

# The Down To Earth Woodworker

by Steven D. Johnson  
Racine, Wisconsin

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## Down To Earth Woodworking

If there were some reliable demographic studies, I could undoubtedly find the woodworking group into which I fall and with which I should most closely identify. Intuitively, though, I suppose that it breaks down a little like this:

About 2 to 3 percent of woodworkers belong to the elite group that are not simply building furniture, but instead are making heirloom works of art. These are the pieces and craftspeople that we all admire, and for some of us, provide motivation to strive for excellence. For some, however, these artists and their works represent an unattainable, and possibly even unrealistic standard. Does anyone else ever feel slightly diminished by these incredible works of art? I will admit that I do... sometimes.

Mostly, though, I am pretty down to earth... comfortable in my own well-worn skin. The vast majority of my projects require just intermediate-level skills, though I am always reaching, stretching, and trying to learn and improve. The projects I build, generally of my own design, lack the grace, proportion, creativity and skill of execution that could elevate them to heirloom status. But, these pieces make their recipients and their creator very happy. My projects are almost always gifts. The gifts suit my friends and family well, and the few pieces I keep suit me well, too. Recipients of my gifts are moved by the fact that it was made, not bought, and that considerable effort went into the project — as long as I avoid pointing out any of the inevitable flaws (more about this in a minute).

We middle-of-the-road down to earth woodworkers likely represent the majority (perhaps even the vast majority) of hobbyists. We will not likely be creating one hundred-thousand-dollar plus one-of-a-kind commissions for the rich and famous, and our work will not wind up in the Louvre or the Museum of Modern Art. But we have fun. Lots of fun. Every day we get a little better, our designs get a little more elegant, and our confidence grows. We learn from our mistakes, our successes, and from one another. We read, we imagine, and we experiment, and sometimes our "tinkering" turns out great.

There is a third category of woodworkers that is made up of beginners and young people, all neophytes. This is a relatively small percentage of our total hobby population, but with our encouragement, this group can grow.

Being down to earth is easy. It requires no pretense, just a dollop of humility and a desire to help others. Most of all, being down to earth just means that not one of us has a monopoly on skill, knowledge, or creativity. Instead, we share our ideas, our best practices, and our knowledge, and we always listen, are always open to new ideas, and we thirst for continual improvement. Our skill levels and our experience vary greatly, but our love for woodworking does not. We enjoy our hobby, and enjoy it when others join us. There is a spirit of camaraderie that makes us, we hope, special.

As a down to earth woodworker, I know there will always be a portion of the woodworking world that is better than me. I also know that I will be better at some things than others. But I stay forever grounded and maintain a commitment to growth, knowledge, skill, and most of all, fun for woodworkers, regardless of expertise or experience. The front of the current Highland Woodworking catalog says, "Helping You Become A Better Woodworker" and I think that applies to all of us, regardless of skill level.

We hope you enjoy this new monthly column, dedicated to that vast majority we call Down to Earth Woodworkers. Of course, we welcome all beginners and neophytes, too, and hope that as you become increasingly "hooked" on this wonderful hobby, and as you grow in skill, experience, and knowledge, that you, too, will remain "down to earth!" We also welcome the elite group. We stand humbled at your expertise, and welcome your input.

## Follow-Up – Justifying New Tools

It seems we struck a very familiar chord with woodworkers across the country in our May 2010 issue of *Wood News* with the article "Justifying Your New Tool Purchase." Apparently convincing a recalcitrant spouse of the need to buy a new tool is a universal "opportunity."

Some woodworkers are just tepidly testing the waters with their significant others, still experimenting with different methods to achieve their goals, while others are obviously experienced in the battle for tool-buying bliss and have developed repeatable systems.

Robert, from Michigan, suggests that it is simply "easier to ask for forgiveness than permission." Hats off to Robert, but in my house, I might only get away with this gambit once... if even that.

Mauricio in Puerto Rico has a unique and creative twist on the "espionage" method of simply hiding a new tool purchase from his spouse. In addition to using all available means to "hide" the purchase, he has also "trained" his spouse that entering the workshop could be dangerous. She might get hurt, or she might distract him, and he might get hurt. Noisy machines and flying woodchips, I am sure, add to the effect, so over time Mauricio's wife has learned to just stay out of his shop. How convenient!

One method I have tried in the past is what I refer to as the "drip water torture" method of continually talking about the new tool I need until finally my spouse gives in and says something to the effect, "If it will shut you up, just go ahead and buy it!"

John, has a great spin on this technique. He affixes a catalog picture of the tool he wants to the clock face and repeatedly asks his spouse "What time is it?" Sooner or later she is bound to ask, "What is this picture?" at which point John can explain all the neat new things he is going to be able to build for her once he gets that tool.

In addition to the principles of 5S, Seiri (sort), Seiton (straighten), Seiso (shine), Seiketsu (standardize), and Shitsuke (sustain) outlined in "5S Your Workshop for Efficiency, Comfort, Safety, and Fun," I learned another nugget from Japanese culture that helped me throughout my career. Nemawashi is a word that roughly translates as "the process of laying the foundation for change in a gradual manner." The word literally means "digging around the roots" and refers to a method of transplanting a tree by gradually preparing it for the move. Japanese gardeners insert a shovel shallowly around the roots of a tree, wait a while, then, over time, make progressively deeper cuts. Gradually the roots of the tree turn toward the trunk, heal from the cuts, and eventually, the root ball becomes self-contained and free from the ground. The transplant can then proceed without the trauma normally associated with sudden and dramatic change. In business we used Nemawashi to represent the techniques used to prepare employees for change by gradually laying the foundation. When change finally did occur it was not traumatic.

It appears that Bob in Pennsylvania adapted Nemawashi as a tool-buying method. Over a long period of time, Bob gradually loosened screws on kitchen cabinet hinges, door pulls, and drawer slides. He did this so gradually, just a quarter turn of a random screw periodically, that his spouse assumed that the kitchen cabinets were literally falling apart from wear. Fed up, she went cabinet shopping, but after incurring significant sticker-shock, asked Bob how much it would cost if he were to build the cabinets. Way less than half price was the answer, but he would need a few new tools. Is it necessary to elaborate how this ended? Tool-buying nirvana, of course! At one point Bob's impatient wife asked him why he had not ordered that new power planer yet. Nice job, Bob!

Jim follows a negotiating strategy with his spouse. "I would really like to make that for you, but I need a new [name of tool] to do the job." This seems to work for Jim, but he offers a cautionary note for us all — "When you get your (new) tool, you really need to deliver!" Good advice.

Chester in Texas seems to have reached tool-buying détente with his spouse, and has a system. Anything she desires to be built first gets a quote from a contractor. Then Chester works up a price for materials to do the job himself. Of course he can build it for less, so he automatically gets half the savings to use for new tools.

One reader has apparently gotten all the tools he needs (is that really possible?) because he is going to adapt some of the methods in our article to justify a new Harley Davidson motorcycle!

We want to thank everyone for their input and encourage you all to keep justifying those new tools!

## A Dirty Little Secret

There are many things we share, fairly universally, as woodworkers. One constant is the amount of fun we have. The truth is that woodworking is so enjoyable that Congress should impose a sin tax on the hobby. But let's not tell them, okay?

Another secret is that we woodworkers are also generally in a constant state of internal conflict. A frugal lot by nature, we hoard scraps of wood and used sandpaper and reuse all manner of household things in the shop, from empty coffee cans to used plastic food storage bags. As long as they are well hidden on a work piece, we will incorporate an assortment of mismatched screws (probably stored in a coffee can!) and we will spend three dollars on cheesecloth filters and a half-hour of time to save two dollars worth of leftover finish. But we will then drop four hundred dollars without batting an eye at a woodworking show on a new tool we fancy.

I read a lot, and wait for the "extra 15% off one item" in order to buy a clearance book that was already marked down to \$5.98; then, on the way out of the book store, will glibly pick up the latest glossy woodworking magazine for \$8.95 and never give the money a second thought. Ah, this "scrimp, save, splurge" way of life is one of our dirty little secrets and one of the internal conflicts with which many of us live.

## A Disturbing Psychological Phenomenon

Another internal conflict many of us seem to share is pride of accomplishment and self-flagellation. What is it about woodworking, and woodworkers, that compels us to point out every little flaw in a finished piece to friends, family, and fellow woodworkers? Do we take some perverse pleasure in pointing out our mistakes or do we need the self-flagellation to spur us on to greatness?

When I look at the galleries of work by truly phenomenal furniture artisans, I wonder if there are enough years left in my body, enough patience in my heart, and talent in my hands to ever achieve anything near the beauty of some of those works of art. And I also wonder if those brilliant craftspeople animatedly show off the "flaws" in their work to every passerby. I rather doubt it. But for some reason, a large majority of us mere mortal woodworkers do. Why is that?

Recently I built a nice chess set for a friend. With alternating squares of curly maple and walnut and a hinged lid with divided storage inside for the carved wooden chess pieces, it turned out pretty nice. When I showed up at his house with it wrapped in a large moving blanket, he was intrigued.

When I unwrapped the piece, his joy was palpable. It turned out to be a great gift. He "oooed," and "ahhhd" over it, and his wife actually shed a couple of genuine joyful tears. They were both overwhelmed by the thought and the time invested in creating such a gift. But then, for some unknown reason, I felt compelled to point out a sloppily cut dovetail on one of the corners, and explain how I "fixed" it with a sliver of wood and some walnut sawdust mixed with wood glue.

In retrospect, I am quite sure my friend would have never noticed the patched dovetail joint, nor would he have cared to know about it. But I suspect that now, after I pointed it out, he sees it every day. It probably stands out like a fly in the sugar bowl. Why did I do that? Why do we do that? And I know you do it, too...

A neighbor's hobbies include gardening, bike riding, and probably more, but certainly do not include woodworking. His only tools appear to be a department store coping saw, a handsaw, and a hammer. Yet, knowing that I enjoy working with wood, he was as pleased as punch to show off the wooden sign he helped his daughter make for a school project. Knowing that he painstakingly cut every curve by hand with a cheap coping saw, I was thoroughly impressed. He actually did a great job, but it only took a few minutes for him to start pointing out the flaws in his work, even while I was complimenting him and his quality of craftsmanship.

This is not just a disturbing psychological phenomenon with down to earth woodworkers, neophytes or beginners. At a recent craft fair, I listened while birdhouse builders, purveyors of trivets, chopping block makers, and one guy with beautiful turned candlesticks all handed their wares their wares of furniture for most of his adult life.

## Follow-Up – 5S Your Workshop

5S Your Workshop for Efficiency, Comfort, Safety, & Fun apparently motivated quite a few readers to sort, clean, and straighten their workshops, and as a result, a lot of ideas poured forth. Color-coding is a method often used in industrial 5S applications, and many of our woodworking friends are color-coding cabinets, drawers, and even tool handles to help them get better organized. One reader has sorted and stored tools by furniture type. In the blue cabinet are chair-building tools. The red cabinet is for cabinet building, and the green cabinet is for tools used in both types of work.

Another reader commented that providing proper storage for tools not only makes them easier and quicker to find, but also helps protect those precious investments. This is an excellent point and a widely recognized advantage of the 5S system among manufacturing and fabrication plants. Protecting your tools may be justification enough for straightening up around the shop, as if we needed more motivation!

The article only briefly covered the fifth "S" in the 5S methodology; that of sustaining shop cleanliness and organization through a systematic approach. Our readers certainly did not gloss over the significance of not only getting organized, but staying organized. Readers suggested organizing workflow as one method of maintaining shop orderliness. Do all rough cutting and surfacing first and make sure there is plenty of material for the project without returning to this step. Group secondary stock preparation into discrete operations, i.e., cut to size, cut joinery, surface preparation (planing or sanding), etc. Excellent tips.

One reader suggested, quite wisely, that we should all add a "rider" to our insurance to cover our tool collections. He suggested taking a photographic inventory. The photographs should be placed in three-ring binders with descriptions, serial numbers, receipts, and other pertinent information. He correctly points out that making a photographic record is also a great way to get organized, and stay organized.

Most of our readers implied that the key to staying organized is to clean up at the end of each session. Return all tools to their home. Devise a ritual and stick to it. This definitely works. My routine is pretty easy. I put away all tools, jigs clamps, etc., then clean up to any scrap lumber. I put project parts and pieces in a safe place. Then I apply [Camellia Oil \(item 456460\)](#) to planes and chisels. I dust off my bench and machine work surfaces, and then I vacuum. Everyone knows that I am finished for the day when they hear the shop vacuum running for an extended period of time. Total time, most days, just ten minutes or less. The time saved, however, is incalculable.

Again, thank you for all the feedback and the great ideas. Next month's column will feature an article on building your own custom shooting board, and also maybe cover a couple of unusual books that woodworkers will enjoy. In the meantime, have fun, be safe, and keep it down to earth!

Steven Johnson is recently retired from an almost 30-year career selling medical equipment and supplies, and now enjoys improving his shop, his skills, and his designs on a full time basis (although he says home improvement projects and furniture building have been hobbies for most of his adult life).

Steven can be reached directly via email at [sjohnson13@mac.com](mailto:sjohnson13@mac.com).

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Highland Woodworking | 1045 N. Highland Avenue, NE | Atlanta | GA | 30306 | 404.872.4466

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