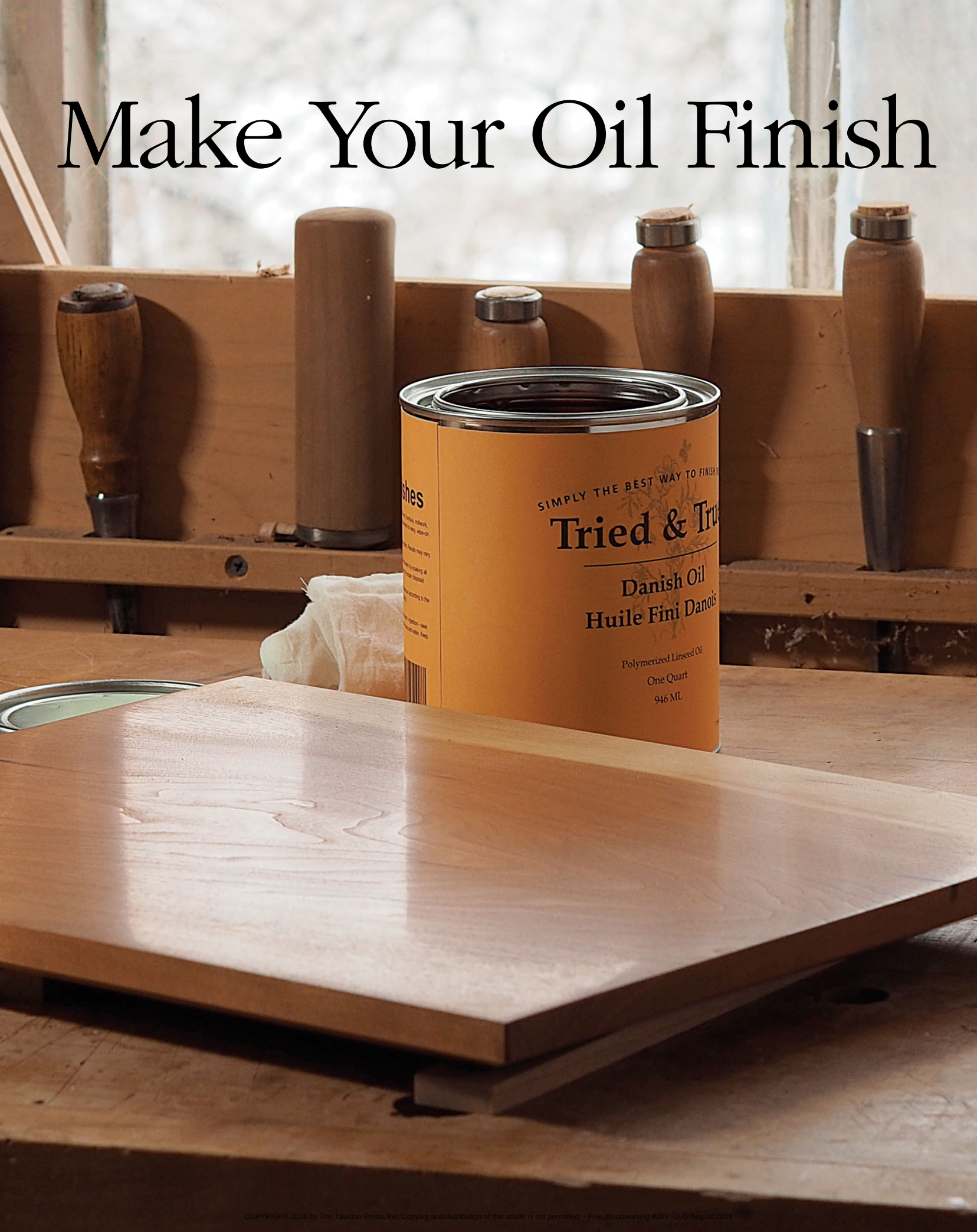
Make Your Oil Finish



Shine

Get a sheen from oil without sacrificing its pleasant feel

BY ADAM GODET

The first time I used an oil finish, I was disappointed that it lacked the attractive sheen of a film finish. The pieces generally had little to no luster and looked amateurish. Buffing improved things, but only temporarily. With some experimentation, however, I discovered that getting a beautiful sheen with an oil finish is a snap with some extra sanding steps. I typically use Tried & True Danish Oil, an all-natural linseed oil with no solvents or metallic dryers. It's a straightforward, easy finish that maintains the feel of wood and won't harm your health. But my sanding process can be used with any oil finish.

Why an oil finish?

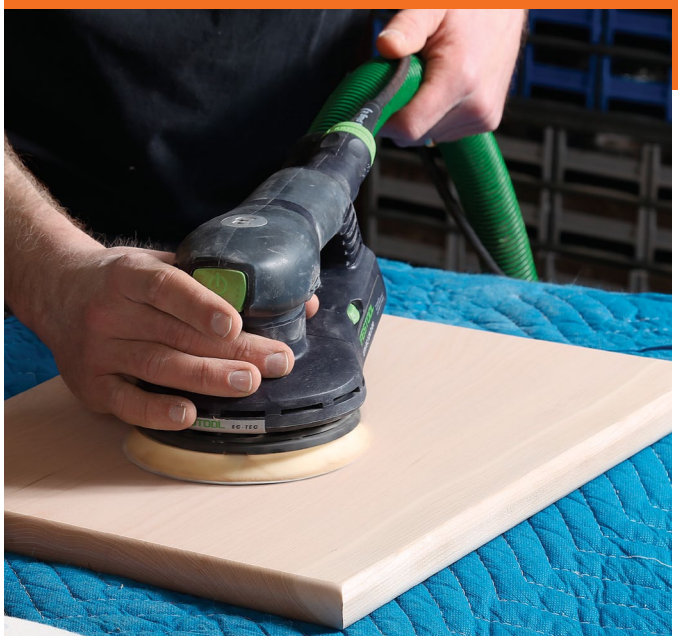
The main reason I prefer oil finishes to film ones is simply that they are more pleasant to touch. When your hand feels the object, you feel the wood. Because of this, I especially like this finish for pieces that people touch often.

The other reasons are more practical. The first is ease of application. Film finishes require a dust-free environment, so if you don't have a separate finishing area, you have to carefully vacuum surfaces and keep dust down in your shop as the finish is drying and curing. Because Danish oil is a penetrating finish rather than a film, any dust that lands on your project during finishing can be wiped away.

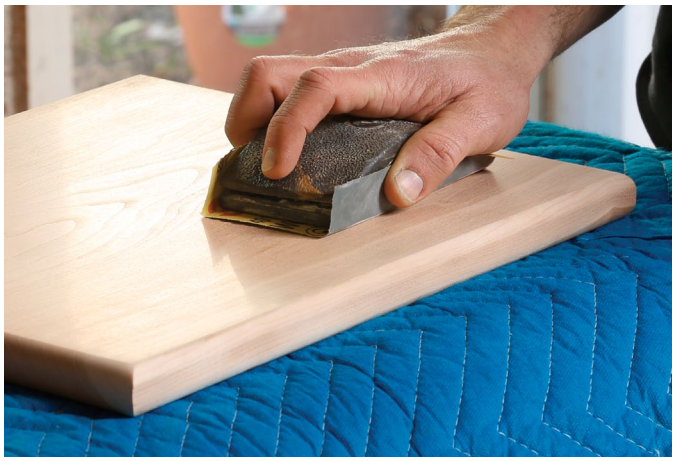
The absence (or low volume, depending on the oil) of volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and solvents is another benefit. Plus, low/no-VOC Danish oils without solvents have very little odor.

A GOOD FINISH STARTS WITH GOOD PREP

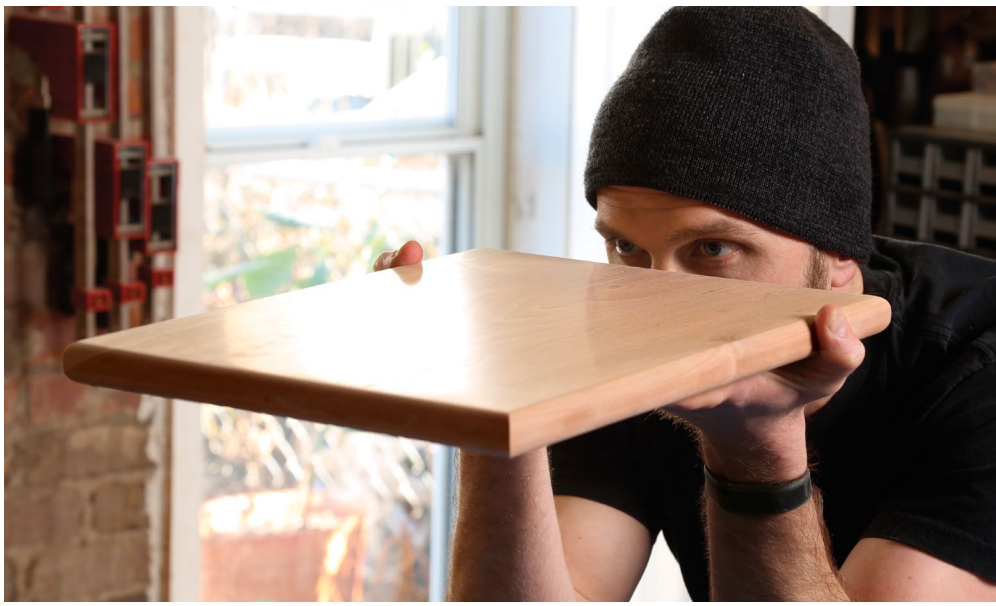
To make an oil finish shine, first make the wood shine.



Use your favorite method to start. *Whether you handplane the surface or sand it by hand or machine, you will want to get it as flat as possible.*



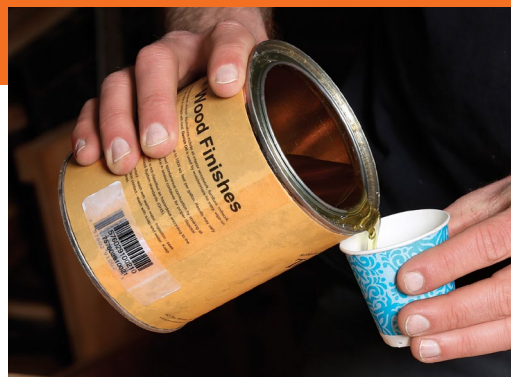
Finish by hand. *After multiple intermediate steps, Godet always ends by hand-sanding with 2,000-grit wet-or-dry sandpaper (left). He gets a mirror-polished surface that, when held in raking light, shows detailed, full-color reflections (below).*



Photo, opposite: Michael Pekovich

FOOLPROOF APPLICATION

Two to four coats are all that stand between you and a gorgeous luster.



Small doses. *Godet uses a new cup for each coat. The cups are easy to handle, prevent waste, and keep him from contaminating the oil in the can.*

Thin coats with a clean cotton rag. *What does a thin coat look like? As you apply the first coat, you should see the oil penetrating the piece. If there are standing pools even after a few minutes, you've probably used too much. Just wipe these off.*

Wipe and buff. *After the first coat, wait about 30 to 60 minutes before rubbing out the piece with a larger rag. Then, let the piece sit for about 12 to 24 hours, rub it out again with a fresh rag, and apply the next coat. Godet normally applies two to four coats.*

Finally, there's repairability. Film finishes can become chipped, scratched, or otherwise damaged, and can be a pain to fix. Oil finishes are less durable—one of their weaknesses—but a scratch or chip on a piece of furniture with an oil finish is on the wood itself, meaning you can more easily sand, scrape, or otherwise address the area and then reapply the oil. Also, small water spots can be buffed and sanded out.

If the piece will see a lot of use, consider adding dewaxed shellac over the oil. I did this on my dining table a couple of years ago, and the top still looks great. Shellac is a film finish, but it shares the environmentally friendly aspects of Danish oil. Similarly, a light coat of beeswax provides a thin layer of protection, and it can make cleaning the piece a little easier.

Prep carefully for finest results

To make your oil finish shine, you want a surface that is as flat as possible, free of any dips, tearout, or other small imperfections. How you get there—handplaning, sanding, scraping—is up to you.

I prefer to start with a smoothing plane on flat surfaces and sandpaper on contoured edges. To prepare for film finishes, most people sand up to 180- or 220-grit or use their smoothing plane. This is because a film finish, which rests on the wood, self-levels, so with enough layers, any surface irregularities get filled and smoothed over. To get a good sheen with an oil finish, which penetrates, you have to go beyond 220-grit—essentially using the

TIP SAFETY FIRST

Oily rags present a fire hazard. You should always read and follow the product's safety warnings and instructions for disposal. Generally, Godet soaks the used rags in a bucket of water, which he keeps handy so he can drop in the rag as each coat is done. When he's finished, the used rags go in a plastic bag that he then fills with water, ties up, and puts in the garbage can outside. A sealable jar or other container filled with water also works.

Photos, except where noted: Barry NM Dima

AN OIL FINISH IS EASILY REPAIRED

Unlike other finishes, which need to be stripped, oil finishes are simple to repair or rejuvenate.

Water spots get rubbed out. *To work out white spots caused by moisture, Godet starts with fine steel wool (right) and ends with 2,000-grit sandpaper (far right), again looking to rejuvenate the piece's mirror shine.*

sandpaper to burnish the surface. In other words, to get a sheen with an oil finish, first make the wood shine.

My preferred method is to sand up to 2,000-grit with wet-or-dry sandpaper. If you've already gone over the piece with your smoother, you can usually start with 320- or 400-grit to remove any plane tracks. But if you'd rather forgo handplaning, begin with 80- or 120-grit depending on the severity of the machine marks.

However you begin, work up to 400-grit. Then jump to 1,000—I haven't found an intervening grit necessary—and finish with 2,000. I get best results when I hand-sand with a sanding block for these last three grits, but on larger pieces, I have also had success going up to 1,000-grit on a random-orbit sander and then hand-sanding with 2,000. This may sound time-consuming and painful, but these higher grits don't take long to work through and the extra sanding really pays off. What you're looking for after all this sanding is a surface so smooth it shows detailed reflections in raking light.

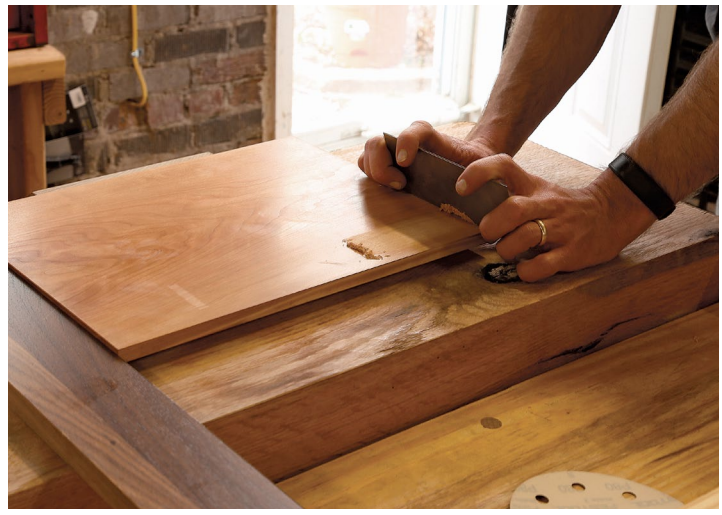
If your piece has profiled edges, work through all of the grits on those edges before sanding the flat surfaces. Also, spend extra time on the end grain to make sure it has a similar tone and color to the edge grain when you apply the finish.

I don't use 0000 steel wool as the final step before applying oil. I find the surface is slightly smoother when I use sandpaper, and I've had issues with steel-wool dust sticking in more porous woods, which can be hard to remove.

Application is nearly foolproof

Once you've established the surface, you're ready to apply the oil. At this point, it's hard to mess up. Just be sure the work surface is clean and apply thin coats with a rag, rubbing out the piece 30 to 60 minutes after a coat and then again 12 to 24 hours later, when it's ready for another oiling. Two to four coats usually work best. Two gives me the minimum protection I want and a nice sheen, but three is often the sweet spot thanks to the extra buffing. Four coats are often necessary with open-pore woods. After the last coat, wait a few days before using the piece. □

Adam Godet is a woodworker in Washington, D.C.



Deep scratches, gouges, and dents require scraping. *More severe damage requires more work, but it's always simply a matter of returning to the prior luster.*

Re-oil. *With the underlying wood repaired and re-smoothed, apply thin coats of oil to the affected area.*