

“Woodturning with Garry Oak”

~by Rudolph Knaack

As a resident of Oak Harbor I have been using Garry Oak as my primary “go-to” wood for woodturning. Living in the Pacific Northwest, suitable hardwood for turning is somewhat limited except in our community where the Garry Oak is the iconic hardwood tree. Beginning in the 1980’s I have used this wood almost exclusively. My source of wood comes from blow-downs, fallen limbs, and pruned trees. Rarely a tree is harvested and becomes the source for large diameter pieces.

Garry Oak is a hard, heavy ring-porous hardwood. It has distinctive growth rings and prominent rays. Heartwood can be a deep chocolate brown color and sapwood will vary from golden brown to nearly white. A rusty nail, reacting with the oak’s tannins, can leave an interesting purple stain in the wood. While the wood has been used for furniture making and architectural purposes, it does tend to split and crack readily. Therefore the first task of the wood turner is to prepare the wood for storage and drying before it can be turned. My approach is to cut the limb or bole length about 1-1/2 times the diameter. The pith or center is identified and the wood is cut lengthwise in a manner to remove the pith. This will help relieve some of the internal stresses with water evaporation. Next, the half-round is cut into a rough disc with the chainsaw or band saw. The disc is mounted on the lathe and then a rough-turned bowl is produced, $\frac{3}{4}$ to 1 inch thick. The bowl is then covered with a generous layer of floor wax (i.e. Johnson’s), plugging the large pores and serving to slow the evaporation of intracellular water and preventing checking. The bowl is then weighed, providing a baseline to measure water loss and determine when the bowl is properly dried and ready to fine-turn. I will then place the wax covered bowl into a bucket of wet oak shavings and allow the piece to dry slowly outdoors. Periodically I will weigh the piece, allowing several months/years to stabilize its weight.

It is also possible to turn Garry Oak wet right off the tree. When this is done, the water and wet shavings fly all over the shop. The bowl should be turned in one sitting and it will tend to change its shape as the walls become thinner, eventually assuming an oval shape. Finishing a wet-turned bowl is a matter of preference. Sometimes no finish is the best choice of all. Oak bark can be retained on a natural edge bowl, producing a turned piece with a rugged, gnarly character.

Small oak branches can produce hours of enjoyment designing and tooling the wood. The small branches are usually so dense that the pith does not need to be removed; and, in fact, can lend a decorative 5 point star for visual interest. A properly turned box will have a lid with a suction fit, and sometimes I add beeswax to the interior to add a little aromatic surprise. My preference for finishing the exterior of the oak branch box is

simple. After turning the piece, the surface is sanded to 150grit. I then apply a sanding sealer, Deft Brushing Lacquer, and allow it to dry. The following day sanding resumes taking the surface down to a glass-smooth finish with 1200 grit sandpaper. The sanded piece is then buffed serially with polishing wax and finally with carnauba wax resulting a high level sheen. Great care must be taken to preserve the fit of the wood as the box will expand and contract with heating from sanding.

I use a variety of tools in my work including the chainsaw, band saw, a variety of chucks to hold the work on the lathe, various turning chisels and gouges, and finally the wood lathe itself. There is no end to the variety of tools available to achieve the wood turner's goal. Some wood turners prefer to make their own tools utilizing blacksmithing techniques.

Styles and designs of the turned piece depend wholly on the wood turner. While turning bowls is popular with many turners, spindle turning for furniture and architecture (columns) has been commercially performed for hundreds of years. Artists have discovered the lathe as another tool to manipulate the form of their materials. Wood turning no longer is just an avocation of men in dusty shops any longer. Some of the most innovative and challenging artistic pieces are being turned by women.

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