

WOODWORKER'S EDGE

Information on Shellac

What is Shellac?

Shellac is an animal product, a resin secreted from the Coccus lacca (lac beetle), a scale that feeds on certain trees in India and southern Asia.

After hatching, the nifty little bug snoops around for a place to eat, selecting a stem or leaf as its breakfast counter. It has a sharp teensy beak, and it uses that to puncture the tissue of the plant, and settle in for a lifetime of sucking nourishment.

After feeding, the insect secretes a resin, which dries and hardens into a protective covering called lac. The lac is collected, crushed, washed, and dried. After cleaning and heating, it is drawn into thin sheets of finished shellac. The level of refinement, the timing of harvest, and source of the lac, determine the specification color that comes to you, the happy woodworker.

What do they mean by "# cut"?

The cut refers to how many pounds of shellac are dissolved in a gallon of alcohol. More, thinner coats are easier to manage than trying to apply thicker coats. To make a 1# cut, mix 4oz of dry shellac flakes in 1 quart of alcohol (1/4 lb. in 1/4 gallon). It doesn't have to be exact. This isn't rocket science

How long will it last in solution?

The rule of thumb is 6 months. Once dissolved, shellac begins a process called esterification, where its ability to dry to a hard shell begins to degrade. Always date new jars of shellac you mix up, especially if you're not going to use it right away. If it's a few months old, test it on a scrap piece. It should dry to touch in 15 minutes at the most. If not, it's no good. You can still use it to make a tack cloth. On the other hand, don't throw out potentially good shellac, just because it's been sitting around awhile. I've successfully used shellac that's more than 18 months old.

Brushing

Use the best brush you can afford. The old-timers scoff at anything less than a badger hair brush. An expensive brush is a very cheap investment. You must work quickly. Dip the brush no more than 1/3 of the way into the shellac. Don't wipe the brush on the side of the jar. You'll pick up dried shellac sludge and end up brushing it on your project. Begin your stroke an inch or two from the end, and lay down the shellac with a light touch, moving toward the far end. Then quickly brush back over to the beginning. Then brush to the far end. Be careful around the edges, because the shellac will want to collect there, creating a fat edge.