Choosing a Stain: Oil or Water Based?

All wood stains are designed to bring out the natural beauty, color and depth of wood. Use this guide to help you choose which stain is right for your project.

Varathane Classic Water Based Stain is great for completing projects quickly. It’s an ideal choice if you are new to staining or looking for a low-odor and low-VOC stain.

- Rich, even color in 1–2 coats
- Fast drying and low-odor
- Topcoat in 3 hours
- Soap & water cleanup

Varathane Premium Oil Based Stain is a superior stain engineered for speed. Using a wood conditioner is not needed, and the color on the can label can be achieved in just one hour.

- Deep, rich color in 1 coat
- Ultra fast 1 hour dry time
- Topcoat in 1 hour
- Mineral spirits cleanup

Varathane Classic Oil Based Stain is a traditional oil based stain that is great for larger surfaces and advanced woodworking. The slower dry time allows you to layer coats and customize the look with expert color control.

- Layer coats to achieve color
- 2 hour dry time allows for color layering
- Topcoat in 8–24 hours
- Mineral spirits cleanup
Premium Oil Based Wood Stain

- Delivers deep, rich color in 1 coat
- Ultra fast 1 hour dry time
- 75% more coverage than competition; 275 sq. ft./quart*
- Available in a variety of colors, including distressed and reclaimed wood finishes.

*Dried film coverage at 0.5 mils when measured against competition

Classic Oil Based Wood Conditioner

- Works under any oil based stain
- Promotes even stain penetration
- Seals soft wood for even color
Classic Oil Based Wood Stain

- Layer coats to achieve color
- 2 hour recoat time
- 150 sq. ft./quart
- Timeless color assortment
Classic Water Based Wood Stain – Pre-Tinted

- Delivers rich, even color in a fast-drying formula with easy soap & water cleanup.

- Apply with a clean, lint-free cloth. Do not apply using a bristle or foam brush.

- For best results, use Varathane Classic Water Based Wood Conditioner first.

- Available in 12 pre-tinted on-trend colors, grab & go

### Colors

- WHITE OAK
- GOLDEN OAK
- BARNWOOD
- DARK WALNUT
- ESPRESSO
- EBONY
- TRUE MAHOGANY
- DARK BOURBON
- AMERICAN WALNUT
- CLASSIC GRAY
- SMOKE GRAY
- GRAY STONE

Colors shown on this printed piece may vary slightly from actual product due to aging, lighting and printing process.
Classic Water Based Wood Stain – Tintable

- Delivers rich, even color in a fast-drying formula with easy soap & water cleanup.
- Apply with a synthetic bristle brush, foam brush, staining pad or lint-free cloth.
- For best results, use Varathane Classic Water Based Wood Conditioner first.
- Have product tinted at the paint counter, see pages 18-23 for Color Selector. (Use stain within 2 weeks after tinting.)

Classic Water Based Wood Conditioner

- Use as the first step in any water based stain project on all types of wood to prepare for staining.
- Promotes even stain penetration
- Helps enhance a rich, even color
Classic White Wash
Wood Stain

- Create vintage, farmhouse finishes
- Can be used on bare wood or layered over stain colors
- Create distressed finishes by applying with a cloth, brush or sponge

Premium Gel Stain

- Ideal for vertical surfaces
- Thicker consistency to prevent drips
- No lap marks or grain raise
Wood Accelerators

- Create a unique aged, weathered or charred look in minutes
- Apply on all types of bare wood
- Easy soap & water cleanup
- Water based, low odor
Premium Polyurethane + Stain

- Durable polyurethane & premium stain color in 1 step
- Superior scratch resistance
- Available in Gloss & Satin sheens

Interior Oil Based Polyurethane

- Outstanding durability and scratch resistance
- Adds a warm, golden glow
- Self leveling, no brush strokes
- Available in Gloss, Semi-Gloss & Satin sheens
Triple Thick Polyurethane

- 3X thicker than traditional polyurethane
- Complete projects 3X faster
- Ultimate durability in one coat
- Fast dry time; dries in 2 hours
- Easy soap & water cleanup

Interior Water Based Polyurethane

- Crystal-clear finish
- Scratch and stain resistance
- Low odor
- Easy soap & water cleanup
- Available in Gloss, Semi-Gloss, Satin & Matte sheens
Floor Polyurethane

- Patented Aluminum Oxide Nano Technology provides maximum resistance to scuffs, scratches and stains
- Perfect for high traffic areas
- Fast drying
- Available in Gloss, Semi-Gloss & Satin sheens
- Available in oil based & water based formulas

Exterior Spar Urethane

- Ultimate UV and weather protection for outdoor wood projects
- Formulated to expand and contract with weather conditions, providing ultimate durability
- Available in Gloss, Semi-Gloss & Satin sheens
- Available in an oil base for a warm golden glow or water base for a crystal clear finish
Super Glaze

- Pour on high gloss epoxy
- Ultra thick finish; one pour is as thick as 75 coats of varnish*
- Ideal for bars, tabletops, photo frames and more

*Compared to Varathane Crystal Clear Polyurethane

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Classic Stain Markers

- Hide minor scratches and nicks in stained wood
- Touch up scratched tabletops and furniture
- Quick one-step method to apply stain and finish
- Available in 9 colors
Classic Fill Sticks

- Fills nail holes and minor imperfections
- Soft compound for quick, easy use
- No mess, fast-drying formula for quick repairs
Premium Oil Based
Wood Stain – Color Selector

Color selection varies by store.
Scan this image with your phone to shop the wide range of Varathane Premium Oil Based stains available in-store and online at homedepot.com
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Scan this image with your phone to shop the wide range of Varathane Classic Oil Based stains available in-store and online at homedepot.com
Product must be tinted at the paint counter.

Clear Tint Base

WHITE  BEIGE  CANYON  DAISY YELLOW  NOBLE YELLOW  GINGER BEER  HONEY  CAFÉ  CHOCOLATE  FAWN  BUTTERSCOTCH  SUGAR MAPLE  DESERT CLAY  BURGUNDY  SANDSTONE

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Classic Water Based Wood Stain – Color Selector

Product must be tinted at the paint counter.

Clear Tint Base

- Enchanted Forest
- Java Bean
- American Walnut
- Golden Oak
- Briarsmoke
- Special Walnut
- Dark Walnut
- Kona
- Espresso
- Carbon Gray
- Ebony
- Alpine Valley
- Harbor Mist
- Moss
- Calm Spring

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Classic Water Based Wood Stain – Color Selector

Product must be tinted at the paint counter.

White Tint Base

- OVERCAST
- APRICOT
- WHEAT
- MELON
- DUSTY PINK
- BIRCH
AQUARIUM BLUE
FRENCH GRAY
LONDON SKY
GRAY
GREIGE
STONE AGE

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Scan this image with your phone to shop the wide range of Varathane Water Based stains available in-store and online at homedepot.com
Premium Gel Stain
Color Selector

GOLDEN OAK  CHERRYWOOD  HICKORY
MAHOGANY  BRIARSMOKE  KONA
WEATHERED GRAY  BLACK

[Image of Gel Stain can]

[Image of furniture with different stained colors]
How to Stain and Protect
with Varathane oil or water based stains and polyurethanes

1 PREP
- Sand wood in the direction of the grain with 120-grit sandpaper. Repeat the process with 150, 180, and finish with 220-grit sandpaper.
- For water based stain projects, apply Classic Wood Conditioner prior to finishing with the 220-grit sandpaper.
- Remove all sanding dust with a vacuum cleaner or tack cloth.

2 STAIN
- Liberally apply stain using a clean, lint-free cloth or high-quality bristle brush. If using Pre-Tinted Classic Water Based Wood Stain, apply with clean, lint-free cloth, do not use a bristle or foam brush.
- Allow stain to sit 3–5 minutes; wipe off excess stain in the direction of the grain. If desired, additional coats can be applied. See label instructions.
- Refer to the product label for the appropriate dry time before applying polyurethane.

3 PROTECT
- Apply a Varathane Polyurethane for long term protection.
  - For a crystal-clear finish, use water based
  - For a warm amber finish, use oil based
- Brush in direction of grain using thin, uniform coats; do not over-brush.
- Wait the appropriate dry time (see product label), sanding with 220-grit sandpaper in between coats as needed. (strongly recommended for water based polyurethane).
- For maximum durability, a minimum of 3 coats are recommended.

**CHECKLIST**

- Clean, lint-free cloths
- Protective gloves
- High-quality bristle brush (Natural for Oil Based, Synthetic for Water Based)
- Sandpaper - 120, 150, 180 & 220-grit
- Stir stick
Wood Project FAQs

**Does wood type affect the final stain color?**
Yes. The final stain color can vary by wood type. For example, Oak tends to be more red than Pine or Maple, which will change the final outcome. We recommend testing stain colors in an inconspicuous area first.

**How do I prevent wood from blotching?**
Soft, porous woods like Pine can be prone to blotching. Use a Varathane Wood Conditioner prior to staining as needed to prevent blotching.

**Should I use an oil based stain or water based stain?**
Either. Both will deliver rich, even color. Oil based stains can be easier to work with and create warm, rich color. Water based stains can raise the wood grain and require additional sanding, but are low odor and easy to cleanup with soap and water.

**What topcoat should I use?**
Oil based polyurethanes (interior) and spars (exterior) will add a warm amber hue. Water based polyurethanes and spars will be crystal-clear. If coating over a white base, use a water based polyurethane to prevent yellowing.

**How do I update a finished piece without removing or stripping?**
If you’re planning to darken color or revive scratched furniture, use Varathane Premium Polyurethane + Stain. No stripping is required. Simply sand the existing finish, and apply our one-step Premium Polyurethane + Stain.

**What product is suitable for vertical or non-wood surfaces?**
Varathane Premium Gel Stain is a thick, non-drip formula which is perfect for vertical surfaces. It is also suitable for fiberglass, metal or plastic. A graining tool can be used with Gel Stain to add wood grain texture to non-wood surfaces.