

Secrets of Turning Back Yard Pine
Janice Levi

OBJECTIVE:

It is my hope that by using a few simple techniques, pine can become as pleasurable to turn as any other wood. The end results are so dramatic and the “secrets” are so easily applied that any turner can accomplish the task.

MATERIALS:

Pine—Slash, Loblolly, Japanese Black, etc. (Back yard varieties)

“Danish” oil soak

1 part Urethane or Polyurethane

1 part Boiled Linseed Oil

1 part Mineral Spirits

Concentrated Dish Washing Liquid (not automatic dish washer)

1:1 ratio of dish washing liquid to water. (This can vary slightly without ill effect.)

Paste Wax

TOOLS:

Roughing Gouge

Assorted Bowl Gouges

Assorted Spindle Gouges, including Detail Gouge

Skews

Parting Tools

Sand Paper (I like the Abranet for pine sanding)

Safety gear—glasses, full face shield, dust mask

SELECTING THE WOOD:

Pine will begin to spalt very quickly (within a month) after cutting, resulting in some dramatic blue and black effects. On occasion, the wood will even spalt a vibrant red color. When cutting the logs, take advantage of limb placement to be used in the bowl pattern. The combination of limb placement and spalting are what make the finished product so attractive. Once the logs are cut, apply end-grain sealer. I then use a sheet of waxed paper between the logs and restack them until I’m ready to use them. These logs will retain a great deal of moisture for several months, at least 4-5.

TURNING STEPS: (Wet wood)

1. The bowl will be turned end grain.
2. Remove the bark. I use a big screwdriver and a hammer.
3. Mount the log between centers using a spur drive. Ideally, the pith will be in the center of the log. If not, you have an artistic decision to make. The pith can be off-center, which creates some interesting effects or you can mount the blank pith to pith and simply cut away a large portion of the log.
4. Use the roughing rouge to create the cylinder and then turn a tenon on one end.
5. Re-mount the blank on your chuck. (I suppose you could use a face plate but pine is so soft, I would not choose to do so.) Re-tighten the chuck often as the pine fibers collapse somewhat during the turning process.
6. Here’s your next artistic/turning challenge:
 - a. With wet wood, you can go right ahead and turn the bowl to completion. There may be some warping and perhaps, some checking, or.....
 - b. You may choose to somewhat stabilize the wood by simply rough turning the bowl then using your dish washing liquid.
 - i. Rough turn the bowl (1” thickness to 10” of diameter)
 - ii. Liberally apply the dish washing liquid mixture with a brush to inside and outside, 5-6 times. Allow the wood’s surface to dry for several days and up to two weeks. The interior will still be somewhat wet.
 - iii. Turn the bowl to finished thickness.
7. Turning the wet wood bowl to finished thickness:
 - a. There are two ways to do this that I have used. The first method throws everything you ever learned about cutting end grain out the window.
 - i. I use a bowl gouge and shape the exterior of the bowl first.
 - ii. Once shaped, I sand out any tool marks using Abranet mesh sand paper.

- iii. I use a skew to cut the fibers at the top that will define the top edge and thickness of the bowl. Using the skew helps prevent tear-out.
 - iv. I then begin removing wood from the interior. I actually start at the outside edge, using very sharp tools. I primarily use a 3/8" bowl gouge but will also use a detail gouge for very light finishing cuts. (I know, I'm cutting against the fibers, but I can see the thickness all the way down the side of the bowl.)
 - v. Since we're turning wet wood, you can actually get away with using a scraper on the interior, either turned at a 45 degree angle or even flat. The cuts must be very light and the edge of the tool dulls quickly.
- b. The second method for hollowing the bowl that I have used is to hollow the inside first. I use the same tools—3/8" bowl gouge, scraper, detail gouge.
- i. Once the inside is hollowed and sanded, use a skew to cleanly define the upper edge of the bowl and the wall thickness.
 - ii. Position a light close to the inside of the bowl.
 - iii. Begin removing the exterior bowl wood with bowl gouge. (I don't prefer this method because you must "trust the light" and I prefer to see the wall thickness. Also, I have found that the shape I turned for the inside may not be exactly what I want for the outside.)
 - iv. Since you are wanting to display the translucency of the finished bowl, I like to turn the piece down to a small bottom, taking full advantage of the bowl's thinness.
 - v. How thin do you turn the bowl's wall? Start with about 1/8" and work toward thinner and thinner. You will have nice translucency even with 1/8" thickness.

TURNING STEPS: (Dry Wood)

1. If the wood has been cut for longer than 5-6 months, or if it has become very dry, you will need to apply the dishwashing mixture to the rough turned piece to revitalize the wood and strengthen the punky areas.
2. I have turned pine that has been sitting for over a year, was very punky and subject to tear-out, but the soaking with dishwashing liquid helps. Apply the dish washing mixture over a period of several days, allowing it to surface dry between applications.
3. Treating knots that want to fall out—CA glue will close the cells of the wood and leave an ugly stain, however, you can use CA glue if you generously dab on the Danish oil finish to the area to be glued before applying the glue. Don't apply accelerator as it will tend to create unsightly crystals. Rather, sand the area a bit with brown colored grit paper. This process also works for filling in cracks.
4. The rest of the turning process is just like that for wet wood.
5. Part off the finished bowl. Sand the bottom.

FINISHING PROCESS (Two approaches)

1. You probably don't want to invest in a multi-gallon vat of Danish oil for your first piece or two. Instead, mix a pint jar of the Danish oil. Cut off an acid brush, or simply bend it over to keep inside the jar. Generously coat the inside and outside of the turning with the oil mixture. Keep applying until you're tired or the soaking-in process slows way down. Sand the wet piece with 320 Abranet. Wipe off the excess. Lightly wrap the piece in paper towels and let it dry over night. (If you live in a very dry climate, you can possibly do this process twice a day.) Repeat this process a minimum of 10-20 times or up to 50 times.
2. If you have decided to lot a lot of pine pieces, you may want to mix up a bucket of the Danish oil. Drop the pieces into the oil. They must be completely submerged or an unsightly line will develop. I use a piece of terra cotta tile as a weight to keep mine submerged. Each day, remove the turning, (I use a set of kitchen tongs) sand with 320 Abranet, wipe off the excess, wrap lightly in paper towels and dry over night. (Ron Kent, Hawaii, lets his drip dry on a rack over the vat.) Repeat the process up to 50 times.
3. The finished product will be a translucent piece that can be buffed with wax to a glowing sheen. The piece can be re-oiled yearly or as needed and re-buffed. Any soft wax will do, such as Minwax paste wax
4. I have tried other finishes (wipe-on polyurethane, Minwax Natural Stain #209, Shellac) over the Danish oil but the end result is a bit plastic-y.

RESOURCES:

1. RonKent.com—Ron first developed the Danish oil method for turning Norfolk Island pine. Ron is also an advocate of using concentrated dish washing liquid to condition the wood.
2. Janice Levi is a member of Brazos Valley Woodturners and Gulf Coast Woodturners Association. She can be reached at:
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