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First Lesson in Wood Carving

-- Freebie --

Woodcarving is an old, much-loved, and practical art but it can be a rather daunting one to learn. Here is a first lesson that will let you get started building simple, useful projects that require only a few inexpensive tools.

The idea is to begin with as few tools possible and add more as your skills increase; you then can take on larger, more complicated projects. We provide sketches of homemade tools and links to Freebie plans on our Website.

After awhile, you will find some woodcarving speciality that really works for you. Mine is hand [hand carved signs](#), which I have been making for more than 25 years.



1. Tools

You can make many of the tools necessary for wood carving at home, from scrap materials. A smaller number you will have to buy, but most of these are useful for general woodworking, too.

1. [Workbench](#)

You need a way to solidly grasp the wood you are working on. For first projects you can

use "C" clamps on a simple [work table](#). The rock bags (described in Section 6) can help you immobilize pieces of wood: construction time and cost will be minimal. You can get by with "C" clamps and rock bags for a good while.

In time you will want a decent [Workbench](#). Our version is sturdy and inexpensive to build. It will soon become the most used tool in your shop. It does, however, mount a woodworker's vise and these now cost about \$130.00. This is a major investment, but it will soon become indispensable for all your woodworking projects.



2. Sharpening Stones

Keeping a sharp edge on steel is the key skill in all woodworking. Sharp tools give you control of the work and are a pleasure to use. Sharpening is a skill well worth the learning but it must be learned.

Most cutting edges like plane blades, knives, and chisels are straight. These are easiest to sharpen. You will also use a few curved blades, called gouges, which require more skill to sharpen. As in all learned skills, nothing will give you the results you want but practice.

You need a good, flat sharpening stone. I prefer the tried-and-true standard: Hard Arkansas. But you can start with an inexpensive Carborundum stone. A Carborundum (fine) stone 2 by 3 inches large enough for the beginner. You may later move up to Hard Arkansas, to diamond stones, or even to Japanese water stones.

It helps to mount your stone on a piece of scrap wood that you can clamp to your bench or grab with your vise. You can hold the stone hold in place with four small wooden blocks.

You will use oil with these stones and you don't want to spread the oil all over your work area. The oil is very bad for wood finishes; it prevents them from adhering to the wood.

For curved edges, you need a small stone called a slip. The basic one is about 1 by 2 inches by 1/4-inch thick and has two rounded edges. This lets you work the inside of a gouge. The outside you can work on the flat stone. Again, Hard Arkansas slips are the best, but Carborundum slips are serviceable and much cheaper.

You should never sharpen a woodworking tool with a power grinder. Yes, power is needed to make and reshape tools, but you really have to know what you are doing or you can ruin a tool in a second with a power grinder.

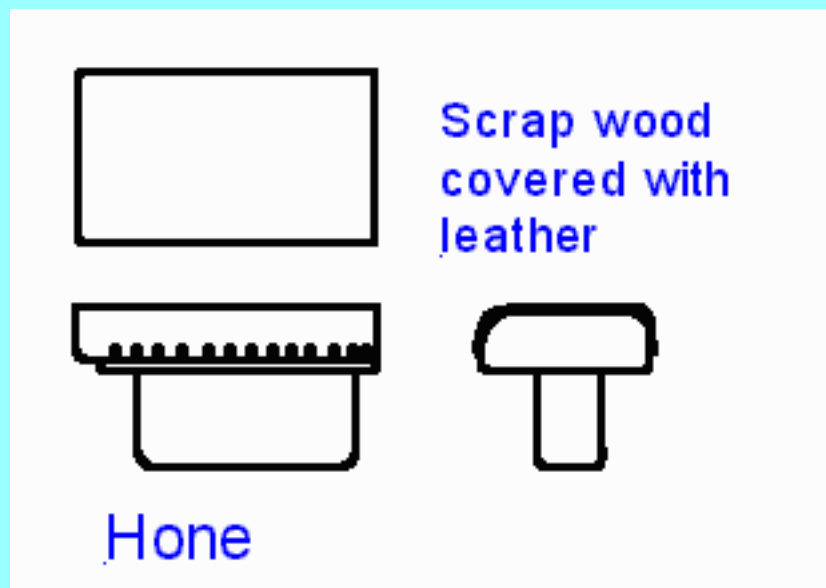
You use the sharpening stone with a fluid to keep the cut metal out of the fine pores in the stone. Most stones require thin oil; 3-in-1 oil works fine for me. If you are sharpening cooking tools, you should use edible oils, like salad oil. With speciality items like diamond stones, follow the manufacturer's instructions exactly.

Place the too face flat on the stone. Try to make contact an a fairly wide grinding area but this area must include all the way to the edge. Work on the three-quarters of the stone surface that is farthest from you. This keeps you from falling off the near edge of the stone, which drives the tool edge into the end of the stone. Turn the stone frequently for even wear. Use powerful, steady, oval strokes that cover most of the face of the stone.

Here is the special trick. You work on one side of the tool only until you can feel a fine turned up edge, called a wire, along entire length of the cutting edge being sharpened. This may take a few minutes work. Getting the wire uniform is what is hard to do for curved blades. You can feel the wire with the ball of your thumb by rubbing away from the shank of the blade out into the air.

When you have a detectable wire across the entire blade (don't be in a hurry), you turn over the blade and do the same amount of work on the other side. This will throw a wire on that side, too.

Repeat the process with only a little work on each side. This removes the old wire and then cuts a new, finer one. You are then ready to hone the edge to a high polish (see below).



3. Hone

You need a simple, home-made hone to put a final polish on your good steel. This is easily made from a few scraps of wood and a piece of recycled leather. A handle block on the underside keeps your hands away from the very sharp blades and lets you clamp the hone in the vise. The edges of the block are rounded so that you can work the inside of gouges.

You can recycle the leather from an old handbag, briefcase, or boot top. The leather is held to the wood block with glue and brass escutcheon pins. If you hit brass with a sharp edge, no harm is done. The leather extends out slightly from one end of the block to let you work the leather inside small tools.

Treat the leather with polishing compound: the type I like best is a white powder of aluminum oxide. Rub the powder into the leather with your thumb. You can also get several different polishing compounds in sticks (white, red, or green but do not use black) that you can rub into the leather. Every few months you have to wash the leather with saddle soap and reapply the compound.

Woodcraft suppliers usually stock at least one of these compounds. Some of the compound sticks are intended for use on powered cloth wheels. Never use one of these wheels on a good cutting edge. The cloth rolls over the edge, rounding it off. The result looks great but cuts badly.

To use the hone, grip it firmly and drag the sharpened blade backward across the surface. Never push forward. A dozen strokes on one side should polish the steel and remove the last wire. Turn the blade over and polish the other side. The result should be a mirror finish all the way to the edge.

Finish the edge by dragging it flat across the ball of your thumb. This not only looks macho but also it wipes off the polishing compound and lets you feel to be certain the final wire is gone. You can feel a wire that you can't see.

To test the edge, cut across end grain on a piece of scrap pine. A sharp edge will cut both the hard and soft grain evenly. An edge that looks good but is not sharp, will cut the hard grain but will pulp up the soft wood between. The old stunt of shaving the hair on your arm usually works, but has nothing to do with the suitability of the edge for woodworking.

While you are sharpening things, you will certainly want to take care of your plane blades, all your carpenter's chisels, and your pocket knife. Don't loan tools this sharp to anyone without a stern warning. A pocket knife this sharp cuts like a razor. Cuts from sharp edges bleed profusely.

Avoid using sharp tools on wood that is dirty or has been sanded. The fine grit imbedded in the wood will dull a tool quickly. Use a power wire brush on dirty wood and put off sanding until all carving is done.

4. **Mallet**

The mallet you use to drive carving tools does not look like a regular hammer. It is round with a handle that sticks straight out (see picture above). Professional carving mallets are turned from the hardest of woods (Lignum Vita), are very expensive, and last for many years. You can easily make one for free from scrap wood, and it will last a few years.

You will need a piece of 4 by 4 scrap about a foot long or a straight piece of tree limb about the same size and length. The scrap piece should not have any checks (cracks running towards the center). A tree limb will have to be fresh to no have checks. The best limbs are from very hard woods like maple or fruit trees.

Remove the bark, cut the ends square, and mark down about four inches from the best end for the head. Make a large number of cuts in the handle area so that about 1-1/4 inches are left in the center. Knock off the waste wood and shape the mallet handle with a plane and open toothed rasp ; so that it feels comfortable in the hand.

Drill a large hole, about 1 inch in diameter, in the head end of the mallet. The hole should extend most of the way down to the handle. This will reduce future checking. You can also seal the end grain with wax like that used to weatherproof boots, or oil-based paint. Leave the striking area as bear wood.

Play with the head size, handle size, and handle length until you get something that feels

good in your hand.

5. Gouge

You can do all our Freebie projects below with one gouge. You need a small one somewhere between a #3 (3/16-inch) and a #4 (1/4-inch). These gouges cost about \$20.00 new.

Keep an eye out for woodworking tools at garage and estate sales. A tool that looks to be in poor shape can often be reconditioned to advantage.

6. Other Homemade Tools

When you sharpen your carpenter's chisels and your pocket knife they become good carving tools.

You can also make rock bags to hold odd-shaped pieces securely. The legs from an old pair of blue jeans work well. Simply cut the legs off at the knees, sew up the ends, and half fill them with washed river stones. Never use sand for the filler!

2. Tool Suppliers

Hand woodworking tools have become a specialty item. You can purchase some of them from general tool suppliers like:



For instance, they have the honing compound mentioned earlier as well as most of the special hardware for the projects. You can also go to woodcraft suppliers like:

[The Japanese Woodworker
Their Catalog](#)

For possible local suppliers, check your local Yellow Pages under Woodworking or Hardwoods.

3. Projects

You can add interest and ornamentation of any of your woodworking projects with simple carving. A good first project should be simple and inexpensive yet useful. A number of our projects could make good first carving lessons:

Freebies:

- [Animal Media Boxes,-- Freebie](#), CD storage in the shape of a horsie, alligator, or turtle.
- [Child's Toy Box and Bench -- Freebie](#), feature carved panels and a hidden compartment.
- [Switched Power Outlet Box](#), Always nice for your computer setup.

Bigger Projects

- [Armoire Computer Desk Plans, five wardrobe type desks \(\\$12.95\)](#)
You can carve the doors of these units, which can also be used as home entertainment centers.

4. First Technique

All these first projects feature simple lines carved into flat wood pieces. This is called incise carving. They feature simple lines in flat wood pieces. Here are some techniques to use on your first project.

- **Keep Your Tools Sharp**

Keep your tools sharp as described above. As you proceed, re-hone the tools you are using every few minutes. This also gives you a chance to step back and look at the work.

If a tool starts behaving badly, pulping up the wood or splitting out splinters, stop work immediately and sharpen it -- now, not later.

- **Transfer Designs**

You can transfer designs from paper to wood with carbon paper, but that it is messy, and carbon paper is getting hard to find.

Ironing xerox or laser printer copies onto the wood produces such a light image (it's also reversed) that you can barely see it to trace over it with a pencil.

The simplest transfer technique is to cut little diamond shapes all along the lines of the drawing with a sharp knife. Next, tape the drawing to the wood and sketch the lines onto the wood through the holes. Then remove the paper and draw between all these little line

segment using the original drawing as a guide. This also lets you reverse the drawing if you like.

The best way to remove pencil lines from wood is with a pencil eraser. Don't try to remove them by sanding! This works poorly and leaves grit in the wood.

- **Control with Many Passes**

Learning carving is like learning to bat in baseball. First you learn control and then you learn power. To have control with the lines in these projects takes at least four passes. The first pass is right down the center of the drawing line and is very light. The second is to one side with one edge of the gouge within the first pass. The third is on the other side. Then go back again and clean up.

- **Carving Direction**

You want to direct your gouge so that the wood grain is always pushing you into the waste wood area. To go around a circle you have to change directions four times with each pass. Again, this gives you control.

- **Ploychrome**

Again, all these first projects have simple lines carved into the wood. They can be made very impressive by using artist acrylic paint in the incised lines. Just slop the paint in, let it dry completely (a minimum of three hours), and sand off the excess.

The tubes of paint cost \$4.00 to \$7.00 depending on the color and are available at any local art store. Acrylics are amazingly easy to use and last, even in the out-of-doors, for many years. The carving protects the paint.

- **Reference Books on Woodcarving**

Check your local library and book stores for books on wood carving. I learned from " The Sunset, Wood Carving Book " by Doris Aller. I think it is the best one ever written, but it is long out of print. Don't buy more than one book before you start a real project.

- **Paper Dolls**

With this technique, you can make your own designs by folding paper and cutting out patterns as through you were making paper dolls. I have made flower and leaf patterns this way that worked particularly well for carving.

Conclusion

Thanks again for visiting Woodward Designs. We very much want to know how you are getting along with your project and will be happy to answer any questions by e-mail.

If you send us a picture of your finished project made from our plans, we put it on our web page.

If you hun with our Freebies, please help keep this Website open by looking over our [Low-Stress Computer Furniture Plans](#) for sale or by following our ad links and making purchases from our sponsors. Thanks again.



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