

University of Missouri Extension

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Cleaning May Restore Furniture

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Furniture eventually reaches a point where it needs more than dusting and polishing. Many old pieces simply need to be cleaned to restore them. Removing the original finish of a valuable piece, if it is in good condition, would destroy much of its value and character.

Wood furniture

Different kinds of furniture call for different cleaning methods. Wood furniture may be finished with oil, varnish, lacquer or shellac. For these finishes, use a good cream furniture polish or a furniture cleaner-conditioner. These may be commercial products or you may make a cleaner-conditioner by mixing together the following ingredients:

- 1/4 cup gum turpentine
- 3/4 cup boiled linseed oil

Pour the turpentine into a glass container that has a tight lid. Add the linseed oil and mix well before using. You can store the mixture indefinitely in a sealed container.

Caution

Use sparingly on shellac finish. To find out if finish is shellac, sponge a spot that will not show with denatured alcohol. The finish will soften and come off if it is shellac.

To use cleaner-conditioner:

- Work in well ventilated room.
- Protect work area with layers of paper.
- Assemble equipment:
 - Cup or small flat can
 - Saucer or pie tin
 - 3/0 steel wool pads
 - Old toothbrush
 - Old clothes
- Pour hot water into cup or can placed on saucer or pie tin.
- Shake cleaner-conditioner and pour enough into cup or can to cover surface of water. Do not stir.
- Dip cloth into oily mixture floating on surface of hot water.
- Rub on small area. Avoid getting excess moisture on places that have been glued.
- Use toothbrush on carved areas and grooves.
- For areas that appear to have a buildup of dirt, dip 3/0 steel wool pad into the cleaner and rub lightly with the grain of the wood.
- Dip fresh cloth into clear, warm water, wring cloth and wipe surface.
- Finish by wiping surface with a clean dry cloth.

Note

Discard mixture when the water becomes cold. Do not reheat — the mixture is flammable and will become gummy.

Flat painted surfaces

Painted furniture is relatively easy to clean. Paint cleaners are sold commercially in liquid, powder and paste form. A good cleaner for flat paint is soap jelly. It can be made by dissolving three tablespoons of white soap flakes in one cup of boiling water. To increase its cleaning ability, add a teaspoon of ammonia or two teaspoons of borax. If the surface to be cleaned requires scouring, add 1/4 cup of whiting.

Glossy finishes

To clean glossy enamel and other painted surfaces that have a glossy finish, use a cloth wrung out in hot water, or hot water containing one teaspoon of washing soda for a gallon of water. Rub gently. Soap-free detergents also may be used. Trisodium phosphate and many of the commercial cleaners dull the finish of glossy paints and soap leaves a film.

Leather

Leather on furniture may be cleaned by washing with saddle or castile soap and water. Use as little water as possible. Wipe off soap traces with a clean, damp cloth and, when thoroughly dry, polish briskly with a soft dry cloth.

Avoid using furniture polishes, oils or varnishes on leather because they could make the leather sticky.

If leather appears dry, apply a small amount of leather dressing with fingertips. Rub until the dressing is completely absorbed.

Leather dressing can be purchased or you can make one using the following ingredients available at most drug stores:

- 60 percent pure neat's foot oil in small container
- 40 percent anhydrous lanolin in larger container

To mix, warm the container of lanolin in hot water until the lanolin is melted. Slowly add neat's foot oil, stirring until blended.

Reference

- Georgia Aycock, Extension Home Furnishing Specialist, Auburn University Cooperative Extension Service.

Related MU Extension publications

- GH145, After the Fire is Out: Cleaning Household Textiles and Clothing
<http://extension.missouri.edu/p/GH145>
- NCR294, Upholstered Furniture Care: Cleaning and Stain Removal
<http://extension.missouri.edu/p/NCR294>

Order publications online at <http://extension.missouri.edu/explore/shop/> or call toll-free 800-292-0969.