

## Do It Yourself

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### How to Remove Old Paint and Varnish

From "[Ask DIY](#)"

episode ADI-107 -- [More Projects »](#)

**Q:** I want to take varnish off a cedar chest. I've never been comfortable using the toxic type of varnish remover. Any tips on stripping away old finishes?

**A:** (Bruce Johnson, *Ask DIY* Woodworking expert) Stripping away old paint or varnish doesn't have to be the impossible task that many people make it out to be, especially if you follow these tips:

- **Safety alert:** The chemicals you use to strip are pretty nasty and have noxious fumes. Before you open the can, be sure to put on heavy rubber gloves, a long-sleeved shirt and protective eyewear. Work outdoors if you can. If you can't, work in a well-ventilated area -- windows open, fans on. If you're sensitive to the fumes, wear a charcoal-filter respirator (**figure A**). Don't confuse the respirator with a particle mask, which will only filter out dust.
- Use methylene chloride (**figure B**, left container) to remove paint from furniture (**figure C**). After taking the proper safety precautions, pour it directly on the painted surface. It's thick -- the manufacturers add wax to the methylene chloride to give it some body and delay the evaporation. Use a paintbrush to smooth the liquid over the surface. And then leave it alone, to give it a chance to work. Cover the area with waxed paper to slow down the evaporation of the chemical.

**Nobody's perfect:** One of the mistakes that people make is poking and prodding the methylene chloride. This breaks down the wax barrier, which allows the methylene chloride to evaporate.

- When you take the waxed paper off of the methylene chloride, use a plastic spatula to scrape up the paint and the goo -- a combination known as "sludge" -- to reveal the original surface beneath. Once the sludge is off, wipe the surface with a rag dipped



Strip stain and shellac, like the finish on this stool, with furniture refinisher, not methylene chloride.



Figure A



Figure B

in mineral spirits. Store the sludge in a closed, empty paint can until you can dispose of it. Put all the rags and steel wool you used with the stripper in the can too.

- Regulations vary from city to city on how you must dispose of that sludge. So contact your local waste-management folks and get their recommendation on what you should do with captured sludge.



Figure C

- On stained or shellacked antiques, you don't need the power of methylene chloride. Instead, use a product labeled *furniture refinisher* (**figure B**, right container), which is clear. Compared to the methylene chloride, this stuff is thin and evaporates very quickly, but you'll still need all the same safety precautions. Pour some in a metal pan and then dip a pad of steel wool in it. Use the wet steel wool to very carefully rub the liquid into the surface. It will work immediately to take the finish off the wood. Wipe it off with a dry rag and it will dry very quickly. When it does, sand it lightly and put on a coat of tung oil.

### More questions for Bruce:

**Q:** I'm getting ready to begin stripping old varnish off some baseboards and would like to use something other than steel wool. What's your take on those reusable stripping pads that seem to be made from plastic?

**A:** Steel-wool pads do tend to fall apart. I've found myself gradually making the switch to the synthetic pads that you can rinse out and reuse several times.

**Q:** It seems whenever I strip the paint off a piece of furniture I'm left with lots of specks of paint in the cracks of the wood. I've tried sanding them out with no success. Any advice?

**A:** You need to attack those flecks of paint in the pores while they are still soft. Instead of waiting for them to dry, immediately grab a brass bristle brush and scrub the paint out of the pores. Don't use steel wire brushes. They're too stiff and will scratch the wood.

**Q:** When I apply stripper, the first layer bubbles just great but it lifts the stripper up as well. As a result, the bottom layer of paint is still there. Any advice?

**A:** Scrape the top layer of blistered paint off the wood, but instead of rinsing it , immediately apply another heavy coat of remover on the exposed paint, and watch it bubble up. Repeat this for each layer of paint until you see bare wood.

### Web site resources for stripping paint and varnish:

[Neater Paint Stripping from Today's Homeowner.com](#)

[Removing Paint and Varnish from Cole Hardware.com](#)

[Correct Use of Paint Removal or Strippers from Wood Finish Supply.com](#)

[Stripping Away the Old from Learn Free-home.com](#)

[Stripping Paint from Wood from Sysnet.net](#)

[Do-It-Yourself Stripping from Ackermans.com](#)

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