

Shellac Flakes

Note: This is a natural product; the flakes can vary considerably in color. However, when mixed into a liquid, the resulting shellac will be within an acceptable color range.

General Dissolving Information

Shellac is an excellent finish, but a user requires experience in order to employ it to its full potential. The consistency of shellac is determined by “cut”. A 3 lb cut would be 3 lb (1.36 kg) of shellac flakes per U.S. gallon (3.8 litres) of alcohol solvent. If you have never worked with shellac before, it is recommended that you start with a light consistency, preferably about a 1 lb cut. This is approximately a 1:8 ratio of shellac to alcohol. Therefore, 1 oz (28 g) of shellac would be dissolved in 8 fl oz (236 ml) of denatured alcohol. Heavier cuts can be used, but it is best to apply many thin coats rather than a few heavy ones. The heavier the cut, the quicker the shellac dries. A thinner cut will give an inexperienced user more time to spread the shellac before it becomes tacky.

After the shellac is fully dissolved, it should be strained through fine-mesh cheesecloth before use to remove any impurities. Shellac is made from the secretions of the lac insect and a few bits of insect carcass are often left in the shellac flakes.

Application

Before shellac in the liquid state is used, it should be shaken or stirred thoroughly and allowed to stand for a few hours. Shellac should be applied in long strokes with the grain. A good-quality brush with a chisel tip should be used. Its bristles should be dipped about 3/4 of the way into the shellac and gently cleared of excess shellac against the rim of the container. (Metal cans should not be used; the shellac will react with the metal, which will darken the shellac.) This gives a reasonably full brush for full strokes without incorporating any air in the shellac. Shellac should be sanded between coats and each coat should be allowed to dry thoroughly. If the shellac is dry, sanding will produce a fine powder on the surface. If the shellac is not dry, it will be somewhat tacky to sand and the paper will clog. After sanding, the piece should be wiped thoroughly with a tack cloth and recoated. Depending upon temperature and humidity conditions, you should allow between two and four hours for each coat to dry. Some craftsmen prefer to do their finish sanding of the raw wood after first giving it a coat of shellac, since this stiffens the wood fibers and allows any rough portions to be fully sanded off.

After the desired number of coats have been applied, the finish can be rubbed with 0000 steel wool or FFF pumice with paraffin oil. Rubbing should always be done with the grain. If it is desired, a coat of paste wax can be applied 24 hours after the final rubbing and the surface buffed to a finish.

Safety and Storage Precautions

Keep out of reach of children. Wear a dust mask when sanding between coats. Store in a cool, dry place.