Polishes

Traditional Finishes Series

Don Jones - Customer Care Team
Email: djones@carbatec.com.au

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Introduction

Furniture polishes are pastes, creams, or lotions used to clean, protect, and shine wooden furniture. These products were originally made from natural waxes, which were often hard to apply and over time, tended to build up on the surface.

Wood has been used for ages for making furniture. As a natural material, wood is vulnerable to the effects of aging which means it can become dried out, cracked, or stained. For thousands of years, people have recognized the usefulness of coating wooden surfaces with oils, balms, and unguents.

Today these formulations combine natural waxes and oils usually with petroleum based ingredients and synthetic polymers. These modern formulations can clean the film residue and lay down new polish in a single step so periodic stripping of old polish layers is not necessary, which was often a requirement in the 18th and 19 centuries.

A core ingredient of many traditional polishes has been beeswax. In 1797, a natural plant wax, called carnauba wax, was discovered on the leaves of the Brazilian cerara palm. Carnauba wax is tough, high melting and, when properly compounded, imparts a fine shine without all the buffing required by beeswax. By the late nineteenth century, other waxes were discovered and polishes were developed that utilized blends of carnauba with ouricui, candelilla, esparto, sugar cane, cotton fiber, flax, palm, hemp and raffia waxes.

Polish Formulations

Furniture polishes are designed with a blend of waxes and oils because no one single ingredient provides all the desired properties in the polish. For example, in theory, a 20% paste of carnauba wax should produce the best gloss but in reality this mixture is gritty and hard to spread. It is beneficial to add different waxes that may not add appreciable gloss, but which will modify the spreading properties of the waxes with the more desirable characteristics.

Solvents and other materials may play an important role in the product's consistency as well. Factors to consider when formulating furniture polish include hardness, buffability, flexibility and mechanical strength, water proofing, stain resistance. Cost and ease of manufacture are important considerations was well.

Some polishes are designed for specific types of wood, others are primarily intended to add protective shine, and still others are made to also to clean, restore surface integrity and remove dust.

Traditional Formulations

Most traditional formulations are based on beeswax and a solvent like turpentine. The goal of “waxing” furniture is to keep the surface visually appealing, provide a level of protection for the surface and to keep the wood nourished so that it does not unduly dry out and crack.

It is also the combination of wax and natural grease and oxidation that forms the patination that is so desirable on antique furniture. Patination is in one sense a form of corrosion, particularly on metals such as bronze. Patination of wood is the coloration that comes with age and maintenance over an extended period.

One of the common misconceptions with waxing is that the more frequently a piece is waxed, the fuller the finish will be. In reality, over-waxing usually results in smeary surfaces. This is because wax softens wax. The only remedy for over-waxed surfacs is to remove all the wax and begin afresh.

How To Wax

Flat Surfaces
Apply a thin layer of wax using a soft cloth impregnated with the chosen wax. Never apply a too thick layer, as this will simply make the rubbing up more difficult and time consuming.

After the initial application, even out the wax using a soft brush like those used to polish shoes. Take care not to mark the surface and make sure you work along the direction of the grain. Use long, steady strokes, working from one side of the surface to the other.

Allow the wax to harden for a few minutes (have a cup of tea or coffee), then buff the surface vigorously with a soft cloth, working in the direction of the grain. Finally, use a clean cloth to give the surface a final burnish.

Carved Surfaces
Due to the nature of the hollows and relief, it is better to apply a thin coat of wax with a soft brush, making sure that it is neither too hard nor too soft. I usually recommend a soft shoe polishing brush or similar.

Allow the wax to harden for a few minutes, then gently burnish the carving with a soft brush. This will remove any surplus wax and even out what remains. Finally, buff the highlights using a soft cloth. Make sure the type of cloth is lint free.

Polishing Damaged Surfaces

If the damage to a surface is extensive, it will usually have to be stripped back. For shellac finishes, this can be done with methyl alcohol. If the surface finish is a plastic poly surface, it may require extensive remedial work to repair. As a general rule, the following steps will apply.

1. Remove the old polish and wax surface with a fine steel wool and methylated spirits.

2. Once the old polish and wax have been removed, wash off the surface with a soft cloth and methylated spirits.

3. Polish the surface using the replacement finish, e.g. shellac or oil. In this step, it is important to "body up" the surface which is the filling of the grain. Leave for 24 hours.

4. When the polish has hardened, cut it back lightly using fine steel wool and working in the direction of the grain. Use light strokes to remove any raised nibs of polish. This also produces a smooth final finish.

5. Finally, apply a coat of wax. Use light strokes as the polished surface will still be delicate. Allow to stand for a week before use to allow the polish to fully harden and cure.

When polished, scratches should become invisible and the finish should last for years.

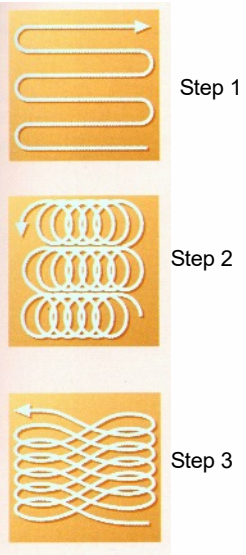
Polishing Tips and Terms

When polishing to "body up" the surface to fill the grain, the following pattern delivers best results:

Start by working across the grain in a looping side to side stroke. Try to keep the motion of the cloth in a steady motions so that excess polish does not clump in any one area.

Change the motion to a circular motion, again working across the grain and at the same time down the line of the grain. Again, try to keep the motion of the cloth fluid.

Thirdly change the motion to a scrolling motion across the surface. This motion will help complete the body up process. During this process, look for areas where the polish is too thin or too thick and give those areas special attention. The goal is always a smooth, even finish across the surface.



Navigating the Product Maze

Walk into any hardware or specialty retailer, and you are often confronted by a myriad of product options to finish and repair surfaces. As a general rule, the finishes and polishes will fall into the following broad categories:

Oil based Finishes - where the predominate ingredient is an oil - usually tung or linseed oils.

Wax based Finishes - where the predominate ingredient is a wax or combination of waxes.

Polymer based finishes - usually based on a plastic or synthetic resin.

Most of the wax based and oil based finishes and polishes use a solvent to "carry" the finish. The most common is turpentine, although the availability of turpene solvents is increasing due to the harsh odor that turpentine based solvents exhibit. Most manufacturers will describe on their product labels or Material safety Data Sheets the predominate ingredient and safety handing instructions.

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Customer Care Team:
1800 658 111