Real Life Danish Oil Tests

Oil mix finishes such as Danish oil supposedly enhance the natural qualities of timber while protecting it, but is their reputation matched by their performance? And just what are they made of? **Jamie Bell** tested 10 to find out.

A hardwearing finish for furniture and other woodwork these days usually means either spraying lacquer or using an oil mix product. Combining a hand-rubbed oiled appearance with the protection offered by a sprayed finish, oil mix finishes are becoming increasingly popular with woodworkers who want the best of both worlds.

Of course some compromise is inevitable, and no oil mix (vegetable oils plus synthetics, often called Danish oil) or pure oil finish (vegetable oils alone) gives the full moisture resistance of a sprayed lacquer. They can be easily repaired and revived though, as a light sand and a re-application of the oil mix will disguise or remove minor marks. They can also be maintained with wax. For these reasons wooden items finished with oil mixes can look better for longer than sprayed items and may never need to be stripped and refinished.

The range of these products is increasing both in number and type. Apart from Danish oil, you can choose from Scandinavian oil, tung oil or orange oil, to name a few. Some of them are almost entirely synthetic (containing a mixture of resins, driers and other man-made ingredients) while others are pure vegetable oils. A representative selection covering most types was chosen for this review.

Although the 10 products tested vary greatly in their content, they can all be used as wipe-on wipe-off finishes without the need for a supplementary finish; that is, they do not need to be preceded by lacquer or polyurethane, or followed by wax or other polish. Their methods of application are also similar.

Preparation and application

Wood needs to be fine sanded for oil mix finishes as for any other finish. Sanding up to 240 grit is probably the minimum, and for this review I sanded the test panels and turnings to 320 grit.

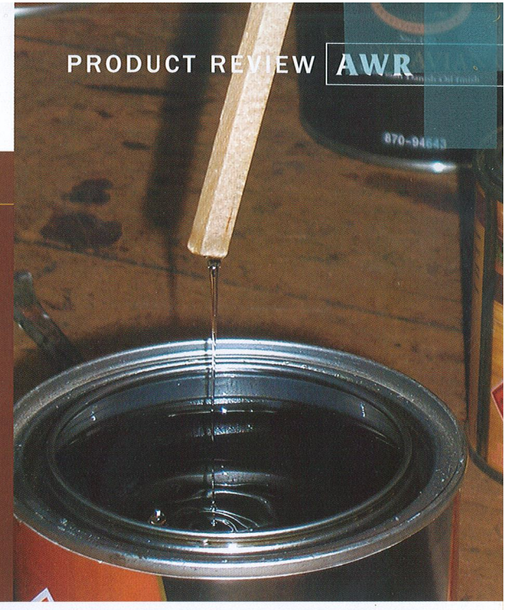
I used a dark red eucalyptus (red ironbark) and a light-coloured cabinet timber (Queensland maple) to test the products on. Oil finishes are ideal for tight-grained timbers such as eucalyptus but also suit slightly more open-grained timbers such as the (plantation grown) maple. I would not recommend them for a very open-grained wood such as red cedar as, depending on the product, it may be difficult to achieve the desirable satiny finish. They are also not usually used on pine due to the patchy finish often resulting, although I would not rule out using them on softwoods.

Viscosity

Thick or thin? The viscosity, or thickness, of the oil finish determines how fast and far it will soak into the wood and how many coats may be needed. Generally the thicker oils (of higher viscosity) with synthetic ingredients are more likely to 'grab' and can be more difficult to use, but will give a very full finish. It's possible to use these as a grain filler, working them into the timber in a similar way as shellac can be built up when French polishing.

The very thin oil finishes—such as the Organoil Danish and Burnishing oils—have low viscosity and soak deeply into the wood.

Depending on the type of oil product you want, high or low viscosity, it's worth having the tin opened before you buy it to see what you are getting.



It is particularly important to thoroughly stir those oil finishes containing a combination of resins and vegetable oils as the resins in these tend to settle in the bottom of the can. The pure oil finishes require minimal stirring. Application is either by brush (recommended by most manufacturers) or rag. When using oil products on furniture my preferred method is to liberally apply the mix with a brush then follow up with an oil-soaked rag rubbing with circular motions to work the oil into the grain. Alternatively it can be worked into the wood using 400 grit sandpaper or 0000 steel wool.

Whether you use a brush, rag or sandpaper to apply the mixture, the following and final step is the same; wipe it off with a dry rag. The suggested time between application and removal of excess oil varies, but is often about 15 minutes. I don't know if it's due to global warming or living in Queensland, but I've always found this suggested time to be about 10 minutes too long for the wiping oils I've used. However, on cool days it's probably about right. The ideal is to be wiping off the excess oil just as it starts to go sticky; any sooner and you are removing too much, and any later it has too much grab and won't come off at all. For first time users this seems like a disaster, but it is easily remedied: just wipe over with a well oiled rag and what's already on the wood immediately softens and can be wiped off.

Many oil finishes come with warnings about the combustibility of the soaked rags. Various theories are put forward as to why this is so; the safest course is to believe them all and throw soaked rags into a container of water as you use them.