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# Careful care will preserve wood furniture

**CANDACE RENALLS**

**Knight Ridder Newspapers**

Whether it's grandma's antique dresser or new furniture, proper wood care can mean generations of enjoyment, use and beauty.

But defining what's "proper" can be difficult.

Advice on caring for hardwood furniture varies. And with so many furniture polishes, waxes, oils and sprays on the market, consumers are left in a quandary.

According to American Hardwood Council, confusion is fueled by the myth that wood is "alive" and needs to breathe. On the contrary, according to the council's information center, wood doesn't need to be "moisturized" with oily cleaners and polishes. If wood dries and cracks, it's due to changes in humidity, not for lack of oil.

Experts seem to agree on some basics of wood care: Dust frequently to remove particles that can scratch and degrade the finish. Place furniture out of direct sunlight and away from heat sources that can dry the finish and bleach the wood. Wood expands and shrinks with changes in temperature and humidity so extreme changes are damaging.

Agreement ends when it comes to the best way to maintain the finish, which seals and protects the wood.

The reason is because the regimen depends on the finish, according to Susan Regan, executive vice president of the Hardwood Manufacturers Association in Pittsburgh.

"Finishes really do differ," she said. "In some cases, the care advice would change depending on the finish. That is why you don't see hard and fast steps."

To keep the finish looking good, you could follow the advice of Grey Doffin, a Duluth furniture builder and restorer. If a piece has a good finish, he recommends doing nothing except an occasional wipe with a damp cloth.

You could do what Victorian furniture collectors Bob and Nancy Erspamer of Duluth do: a strict regimen of weekly dusting and yearly washing and waxing.

Or you could follow the manufacturer's recommendations, which is what Regan advises. "They know the care needed," she said.

Because some furniture wax, polish and oils may be incompatible with the finish, consumers should always ask about finish when buying furniture, Regan said.

To determine what kind of finish a piece has, experts suggest working a few drops of boiled linseed oil into the wood in an inconspicuous spot. If the oil is absorbed, it's an oil finish. If it beads up, it has a hard finish.

To determine what kind of hard finish, rub some acetone into the finish. If it sheds like water, it's polyurethane. If it dissolves in 30 seconds with some rubbing, it's lacquer. If the finish turns into a sticky gel, it's varnish or shellac. To find out which, take a cotton swab dipped in denatured alcohol and apply to the finish. If the finish dissolves quickly, it's shellac. If the reaction is slow, it's varnish.

When asked how to keep wood furniture looking beautiful, Grey Doffin said: "That's easy. Don't do anything."

Although a furniture polish or wax will add shine and appear to revitalize a dulled wood surface, Doffin says it's only a temporary fix and the sheen soon will fade. Over time, the remaining polish or wax contributes to a buildup of grease, smoke and other residues that darken and dull the finish.

To keep wood furniture beautiful, use a dust cloth or a damp cloth to remove dust and dirt, says the Duluth, Minn., furniture builder and restorer. If furniture polishes and waxes are never applied, the piece will be as shiny as the day it was bought, he says.

"If the finish of wood furniture is in good shape, nothing you put on it will improve it," Doffin says. "If it's in poor shape, nothing you can put on it will make it better."

For furniture that has darkened and become gummy from years of grimy buildup, a good cleaning may be all that's needed.

Doffin suggests first rubbing the surface with a moist cloth. If that fails, try a solution of TSP (tri-sodium phosphate), but first test a small inconspicuous spot to make sure the solution doesn't harm the finish. If buildup remains, the piece may need to be stripped and refinished to bring back its original beauty, he says.

At Schneiderman's Furniture in Duluth, customers are given brochures advising them to use a high-quality furniture polish to maintain their new wood furniture, according to Operations Manager Steve Anthony. The care recommended depends on the finish.

For furniture with an oil finish, the store recommends cleaning wood regularly with a damp cloth, taking care not to leave the wood wet. Applying a furniture paste wax at least once a month also is advised.

For lacquer finishes, the store suggests a good quality furniture polish to keep the finish elastic. The finish then adjusts with the wood as it expands and contracts with temperature and humidity changes.

## **Getting down to basics**

Besides placing furniture away from direct sunlight, heat sources and extreme temperature and humidity changes, experts generally agree on these tips:

### **ENVIRONMENT**

Since excessive heat and dryness can cause wood to split, moderate temperatures of around 70 degrees and a relative humidity between 30 and 50 percent are best. Using air conditioners in the summer and dehumidifiers in winter can help.

Curtains and blinds, window tints and screening films can avoid damage from the sun's ultraviolet rays.

Table leaves should be stored near the table so they are exposed to the same relative humidity and temperatures. Keep table locks closed.

It's better to store furniture in an unheated space where humidity is constant than a heated area where humidity fluctuates greatly.

## CLEANING

Dust can cause small scratches on wood, so dust frequently with a soft clean cloth that's slightly moistened to pick up dust. A dry cloth can be abrasive and eventually dull the finish.

Don't use a feather duster or a dry cloth that simply moves the dust.

Follow the grain of the wood when dusting.

Lift, rather than slide, lamps and objects to dust under them. Use felt bottoms on lamps and other objects.

Don't place plastic on wood because it can stick to the finish and remove finish when the plastic is lifted. Its colors also can leach into the wood.

Wood surfaces can be cleaned with a mild nonalkaline soap and water solution, but don't let the wood get soaked. Dry immediately and buff lightly, going with the grain.

## POLISHING

If oils, polishes or waxes are used to rejuvenate the wood's luster, they should be compatible with the finish.

- For lacquer finishes: Occasionally wax with a good quality furniture paste wax.
- Waxed finishes: When the finish looks dry, apply more wax, then buff.
- Polyurethane: With its clear, strong shield, no polishing is needed.
- Clear varnish: Apply a thin coat of good paste wax once a year.
- Oil: Apply oil annually.
- Shellac: Protect this old-style finish with a regular application of paste wax.



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