

DECORATIVE BLEACHING

Enliven your work with two-part bleach

BETTY SCARPINO

I TOOK MY FIRST TENTATIVE STEPS AT bleaching wood three years ago when the silver maple wood I had harvested turned gray. This color not being at all what I had in mind for small bowls and not wanting to discard what was otherwise useful material, I decided to try bleaching part of a turned bowl. The resulting contrast between the gray and white tones brought the piece alive with visual interest.

Expanding upon my initial success, I decided to try bleaching parts of other species of wood. The raised band of turned grooves or beads that I bleach on walnut plates is striking and provides a nice highlight on the darker wood. Adding a bit of carving through the grooves or beads, revealing the unbleached wood beneath, makes the band look similar to inlay.

I don't care for the final color that Osage orange ages to, turning from a beautiful golden yellow to a yellowish brown with exposure to light. I discovered that bleaching an entire Osage vessel highlights the difference in the density of growth rings, creating a dramatic effect. That effect is further dramatized when turned beads are added, as in the vessel in the photo far right.

The process of bleaching is relatively straightforward. Several different brands of two-part bleach for lightening wood are available in many hardware and woodworking stores. (There are two other types of bleach that can be used on wood. Chlorine bleach will bleach dye in wood, and oxalic acid will remove rust and water stains. Neither is appropriate for bleaching the wood itself.) Two-part bleach consists of sodium hydroxide and hydrogen peroxide, which are either mixed together or applied separately, de-

pending upon the directions supplied with the type you purchase.

Take seriously the warnings that accompany these directions. Wear gloves and goggles and provide plenty of ventilation. Although the fumes cannot be smelled, they will burn your skin and eyes. Imagine what would happen if the bleach itself splashed into your eyes!

To achieve good results when bleaching only part of a piece, turn a raised band of grooves or beads for the section that is to be bleached. Make sure that there is a small groove at the beginning and end of each band, which will help keep the bleach from flowing to the wood that is not to be bleached. Apply the bleach with a cotton swab, dabbing it on. After all of the band is wet, allow the piece to dry. Repeat the process if you like. I generally bleach walnut and maple bands twice.

To bleach a whole piece, simply saturate the wood with bleach. Set it aside to dry and repeat as desired.

As you might suspect, there are a number of "tips" that will help you

achieve success and avoid pitfalls:

- Bleaching an entire piece more than three times could cause some turnings to check or crack, particularly in the end grain. Osage orange requires at least ten bleachings to achieve significant results, and fortunately it holds up well.
- Bleach will seep through the end-grain sides of thin bowls and discolor patches on the inside. Make thicker-walled vessels, or bleach the whole piece, or blacken the inside.
- Bleaching does not "hide" technical defects. Sanding scratches and torn end grain will still show.
- Placing the wet piece in the sun speeds up the bleaching and drying process.
- Have a vinegar solution available at all times to neutralize any spills, especially if bleach has splashed onto your skin. (UPDATE: Use water to wash the bleach away, especially if it gets into your eyes.)
- Any type of metal such as bits of steel wool left on your bowl will cause a stain because of the interaction of bleach and metal. Use a glass container to mix the two-part bleach before application.



Bleach accents the beads on the author's walnut plate, "Four Connections," left. Bleaching all of the Osage orange vessel, above, highlights the graphic grain pattern.

- If you accidentally drop a spot of bleach in an area that is not going to be bleached, wipe it dry immediately.

- The directions call for neutralizing with a solution of vinegar and water after each application of bleach. I don't find that necessary. Also, I don't neutralize the surface when I'm finished with the process. Be aware, however, that the white "dust" from the bleaching process is still slightly active when moistened. Don't get it into your eyes or nose!

After you have bleached the piece or part of it and the wood is thoroughly dry, brush or sand off the white powder residue of bleach. Apply finish as you generally do. For my walnut plates, I use an oil finish, such as Deftoil. Lighter pieces get finished with lacquer. The finish will darken the bleached area somewhat, just as it does wood in general.

If you want to keep a whiter appearance, experiment with simply waxing the surface or with adding a very small amount of universal white color to lacquer before applying. Or you can leave the piece unfinished, although unfinished bleached pieces will pick up oils from handling.

Bleaching is simply another technique or process under the larger category of "working with wood." A broad range of effects are possible. You will apply this process to your work differently than I do and achieve results that complement your own style of turning. Start your experimenting with small pieces. I often try new techniques on the production tops that I make. That way, if I don't like the results, I have not invested lots of time figuring out what works and what does not.

Betty Scarpino, of Indianapolis, IN, will demonstrate her bleaching, texturing, and carving techniques at the AAW symposium, "Turning Ten," in Greensboro June 22-24.

UPDATE:

- I have found that the best woods to bleach are ash, maple, walnut, box elder, Osage orange, holly. Woods that don't retain the bleached whiteness: oak, butternut, many exotic woods.
- Over time, all bleached wood will darken, but for bleached elements on walnut, maple, ash, for instance, the contrast between bleached and non-bleached areas will remain.
- There is a shelf life for wood bleach, but it can be quite a few years (longer if unopened). If you are discovering that the bleach just isn't working, it simply may be expired.
- You can make your own wood bleach from fairly common chemicals. *American Woodturner* has one article on making your own, and there are many other tutorials on the Internet and in various woodworking forums.