

Wet & Dry Turning - Part IV of IV

The Mad Woodturner

One of my favorite drying methods is using the microwave to nuke smaller and thinner turnings. The idea is that the microwave quickly and efficiently heats the water left in the wood and releases it as the little steam you see inside the microwave oven. Microwaving works best when the thickness of wood is under 1 inch. Part of the problem or benefit, depending on your perspective, is that this method tends to promote warping. You can get some really interesting shapes this way though. OK, so on to the process.... While you can microwave an entire bowl blank, it's not efficient to do that. It's best to completely finish-turn or rough-turn your piece with the normal wall thickness of about 10% the total diameter of the piece and then put it into the microwave. Put some paper towel in there to soak up some of the moisture coming out of the piece. Set your microwave to its lowest setting (usually defrost) and try a time of 2 minutes to start. When done, take the piece out and let it sit in the open until it is cool to the touch. You should notice that there's a little steam on the inside of the microwave. That's the moisture coming out! If not, then increase the time half a minute. Repeat this procedure until you notice that there's no more moisture accumulating inside the microwave. It should take just a few times. If you want to be more precise, you can weigh the piece before and after each microwaving. When there's no more weight loss, it's dry. With the microwave it's easy to go too far. Too far??? Sure! You don't want your piece to be bone dry. All you want to do is just bring it down to the same moisture content as the surrounding environment. Otherwise, it'll just soak up the moisture in the air and probably crack and/or warp anyway. Also, don't get the piece too hot in the microwave, it'll catch fire! Go slow and steady.

Another favorite of mine is boiling and then bagging. Take your rough-turned piece and completely submerge it into a full rolling boil for an hour per inch of thickness. Remove the piece from the boiling water (carefully!), wipe it off, and place it into a paper bag. DON'T use a plastic bag. It won't allow moisture to pass through at all and just promotes mildew. By the way, mildew does NOT promote spalting. Tightly close the bag and put it into a cool area with little to no air movement around it. You want the piece to dry but not too quickly. After a few days, take the piece out of the bag and put it into another, fresh paper bag. Keep doing this about 4 times. This is to release the built-up moisture in the bags. Now, leave it alone, in a bag, Check the piece maybe every week. If it doesn't feel cool to the touch anymore, then it's dry. Again, to be more precise, keep weighing it each time you check it and when it stops dropping weight it is finally dry. For a large number of pieces being boiled all at once, you can also just stack and cover the pieces with a tight cloth like a sheet. Keep rearranging the stack and changing the cloth as per the bagging technique. This boiling process for a basic 10 inch maple bowl of 1/2" thickness takes me about 2-3 months to be dry enough to final-turn.

Of course, you could always just put your rough-turned or final-turned piece into a paper bag to start with. Often it's really the only thing you need to do. Follow the same procedure as above for the bagging portion. Just be sure to change the bag every so often especially at the beginning and then wait for the piece to stop losing weight or not feel cool to the touch anymore. This method isn't quite as quick as either microwaving or boiling first but it's a lot less hassle. Again, the bagging is just to keep the piece from drying out too quickly.

Two other methods that can be used are also more aggressive than most. Silica, or more accurately desiccant silica gel in bead form, absorbs a great amount of water and can be heated and then reused almost indefinitely. You often find silica along with electronic products in little bags but can be purchased in large quantities. Simply cover your piece in a bucket with the silica and the moisture is soaked up quickly. Careful though, it can be too quick and cracks will develop. Check your piece often. Along the same lines, a clean diaper acts very much the same and just looks awfully cute wrapped around your newborn "baby" of a hollowform. That's it folks! Hope you liked it.

Steals and Deals

Classifieds

Woodworking - 101

We have some interesting burls coming in just in time for the turners meeting. Here's the skinny....box elder with nice flame, spalted maple, maple burl, spalted hackberry, elm burl, mulberry burl.

Also, we are putting several items on sale, 50% OFF, just for the turners. Sale starts at 6:00 PM. Sale is for members and guests, or anyone who has money.

Slightly Skewed

Funnies

"My wife came in today and asked if I would go do some turning. Ahh, I asked, what do you need? Maybe a new dibber or possibly a rolling pin or a vase? I have Persimmon, Hickory, Mesquite, a little bit of Walnut and a tad of Oak - what would you like?"

Oh, I don't care. I need about six bags of shavings for the flower beds...

It's so nice to know my turning is appreciated. "