the satin.



MATERIALS

OIL-BASED STAIN

MINWAX WOOD FINISH
Colonial Maple (#223) mixed
with Golden Pecan (#245)

One gallon (\$25.99) covers about 500 sq. ft.
www.minwax.com

SANDING SEALER

ZINSSER UNIVERSAL SANDING SEALER
SealCoat

One gallon (\$29.99) covers about 400 sq. ft.
www.zinsser.com

GEL STAIN

MINWAX GEL STAIN
Aged Oak (#602) mixed with Walnut (#606)

One quart (\$11.99) covers about 200 sq. ft.
www.minwax.com

CLEAR POLYURETHANE

ZAR INTERIOR POLYURETHANE
Clear Gloss, Clear Satin

One gallon (\$32.99) covers about 500 sq. ft.
www.zar.com

Tips for a smooth finish



When working in humid or cold weather, add Japan Drier to help speed the drying time of oil-based finishes.

A tack cloth removes fine particles that vacuuming tends to leave behind. The tack cloth can leave a sticky or oily residue, however, which can affect water-based finishes. **If applying water-based finishes, be sure to use tack cloths that are made for use with water-based products.**



Use preshrunk T-shirt-grade cotton rags. Run them through a laundry cycle before use to remove all loose fibers.



Slowly hand-stir the polyurethane. If you stir it fast by hand or with a mixer, air bubbles will form and make their way onto the floor's surface. Popped air bubbles create an orange-peel effect—which is exactly what you don't want.

To remove any loose fibers, run the pad of a lamb's-wool applicator through a laundry cycle before using it to apply polyurethane. If you don't have time to throw it in the washer and dryer, vacuum the applicator.

