

Ebonizing Wood

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Option 1: FIRE

Scorching wood with fire from a propane or mapp gas torch can be messy, smelly, unpredictable and potentially burn your shop down. But hey, it's fun to play with fire! If you go this route, best to do it outside in your yard or driveway, away from wood chips and sawdust. And keep a container of water AND a fire extinguisher nearby, just in case.

Start slow; you will find different areas of the wood char at different rates. Experimentation is key to find the technique that will give the outcome you hope to achieve. So practice on different scraps of wood and pieces that will not take pride of place on your mantle.

I'll start burning a small area until I'm satisfied with the level of char, then I move on. I usually go back over areas I've already scorched to even out the blackness. I'm looking for an "alligator skin" effect on the surface of the wood. Keep a spray bottle of water on hand to extinguish glowing embers that may burn too aggressively. Let it cool down, then lightly use a brass or nylon brush to remove some of the char and make the grain pop. This is messy. Topping it off with a spray laquer is the easiest way to finish, but I have also used walnut oil and wax with good success.

Option 2: IRON ACETATE

Like bleaching, this technique works best on species with a high tannin content (oaks, cherry and walnut). Wear gloves unless you want stained fingers.

Sand up to but not past 220 grit. Any finer and it is more difficult for the ebonizing to penetrate the surface of the wood. In a glass or plastic jar (NOT metal), place a handful of **0000 wax-free steel wool** and a quart or so of **cleaning-strength vinegar**. (TIP: Use a magnet to keep the steel wool at the bottom of the jar to facilitate the oxidation process.) Poke a hole in the lid screw it on. Leave it alone for a week or two, and the steel wool will mostly be dissolved. Stir and strain the iron filings out of the solution with a coffee filter and your ready to apply with disposable brush, paper towel or even spray bottle for larger areas. After the first coat is dry, you can apply multiple coats to increase the darkness of the wood.

Good article on iron acetate ebonizing: [How To Ebonize Wood by Brian Boggs](#) February 2021 issue of Popular Woodworking.

Option 3: INK

This is my preferred way of ebonizing. It is less messy, way more predictable and works on every species of wood. It also allows the grain to show through, is water-resistant when dry, and provides UV protection. Again, wear gloves.

A 32 oz. bottle of **Speedball Super Black India Ink** from Blick Art Supply runs around \$16. There are also 2 oz and 16 oz sizes, but the largest is the best value. Also, it will pretty much last forever.

Application is easy: Use a chip brush, sponge or paper towel. After drying, if it is not black enough, apply another coat. I like to finish it with walnut oil and wax. Then lightly buff to achieve a beautiful luster.