

Turning Red Aromatic Cedar

Cedar is a very lightweight wood. It resembles spruce in weight and texture. Certain attributes particular to cedar should be kept in mind when you turn bowls from it.

- If you use a scroll chuck to grip your work, it is much better to turn a waste plug on the end of the blank and grip the outside of the plug. Since the wood is fairly weak compared to all the other hardwoods, turning a counterbore inside the foot of your bowl then gripping the foot from inside this counterbore is very prone to splitting the wood apart.
- It's very dry. Your blank will be waxed on most sides if not all. As soon as you turn a rough shape you like, stop and examine the rough bowl closely. Look for cracks forming. This is common and don't be alarmed. Get some thick CA (superglue) glue, and fill in these cracks as soon as you have a rough shape done. Fill the crack with several applications as needed until you fill the crack completely to the surface.
- Because this wood is so light and soft, typical relief angles may not be acceptable on some of your tools. The gouges may need to be ground back to a much steeper angle. You want to make sure you shear cut the wood when you turn, and not scrap. Scrapping will tear the grain fairly deep and require extensive sanding to bring to a presentable finish.
- When sanding use very course (60) grit to start, then work your way up. While you sand, apply pressure at any one spot only a few seconds (3 to 5 sec.) because the wood heats up rather quickly. Keep your paper and bowl blown off with compressed air, if you have this available; to reduce friction and increase the time you can apply pressure.
- I have found that a light touch with sandpaper works better than hard or firm pressure. You want enough pressure to feel it cutting, but no more than this. The light pressure makes it easier for the dust to revolve with the bowl past the paper and fall off. This also helps in keeping your paper from clogging.
- If you have a blower for your air compressor, rig up the blower to blow lightly on the bowl as you sand, this also helps keep the paper from clogging.
- Cedar is a very oily wood too. The oil is mixed in the sand dust. You will find the dust tends to stick to more firmly to things as well. Be prepared for this when you go to clean up the dust.
- If you don't have a dust collection system, or it is not strong enough to pull all the dust away from you when you sand, be sure to wear a filtration mask. The dust from cedar will cause you respiratory annoyances even if you aren't allergic to it.
- One of the best tools I have to shape my cedar work is a 3/8 bowl gouge sharpened very steeply. So steep the point is sharp like a needle. The overall shape of the gouge looks like a sharpened pencil. It allows you to make very small profile cuts, but it does cut and doesn't scrape when you do. This is particularly helpful turning the cedar.
- When you have finished turning the bowl, sanded it, and are ready to apply your finish if you use one stop at this point. Let the bowl sit for at least 3 days in a room in your house out of the sunlight. This gives the oil time to bleed out to the surface, and any remaining moisture along with it. After this, let your bowl sit with direct sunlight on it for an hour max, then bring it in to cool. This will force any remaining oils and waters to the surface. It will also do any latent distorting making it stable.
- If you do this final drying and curing, you will probably have to go back and do some more sanding, possibly turning, but you can expect no more surprises after you do this and you can entirely finish your bowl then.

- One thing that especially amplifies the color of cedar when you are ready to work on the finish is to apply Walnut oil liberally to the outside. It deepens and enhances the colors prior to your surface sealing. Walnut oil will dry and cure to a hard finish.
- To apply Walnut oil, use a linen rag to thoroughly saturate the outside, then take a 1" strip of felt, and apply the felt to the bowl as it turns on the lathe. This creates friction and cures the walnut oil to some degree. Afterwards, set the bowl aside for a few days in your home or in a dry warm room and let the oil completely cure.
- At this point you can apply a sealer. I prefer a two stage system of finishing. I first apply Deft Spray sanding sealer, which is simply spray lacquer. I spray light coats of this on the bowl as it turns on the lathe. It dries very fast, in a few minutes. Then I take a clean felt strip and apply it to the finish very lightly, burnishing the coat to a gloss. Be careful here not to let it get hot when you do this or it will mess up the finish and you will have to sand it off and start over.
- After I put 3 coats of deft sealer on and polish it, I spray gloss polyurethane on the bowl as it spins, only a light coat. Stop the lathe and inspect the bowl to make sure there are no runs. If you see runs smooth them out with your finger.
- Dismount the bowl at this point and set it somewhere upright to dry that dust will not get to it and stick to the poly.
- I took an old turntable or LP record player and fitted a wood hub on to the spindle so that I can put my bowls on the hub, turn the player on 16 rpms and then spray my final coats of polyurethane on my work. This provides a very even coat. Be careful doing this, it is easy to spray too much and have runs.

That's all I have right now regarding cedar. I hope you are very pleased with how beautiful your cedar bowl turns out. It is one of the most colorful and beautiful woods I have found for turning.

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