

Wood Fillers: The Key to Expert Wood Repair

By Bob Mack



When repairing cracks or defects, press the wood filler firmly into the damaged area with a putty knife.

Whether you are working on a new-build or a home that has stood for decades, it is the detail-oriented finishing work that keeps the business coming. Quality wood filler is the secret to achieving that professional look inside and out, from small details to larger surfaces of both old wood and new unfinished wood.

The two basic types of wood filler, solvent-based and water-based, provide a great deal of versatility. Primarily designed to repair holes, cracks and other defects in woodwork, these fillers also can be used to fill the grain in hardwoods for a more even finish.

Solvent-based fillers dry more quickly than water-based fillers. However, the new

water-based fillers provide some excellent options for contractors who want easy cleanup and good workability. Whatever type you choose, the best wood fillers should exhibit minimal shrinkage and good adhesion to give excellent results on finished or unfinished wood.

Preparing or Repairing Wood Surfaces

If the area to be filled is already coated with a finish, first sand or strip off the old paint or varnish. Hand sanding is not recommended. Even common orbital sanders should not be used except on the smallest of surfaces. Chemical or paint strippers will get to the bare wood quickly and easily. When using strippers, be sure to take the proper safety precautions and follow the directions provided on the container.

Once the old finish is gone, sand the wood with 120-grit sandpaper to clean off any remaining finish and level rough spots. Follow this step by sanding with a 220-grit paper to smooth the entire piece, making sure to sand with the grain. Keep in mind that the better the sanding job, the more professional the result.

After sanding and stripping down to the wood, fill the grain with wood filler. To emphasize the grain, choose a filler color that contrasts with the natural color of the wood or the color of the final stain. To de-emphasize the wood grain, a color that closely matches the final finish will provide the result you want.

Professional woodworkers find wood fillers particularly helpful when working with unfinished hardwoods, such as oak, mahogany, ash, poplar, rosewood, hickory and walnut. These porous woods tend to soak up wood stains and varnishes inconsistently.

Wood filler fills the large pores, minimizes the grain pattern and helps create satin-smooth hardwood surfaces for consistent staining. When filling grain on large surfaces, such as hardwood floors or cabinetry, it is best to use a trowel-grade grain

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filler because it spreads easily and smoothly with a trowel. For smaller pieces or wood trim, it is easier to use wood filler that can be applied with a small putty knife.

Use a rag or stiff brush to work the filler into the grain and let it dry. Remove any excess filler with a plastic scraper or rounded putty knife, taking care not to damage the wood. Allow the filler to dry completely, and then sand lightly with the grain. It is always a good idea to test the process on a piece of scrap wood to see if you are on the right track to achieving the desired look.

Concealing Wood Damage

Woodwork takes a lot of abuse. Moldings, banisters and windowsills are subjected to the dings, dents and depressions of everyday living. However, it is possible to make a nearly invisible patch with a quality wood filler and good finishing techniques.

If you must remove the finish from a piece of wood, follow the above tips. However, keep in mind that you only need to strip, sand and fill the damaged area. With

the variety of colors on the market today, there should be no problem in finding a wood filler to match the wood color or an existing stain.

Cracks or defects should be clean and dry. Press the wood filler firmly into the damaged area with a putty knife. Once the repaired area has dried, simply sand the filler flush to the surface and apply a sanding sealer, which acts as a primer for the wood. Finally, sand lightly with 220-grit sandpaper and stain or finish the surface to a beautiful and professional result.

Taking the time to tend to the details and providing quality interior wood finishing work will help to ensure a high level of customer satisfaction. **APC**

Bob Mack is staff chemist for FAMOWOOD Professional Wood Fillers, a part of Eclectic Products Inc., headquartered in Eugene, Ore. For more information about how to get great results with wood fillers, call the FAMOWOOD technical support line at (800) 747-4667, or visit eclecticproducts.com.

Tips and Tricks of Wood Repair

- *Use fresh putty.* Discard wood filler that is partially hardened.
- *Test first.* Test the putty on a piece of scrap wood or on a hidden section of the piece you are working on.
- *Match filler to wood.* If you are working with unfinished wood, match the filler to the wood. If the piece is already stained, choose filler that matches the stain.
- *Use an artist's palette knife.* A palette knife has a thin, flexible blade that is ideal for applying wood filler.
- *Clear away sawdust.* Make sure sawdust has been blown away before applying wood filler to ensure proper adhesion.
- *Use shallow applications.* For deep holes, use more than one shallow application to prevent shrinkage and cracking. Let each layer cure before applying the next one.
- *Overfill the hole.* By overfilling a shallow hole or filling a deeper hole with several shallow applications, you can usually compensate for any shrinkage that does occur.
- *Use a sanding block.* When sanding wood patches, a firm backing to the sandpaper will help achieve a flat surface. **APC**

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