

Free Online Project

Turning a Corncob Pen ... It's Not Just for Pipes Anymore!

by Emory McLaughlin

Making a pen from a corncob is an interesting exercise in trying new, rather unusual material. The pen has an interlocking "grain" pattern and looks unlike any figure normally associated with wood. People who see these pens for the first time either know exactly what they are made from or have no idea what they are. I don't usually tell people up front and prefer to have them guess the material.

My dad feeds the squirrels, so he buys dried corn on the cob from the feed store. I get what's left behind after the little critters are finished. The smaller corncobs are preferable for my projects, and I look for ones where the pith is as tiny as possible (see Fig. 1).

Shown is the Streamline Pen kit....Recommendation: Don't use anything smaller than a Streamline....Cigar, Roller Ball, Fountain Pens, Polaris, Sierra, etc. are much better. You will have limited success with Slimlines, or Comfort kits.

PREPARING THE BLANKS

The cobs can be worked with ordinary woodworking tools. Cut and drill the pen blank just as for any other material (see Fig. 2). Be sure to check the instructions that come with your pen kit to determine correct blank length and bit diameter.

Corncobs are a fairly soft material and, at some point in the process, they have to be strengthened with cyanoacrylate glue (CA or superglue). As shown in Fig. 3, I use some thin CA glue initially to run down in the hole to help strengthen and seal the inside. This is so the corncob doesn't soak up an inordinate amount of glue when the brass tubes are glued in place (see Fig. 4).

TURNING THE BLANKS

The blanks are mounted on the lathe with the bushings in the proper position. I like to use a skew chisel for most of my turning projects (see Fig. 5), but whatever tool you select for your project, make sure it is very sharp! Turning these corncobs is easy; the material is soft and comes off rapidly.

Make sure to leave the corncob a little proud of the bushings to allow for sanding. Just be careful because the abrasive paper will remove material very quickly as well. I like to sand my projects starting at 150 grit and progress from 220 through 1,200 grit. Stack the abrasive paper in the order of use, and then cut it on the bandsaw into 1" x 2-1/2" pieces. This seems to be just enough paper for each pen.

FINISHING

Once the pens have been sanded to my satisfaction, the decision has to be made whether to add color and, if so, exactly what color to use. I use Dye-na-flow dye, which is actually a dye for silk and comes in about twenty different colors. It can be purchased at local art supply stores, but most "big box" art supply stores like Michaels carry it as well. The dyes can be used straight out of the bottle, or they can be mixed together to get a custom color. They are vivid and a little goes a long way. I do suggest, however, that you wear gloves when applying the dyes.

Using a paper towel, apply the dye (see Fig. 6) with the lathe running, making sure to get even coverage. The dye won't cover up any of the patterns on the corncob nor does it obscure the wood grain if used on wood.

The CA finish used over the dye prevents it from wearing away during use. The glue also gives the color some additional "depth." Apply the CA glue finish after



CORNCOB PENS

Fig. 1.
I like to use a small cob with a tiny pith.



Fig. 2.
Corncob pens can be made using standard woodworking equipment.

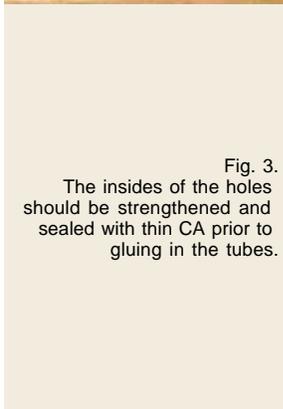


Fig. 3.
The insides of the holes should be strengthened and sealed with thin CA prior to gluing in the tubes.



the dye has dried for a couple of minutes. (See my article in Woodturning Design, Spring 2004, Issue 1, for step-by-step directions on how to apply the CA finish.)

After the barrels are sanded and polished, the pen can be removed from the mandrel and assembled as usual.

This project stands out from other pens because of the unusual material from which the pens are made. For this reason, I enjoy watching people's reactions when they find out the pens are made from corncobs. You will too!

SUPPLIES

Tools: lathe, drill press, pen drilling vise, appropriate- diameter drill bit, bandsaw, skew chisel, pen assembly tools

Corncocks

Toni pen kit* or kit of choice**

Assorted grits of abrasive paper

Thin cyanoacrylate glue (CA or superglue)

Dye*** (optional) (Dye-na-flow was used for featured projects)

Gloves and paper towels (if using dye)

***Available from craft and art supply stores such as Michaels — www.michaels.com.



Fig. 4.
A limited production run!



Fig. 5.
Set up the mandrel and bushings just as you would with any other material.



Fig. 6.
Apply the dye with the lathe running and use a paper towel to spread it out evenly.

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