

A Custom Finish for

Layers of dye and glaze add instant character to an inexpensive interior door

BY PETER GEDRYS

More often than not, wood interior and exterior doors are finished using a premixed pigment stain. To be perfectly honest, the results are typically less than stellar. The stain ends up too dark, the wood grain becomes muddy and obscured, or the overall finish is blotchy.

Besides, there is more to finishing than just changing the color of wood. I don't care if you are working with poplar or mahogany. By first understanding the finishing products available to you (sidebar p. 46) and by learning how to combine them in creative ways, you can go beyond a remedial finish and dramatically improve the final product. Even a brand-new pine slab door like the one featured here—found in a lumberyard clearance pile—can be finished with a warm, antique glow.

Get a feel for sanding

If the door is already installed, I suggest you pop it off its hinges and bring it to your shop, your garage, or another well-ventilated area of your house, then lay it flat on sawhorses.

Don't make the mistake of assuming that a store-bought door will be ready for finish. Every square inch of wood needs to be sanded, wet down, then sanded again.

On a softwood like pine, I start sanding with 150-grit paper; harder woods should begin with 120 grit. I occasionally use an orbital sander for the initial sanding, but not when I switch to higher grits. If you use an orbital sander for the first pass, make sure to remove any swirl marks. Keep in mind that nothing can get into the details on a door as well as a piece of handheld sandpaper.

It can be hard to see which areas of the wood are rough and which are well-sanded, but it's easy to feel the difference. I sand with one hand and run my other hand lightly over the surface to determine which areas need more attention.

After the first sanding, I dampen the door with a wet cloth to raise the grain; then I do a second round of sanding. I sometimes use a finer grit to ease any sharp edges, but otherwise, there's rarely a reason to go higher than 180 grit. Finally, I clean the door with a vacuum or blow it clear with an air compressor; then I wipe it down with a lint-free cloth to remove all sawdust from the surface of the wood.

Use a dye for background color

Now that the door is sanded, it's ready for the first layer of color: a dye stain. I prefer to work with powdered dyes

Affordable Doors

STEP 1 SAND AND WASH

Sand, raise the grain, then sand again. After a light sanding with 150-grit sandpaper, wipe the surface of the door with a wet cloth to raise the grain. Then begin a second round of sanding with 150-grit sandpaper, working your way up to 180 grit. It can be hard to gauge sanding progress by eye, so run your free hand over the surface of the door to feel which areas need more attention. For best results, sand with the grain. Use a wooden block as a backer for sanding the flat areas, and crease the sandpaper as needed to work into the door's details.

Prep the wood with a wash coat. To help control the penetration of the dye, first use a pad to apply a wash coat of shellac or water. For an even-colored look, use shellac (shown here), which seals the wood surface. If you want to create more definition between light and dark areas, use distilled water instead of shellac. The water simply soaks the pores of the wood so that the dye can be absorbed more predictably.



because they are much more economical than liquid dyes, and I find that powder gives me much better control over color strength. A typical mixture is 1 oz. of powder dissolved in 1 qt. of warm distilled water; this mixture then can be altered to achieve the strength desired. I prefer to mix batches of dye at double strength (2 oz. of dye to 1 qt. of water), then add water as needed to get the look I'm after.

To help control the penetration of the dye so that the entire surface of the door absorbs the same, I first apply a thin wash coat. For this project, I used shellac—3 parts of denatured alcohol to 1 part 2-lb. cut shellac. Distilled water also can be used; your choice depends on the look you are trying to achieve. A wash coat of shellac partially seals the surface of the door and controls the penetration of the color. Water, though, soaks into the pores of the wood, helping to control the absorption of the dye and creating more variation between light and dark areas.

Seal the dye, and apply the glaze

Regardless of whether you used shellac or water as the initial wash coat to seal the bare wood, use shellac to create a thin film finish over the dye in preparation for the glaze coat that comes next. Remember, shellac dries faster than oil-based products, so it becomes tacky quickly. Coat the surface with as few brush strokes as necessary to cover the wood, then leave it alone. On the plus side, quick drying time means that I can apply three coats in under an hour. There's no need for sanding between coats, but you do need to sand the final coat lightly with 220-grit sandpaper and wipe the door surface in preparation for the glaze coat.

A water-based stain can be used for the glaze, but oil stains dry more slowly, which makes blending easier. Whether it's water- or oil-based, don't use a conventional liquid penetrating stain; it's too thin and doesn't have as much depth of color.

STEP 2 DYE AND SEAL

Don't be intimidated; dye is simple. Add 2 oz. of dye to 1 qt. of clean water, and stir the mixture until the powder dissolves. Then smear a sample onto a white paper plate to check the strength of the color. If the mixture is too weak, add more dye. Too strong, add more water.



Add dye for background color. Use a fresh pad to apply dye to the panels, then to the rails, and finally to the stiles. Use a small brush for covering the detailed profiles and for removing dye from corners, where it tends to pool (inset photo).



Dry dye looks dull. Once dry, the dye will leave the door with a flat, dull appearance. This will change after the seal coat is applied next. Regardless of whether water or shellac is used for the wash coat, the seal coat should be shellac. Apply it with a brush or pad, taking care not to lift the dye. Apply three coats, lightly sanding only after the last coat.



STEP 3 APPLY GLAZE

When it comes to glaze, less is more. A glaze coat doesn't need to be thick. A few ounces goes a long way, so don't mix a big batch unless you need it. A basic recipe is 1 part glaze base, 1 part mineral spirits, and 2 parts gel stain. A pad is best for applying this coat, but a brush or cloth is fine, too. Again, work sequentially, starting with the panels, then the rails, and finally the stiles.

Few things are as forgiving as a glaze. As the glaze is applied, use a clean, soft brush to feather out any application marks and to even the color. If any light-colored areas need a bit of extra darkening, dab them with a pad or brush, then remove the excess. If at any point you're not happy with the look of the glaze, you can wipe it off with a clean cloth before it dries. Once you're OK with the look, let the glaze dry, and add a clear top coat.



STEP 4 TOP COAT

Seal the deal with shellac and wax. For a nice tactile surface, use a top coat of shellac followed by a coat of paste wax applied with 0000 steel wool to create a softer sheen. Finally, buff out the wax with a soft, lint-free cloth. The finished door will have a wonderful surface that is a pleasure to touch.



The beauty is in the layers

When people talk about buying a can of stain, they are probably referring to a group of oil- or water-based products known as pigment stains. If you mention the word *dye*, though, people are intimidated. Don't be afraid. A dye is just another type of stain, a colored powder or liquid mixed with water. It's that simple.

The effect of stained wood is similar to looking through a window covered with a thin sheet of plastic; you can still see the grain, but it's muddy and somewhat blurred (photo top left). Unlike these semi-opaque pigment stains, dye is transparent. In other words, dye is like the same window without the plastic covering; you can clearly see the wood grain and color.

By layering the dye and the stain on the same piece, you can create virtually any look. For instance, when applied over a base coat of medium-yellow dye, the same Georgian Cherry gel stain in the photo above now complements the dye to create a deep, glowing finish.

Glowing brown isn't your thing? No problem. By using the same medium-yellow dye base coat but altering the color of gel stain used for the glaze, you can tweak the appearance of the finish to suit your taste.

FROM BLAH TO BEAUTIFUL



SAME DYE, DIFFERENT LOOKS



That said, gel stains used out of the can are a bit too thick. I like to thin the gel slightly and extend its working time by mixing in a bit of clear glaze base. I typically do this mixing by eye—adding just enough of the glaze base to create a creamy consistency—but a basic recipe is 1 part glaze base, 1 part mineral spirits, and 2 parts gel stain.

The glaze mixture can be applied using a brush, a paper towel, or a pad. You also can manipulate the glaze to achieve different looks. The glaze can be feathered with a dry brush to create a soft, even color, removed in the center of a panel and pulled into the corners, or pounced with a brush to create light and dark areas where desired. Have fun with it. If you don't like what you see, simply wipe the surface before it dries, and start again. If the surface has started to become tacky, wet a paper towel or a rag with mineral spirits to remove the glaze easily from the sealed surface. Once you have the surface glazed, let it sit for at least a day prior to finishing.

Lock in the glaze with a clear coat

Before applying the final protective clear coat, it's a good idea to seal or lock in the glaze with another application of shellac. The shellac can be sprayed, brushed, or padded on, but take care with brushing and padding because these application techniques can lift the glaze in areas if you are too aggressive.

The top coat can be polyurethane, varnish, lacquer, or additional coats of shellac followed by a coat of paste wax, which is what I did for the project shown here. Avoid using penetrating finishes such as boiled linseed oil for the final clear coat. This type of finish needs to soak into the surface of the wood to cure properly, and the layers of shellac prevent this penetration, leaving you with a sticky mess. □

Peter Gedrys is a professional finisher in East Haddam, Conn. Photos by Justin Fink.

SHOPPING LIST

Finishing materials vary based on the look you want to achieve. Here are the supplies you need to finish the door shown here.

POWDER DYE

Early American Maple, medium yellow, about \$7 per oz. www.wdlockwood.com

SHELLAC

Zinsser's SealCoat, \$11 per qt. www.zinsser.com

OIL-BASED GEL STAIN

Brown Mahogany, \$11 per pt. www.generalfinishes.com



ALKYD GLAZE BASE

Benjamin Moore #409, \$15 per qt. www.benjaminmoore.com

CLEAR PASTE WAX

Liberon Black Bison fine paste wax, \$20 www.liberon.com.au

0000 STEEL WOOL

Four-pack of pads, \$12 www.liberon.com.au