



# SHELLAC SHACK

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Here is some information you may find helpful.

- Store your shellac flakes in a cool, dry place and they will remain fresh for years. **I recommend storing them in a refrigerator.** If the flakes should clump or cake together, this is called blocking. This can happen in warm weather, but does not indicate there is anything wrong with the flakes. Just break up the blocks and add to alcohol.
- Do not store shellac – either liquid or flakes - in a metal container.
- If your mixed shellac is over 6 months old, it is best to test it by pouring a drop on a hard nonporous surface such as glass or clean metal. If it does not dry to a hard surface in an hour or so, discard that batch and mix up a new one.
- Some folks talk about using chemical-grade ethanol to mix with their shellac flakes. I myself have never run into any problem using the denatured alcohol from the paint or hardware store. You will know if there is a problem if you get "blushing" when the coat has dried. Blushing will indicate that either your alcohol has water in it, or you are applying the shellac on a very humid day.

## The Cut

With regard to shellac, the term "cut" refers to the quantity of shellac (in pounds) in a gallon of alcohol. Thus a 2 pound cut means 2 pounds of shellac flakes dissolved in a gallon of alcohol. Since few people would use a gallon of shellac for a project and because liquid shellac has a relatively short shelf life (approximately 6 months), it is best to mix up only what you think you will need. For example, to make a 2 pound cut you could mix ¼ pound of flakes with 1 pint of alcohol.

Below is a chart for mixing 8 - 10 ozs. of finish at various cuts:

1 pound cut.....	1 oz flakes .....	8 oz (1 cup) alcohol
2 pound cut.....	2 oz flakes .....	8 oz (1 cup) alcohol
3 pound cut.....	3 oz flakes .....	8 oz (1 cup) alcohol

Of course you can make a little over a pint of finish by doubling the flakes and the alcohol.

When dissolving the flakes or the buttonlac it is best to crush them, as they will dissolve much quicker. I grind the flakes in a coffee grinder. It is best to break up the buttons before grinding them.



The flakes can take from 24 to 36 hours to completely dissolve. It helps to stir or shake the solution every now and then.

After the flakes have totally dissolved, the liquid may need to be strained either with a fine mesh paint strainer or tightly woven cloth.

Some people will remove the wax from buttonlac. They like the distinctive color of the buttons but think removing the wax gives a finish with more clarity.

Suggested methods:

1. Wrap the pulverized buttons in a double layer of large paper coffee filters. Tie the top closed and set this in the appropriate amount of alcohol.
2. Dissolved the pulverized buttons in the alcohol, then filter it through a couple of large coffee filters. This method takes time as the solution filters through slowly. There is also some alcohol evaporation.

### **Application**

As with any stain or finish, it is wise to try it out on a scrap piece of the wood you are planning to finish, to see what you can expect as an end result.

In air temperatures above 70° the alcohol in shellac dries more quickly, so it is important to remember to move fairly quickly with your application and don't go back to catch spots you have missed. Because one coat of shellac burns into the next, any missed spots can be covered on the next coat and still produce a level finish.

Wipe-on or padding:

With padding, I use a 1½ to 2 pound cut of shellac.

Use soft, lint-free cotton cloth formed into a pad. You can either put the shellac into a container so that you can 'blot' the pad against the side after you have dipped it into the finish. You can also put your shellac into a squeeze bottle and apply it to the pad this way. In either case you want enough shellac on the pad to moisten it, but not enough so that it drips.

I like to use as long a stroke along the surface as I can. Like an airplane, I "land" the pad near the edge, run it on the surface to the far edge, then "take off" without stopping. If the shellac is not drying too fast, I reverse the direction without adding more shellac to the pad. After that, move on to the next section. Remember, if you don't like the way the finish is laying down, you can fix it on the next coat. One of the benefits of using shellac!

### **Brushing**

With brushing, I use a 1 to 1½ pound cut of shellac. It is best to use a natural bristle brush or a Taklon synthetic brush. I sit the brush on the wood six to ten inches from the edge as there tends to be more material 'dropped' on the initial contact. I move the brush in one direction towards the furthest edge, then back over the contact spot in the other direction. You'll want to move quickly and not re-brush completed areas.

### **Spraying**

Here, I will limit comments to saying that spraying shellac is similar to spraying nitro-cellulose lacquer regarding application. They are also similar with respect to the problem of blushing. Lacquer retarder will prevent blushing with shellac.

I will not try to describe French Polishing here, but will suggest checking out books and articles by Jeff Jewett and Bob Flexner for detailed information on French Polishing and more on the above methods.