

Sharpening Cheap Tricks

Over the years I've learned a few things about sharpening. Most of them are cheap to use. They eliminate the need for expensive stones and equipment. I'll share a few of them here.

- **Wet Sand Paper**

Sharpening with wet-sand Auto Body paper will always be my favorite. You can pick up a variety pack of Wet Sand Paper ranging from 240 to 2000 and even 3000 grit at auto supply houses. I achieve the finest edges with this paper. With practice, I eventually was able to just use a 600 grit paper to get the edge I want.

- **Milled Surfaces**

The advantage of having a milled surface is that it is perfectly flat. Examples of flat milled surfaces include Cast iron table saw tops, band saw tops, plate glass and granite counter tops. When I need to true up the straight edge of a detail knife that has been worn to a rounded profile I wet down my 600 grit paper and stick it to one of these surfaces and sharpen away. To totally flatten a blade, use a lower grit and use the next trick to flatten your blade.

- **Big Fat Sharpie Markers**

I have a big fat Sharpie marker that I use to check progress in the blade flattening process. I color the blade totally with the marker and draw it across my sandpaper ONCE. I then check where my high point is (indicated by where the marker has been sanded away) and work from there to sharpen. Do this until when I put the marker on and draw it across the paper all of the marker is gone. If you don't like a flat blade, use the marker to draw a line along the edge and draw across the sandpaper to check if you are sharpening evenly. If you are applying even pressure, the blade will show a even grind across the edge. If only the tip or heel of the blade shows marker gone you are sharpening unevenly and need to adjust your pressures and angles. The goal is to get an even line.

- **Cratex Rubber Abrasives**

These are rubber blocks or wheels that have silicone carbide and or Aluminum Oxide embedded in the rubber. Machinists use this to deburr metal. The advantage of these is that they can be cleaned easily and shaped with a file to any contour. Think gouges and V- Tools. Check ebay, Surplus Houses and Machinists Supply catalogs for this stuff.

- **Testing Your Edge**

When testing your edge use it on the material you intend to cut. For wood, cut across the grain. It should leave a polished surface with no lines in the wood. If you have lines, you have nicks. Strop again, if you still have nicks, start with the sandpaper again.

- **Mobil 1 Synthetic Motor Oil**

Some folks like to use oil to lubricate their stones or sandpaper. If you are using 3-in-1, try a Mobil 1 Synthetic Motor Oil 5w-30 and your stone or sandpaper will stay cleaner longer and perform better. It is spendy, \$6 a quart, but it will last forever. I've used this stuff to hand sand a finish on hunting and chef knives and my sandpaper seems to last twice as long and leaves a very fine finish using the 400-600 grit range.

- **Cleaning Your Sandpaper**

Sure, sandpaper is inexpensive but if you have to buy 20 sheets at a time because they fill up, what's the point right? Well, here's a tip: wash them. Wet-sand paper can be cleaned with Dawn Dish soap (the kind to hand-wash dishes). This will lift out the metal embedded into the sandpaper making the paper almost like new. Another Tip: Clean out the sink when you are done. No one likes to get yelled at by other members of the house for a dirty sink. Use an old tupperware or something. Just sayin'.

- **Cleaning Whetstones**

This tip comes from Mastersmith Wayne Goddard. He wrote a book called *The Wonder of Knifemaking*. In it he tells how he would buy sharpening stones at garage sales and swap meets for pennies on the dollar because they were dirty and useless. He then would take them home and soak them in a 50/50 mix of water and... Simple Green. Yes, Simple Green will clean a stone like crazy. I tried it without the water overnight and scrubbed the junk off with a Scotchbrite pad. Some stones took several treatments but it works like a charm.

- **Ask People**

Ask your fellow carvers for their tips. I've talked with many retired machinists, and master carvers. I learned one tip from a Grandma that sharpened her boning knife on the bottom of a ceramic mug before she cut up her chicken. She did say that you should drink all of the coffee out of the mug before you turn it over. There is a lot of experience out there, just ask.

So I'm asking you: e-mail your tips to me. I love to learn new things.