

THE "JOY" OF TURNING: Detergent Stabilization

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When I read in one of the national journals about a way to stabilize green wood without extended drying times, I had to try it. So often when I had a beautiful piece of green wood on the lathe, I could see the finished piece in my mind. I really wanted to turn all the way to finish but couldn't because of the drying process we've become accustomed to.

Stabilization with detergent allows you to turn to finished dimension immediately. The wet wood turns faster and you receive the instant gratification of taking a piece directly to its final shape.

The process

Buy lots of cheap liquid dish detergent. There is some discussion about brands, but I couldn't tell any difference. I bought the clearest detergent I could find on the off chance that the blue or green ones might discolor the wood.

In the articles I've read, the suggested proportions range from 100% detergent to 10:1 detergent to water. I ended up with a 5:1 proportion and that has worked fine.

To cover the larger bowls that I turn, I bought plastic trash cans with lids and stacked the bowls inside. The lid helps lessen evaporation. Experience taught me to soak the light and the dark woods in separate trash cans. The pigment of the dark woods remains in the liquid and it darkens any lighter woods that are subsequently put into the mix. One drawback of this method is that even the light woods seem to darken somewhat. I've wondered if bleaching the piece after it has dried would offset the detergent's darkening

it. If anyone has experience with this, let me know.

A 1/4" thick piece will need to soak for a minimum of two to three weeks. Generally, longer immersion is better to allow the detergent time to work into the wood. One forgotten trash can sat for nearly a year with no adverse effects. As a rule of thumb, air-dry the bowls for as long as they soaked. You'll need a rubber spatula for removing the goo from the bowls when you take them out.

Drying and sanding

When you chuck detergent-processed pieces back up on the lathe they are often distorted. You can sometimes face the top, squaring off the rim. As with all woods, these pieces tend to distort to oval. On the positive side, the ovalization of these pieces has often been graceful and interesting. My next experiment is to see if the oval of the bowls is controllable. Which species work better? Which thickness works better? Which grains work best?

After squaring off the rim, begin sanding. With the residual detergent lubricating the piece, detergent-soaked pieces sand nicely. Contrary to what you might expect, the sandpaper does not load up.

Finishing

I've tried both Quick 15 and lacquer with success. Both go on a little differently than they would go onto raw wood, but the results were acceptable.

If you've ever itched to turn green wood right down to finish, detergent stabilization offers a way to do it with few drawbacks.