

Highland Woodworking's Rosewood Plane Handles



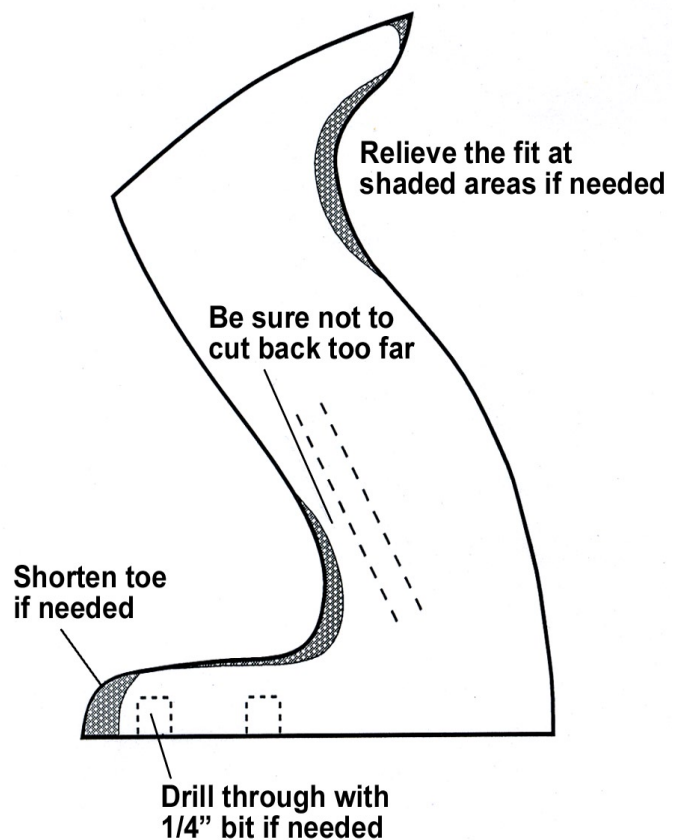
Wooden plane handles have been around in one form or another since the invention of the plane some 4000 years ago. During the past fifty years the handles made for steel bench planes have almost without exception been too small for most adult hands; they squeeze the little and ring fingers, and put too much pressure on the web between thumb and forefinger. It may be that here at the dawn of the 21st century the average hand is larger than our forefathers' hands for whom the handles were originally designed, or it may be that plane manufacturers simply have neglected comfort in favor of tradition.

Fit

Our rosewood front knob is pretty much the standard turned shape. A sculpted T-shaped handle would better match the shape of your hand, but it would be difficult to mass produce economically in wood, so we've settled for a nicely shaped version of the ordinary round knob. Our rear handle is modeled on a couple of our favorites here at the store, handles which we've modified through trial and error until they fit the way we want them to. You might well find your new handle comfortable enough to use exactly as it is. Try it out; just hold it as you would in use, with your index finger pointing forward like a pistol. Give it a bit of a squeeze—how's it feel? If you like it, you're ready to install it on your plane. If there's more pressure than you like on your little finger, you can relieve it by doing some simple woodworking. You'll probably want to remove a bit of wood at the bottom, just where the little finger rests. Just as effectively, you can make a little more room under the top so your hand can move upward slightly without squeezing the thumb web space.

A round rasp is a good tool for the job. Before you begin, hold the handle some more and look at where you feel pressure. The drawing shows where you're most likely to need to create more space. Try to sneak up on a perfect fit; wield your rasp just a few strokes at a time until the handle makes your fingers happy. Blend the new shape smoothly into the handle's contours, with no sharp breaks or flat surfaces.

As long as you're at it, you might enjoy reshaping the rest of the handle as well, with an eye toward eliminating the flat surfaces along the sides. Gently blend the curves from front and rear into the sides until the handle's cross section is a blunt oval, a smooth, continuous curve that feels so good it's hard to put down. Whatever suits you best is exactly right.



Finish

The factory finish on our handles is unusually good—thin, smooth, and attractive. You can make the handles feel and look even better, however, by removing the lacquer, sanding the rosewood extremely smooth and applying a custom oil finish. Strip or sand the finish from both knob and handle, then sand both up to at least 400 grit—600 grit if you want to indulge yourself. If you often sand to ultra-fine grit, you already know the rewards; if you've never sanded wood smoother than 220 or so, it's certainly worth finding out what all the heavy breathing is about. You can make rosewood so smooth it's hard to believe, and it's hard to describe without risk of offending someone's sense of decency.

One note: please protect yourself from rosewood sanding dust. Rosewood is relatively toxic, as woods go, and for some woodworkers it can be highly allergenic. Do not inhale the dust despite its sweet aroma, and don't wipe your mouth or eyes with dusty hands. Chances are that you wouldn't react at all, but why take chances?

For a new finish, we'll recommend an outstanding oil treatment we invented by accident nearly twenty years ago. Wipe on coat of Watco Natural Danish oil. Apply another round after about half an hour, then after a few minutes wipe completely dry. Allow to cure for about 24 hours, then buff lightly but thoroughly with a white Scotch-Brite pad or 4/0 steel wool. Now wipe on a light coat of tung oil finish (such as the Gillespie product in our catalog—not pure tung oil such as Behlen's). Leave as thin as possible a coating of oil, and go away; do not wipe dry. Let dry 12 hours, buff lightly as above, then apply another very thin coat of tung oil. Let dry at least 24 hours, then buff vigorously with wool fabric, such as an old shirt or sock. This will deliver a beautifully warm finish with a rich glow and extraordinary durability. It looks as if you've applied twelve coats of tung oil, it feels more like ultra-smooth bare wood than a layer of finish, and it will last through many years of regular use.

Installation

Our front knob should replace the one now on your plane with little or no adaptation required. The worst-case problem would be if your mounting screw were much too short; should that happen, give us a call and we'll get you set up with a suitable replacement.

Our rear handle is configured for mounting on planes with or without a front screw in the handle's foot. If your plane has a front screw mount, you'll need to finish drilling through the 1/4" hole near the front of the handle foot. Use a sharp bit, little pressure, and a backing block to limit exit tearout. If your plane has a short stud cast into the handle mount instead of a screw hole, the stud should fit neatly into the shallow hole drilled between the handle's front & rear screw holes.

If the handle is too tall to clear your plane's lateral adjustment lever, first make sure the lever lies as close under the plane iron as possible; it can be bent upward slightly if there's room. The handle can be shortened by sanding off the bottom of the foot, and by sanding the top of the handle as well. You can remove as much as 1/16" from the foot, and a similar amount from the top if need be. You might need to drill the 7/16" counterbore in the top a bit deeper to house the brass nut flush if you've had to shave the top down quite a bit.

If the handle foot is longer than the mounting platform on your plane, you can shorten it by as much as 1/4". If you haven't drilled out the front screw hole, check its depth and be careful not to expose the hole as you shorten the foot.

Use

The only thing left to do is get to work making shavings, with a plane whose handles we hope will please you for many years to come. Thanks for making the purchase—enjoy!

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