

Turning a Spatula

by Tim Kennedy



sure they all have their purposes. However, for the techniques I use here, the best grind is shown in **Figure 1**. This is a 1" wide chisel ground with a curved edge. The tip, or long point, is almost at a ninety degree angle. The cutting edge curves back toward the handle. The bevel is very acute.



Figure 1

For best results you will also need a spur drive with a removable center point. This is because the thin 3/16" end of the blank will be mounted at the spur drive as you will see later. The center point of the spur drive often splits a chunk out of the thin blank.

After the turning is done, you will need a belt sander with a series of belts ranging in grit from 80 to 220 or something close to that range.

Preparing the blank

Select a closed grain piece of wood good for kitchen use. Fruit woods, maple and beech work well. Cut the blank to about 13"x2¼"x1¼". On one edge mark a diagonal line 3/16" to 1/4" in from opposite corners as shown in **Figure 2**. Using the band saw cut along this line to create two wedge shaped blanks. Now you need to mark two more lines on the wider surface of each blank. Starting at the thinnest end move down about 1" from the end and make a mark at each edge. At the thickest end make two marks 1/2" each from the middle. Connect the respective right and left hand marks as shown in **Figure 3**. Again, using the band saw, cut along these lines to remove the waste area on either side.

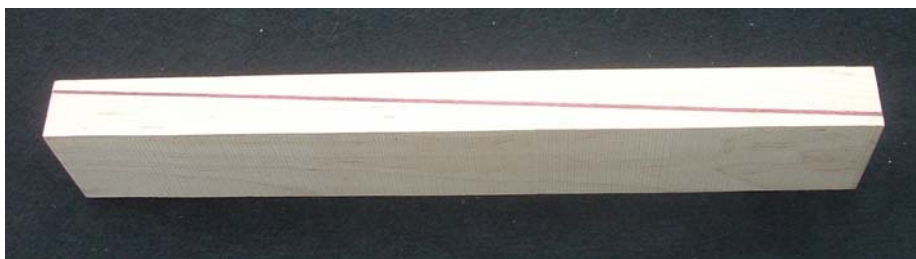


Figure 2

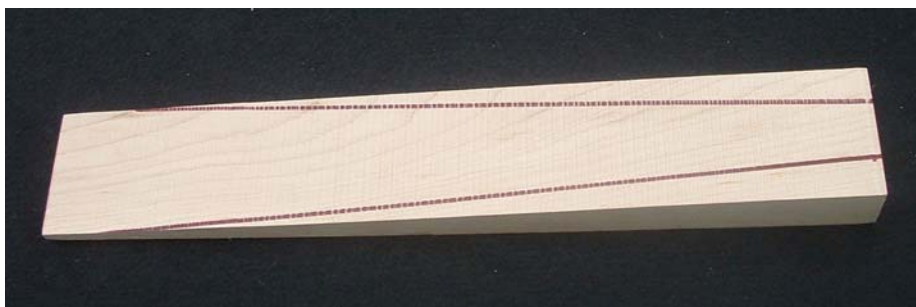


Figure 3

A useful project to make on the lathe is a wooden spatula. I have several in my kitchen. One of them gets used nearly every day and has been in service for several years now.

Tools Required

For this project I like to use a skew chisel. The spatula blank is more or less a flat skinny piece of wood, which means you will be cutting a lot of air as it turns. When using a gouge, it is easy to push too much into the work, perpendicular to the cut, resulting in tearing the piece out of the lathe. With the skew, I find it easier to apply the force in the proper direction, along the path of the cut. Secondly, I find it much easier to achieve the long sweeping curve of the handle with a skew chisel than any other chisel. I have seen many different grinds on skew chisels, and I'm

Mounting and Setup

If your spur drive has a removable center point, remove it now so the point does not split the blank. Mount the paddle end of the blank on the spur drive. The spurs should be as close to centered on the short axis of the blank as possible. See **Figure 4**. On the longer axis, offset the blank slightly as shown in **Figure 5**. The offset makes better use of the wood since the finished spatula will have a long point and short point similar to the skew chisel. **Figure 6** shows the handle end of the spatula mounted on the revolving center at the tailstock. **Figure 7** shows the whole blank mounted on the lathe.

Care needs to be given when tightening the tailstock. Too much force will cause the spur drive to split the blank. Too little will allow the blank to come loose while turning.



Figure 4



Figure 5

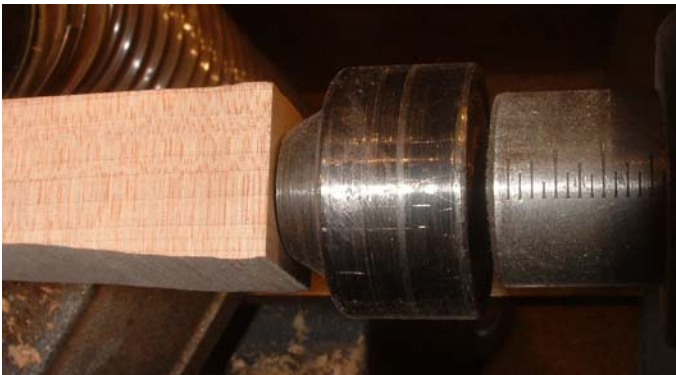


Figure 6



Figure 7

The first cuts will be closer to the headstock, so position the tool rest accordingly and set it about 1/4" away from the blank at its widest position as shown in **Figure 7**. Turn the lathe by hand to make sure the blank clears the tool rest.

Lathe speed should be set as fast as you are comfortable with. You will be cutting a lot of air, so the faster the better. I like mine set somewhere around 2500 RPM.

Turning the Spatula

For the following cuts, use the area of the blade between the middle of the blade and short point. Position yourself so you can make cuts from left to right. Start at about 4.5" from the paddle end and make a series of scooping cuts working your way back to about 3/4" from the end. See **Figure 8**. Once you get down to around 3/4" thick at the neck of the spatula, change position so you can start cutting from right to left. From the neck of the spatula to the tailstock, work your way along making a series of scooping cuts to remove most of the waste area. See **Figure 9**.



Figure 8



Figure 9

Once the waste area is removed, you can make more delicate more precisely controlled cuts to remove all the flats and refine the shape. Work on the handle cutting down hill from the tailstock toward the headstock. Likewise, work on the paddle cutting down hill from the headstock toward the tailstock. It is okay to alternate from the handle to the paddle a couple times as needed to get the shape right. As the piece starts getting thin in the middle it will start to flex and you will have a difficult time working on the paddle. At that point you need to be done with the paddle and move on to finishing the handle. In order to minimize the flexing while working on the handle, wrap your fingers behind it for support. In **Figure 10** I am working with my left hand on top of the piece. My thumb is holding the chisel against the wood, and I have three fingers supporting the work piece from behind. The fingers and thumb create opposing forces, enabling me to steady the work. **Figure 11** shows me using the thumb and fingers the same way as before, except my hand is under the tool rest and work piece.



Figure 10



Figure 11

Now that you have the shape completed, it is time to sand. I start with 120 grit and work my way up to 400. Sand the handle from the neck of the spatula to the tailstock. The thin edge of the paddle can easily be sanded by hand later.

The last thing to do on the lathe is shape the end of the handle. The shape you make here is a matter of taste. Some times I square it off at a bit of an angle by using the long point of the skew to make a "V" cut. A common mistake when making this cut is to plunge the point straight into the wood. A better technique is to position the point above the wood and drop it down into the wood by raising the handle of the skew.

Another shape I make at the end of the handle is a simple round over. First make the same "V" cut but leave about an eighth inch diameter of wood. Then using the short point of the skew, cut away the wood in a series of cuts by rolling the skew as if making the right side of a large bead.

It is nice to add a little decoration to the handle but stay away from adding details like beads, flutes or "V" cuts. You don't want to make places which are hard to clean later after

using it around food. A simple burn line or two close to the end of the handle will add just the right touch. Use a piece of wire to do this after sanding but before the handle is paired off. While the lathe is running, use the long point of the skew to make a very small groove where you want the burn line as shown in **Figure 12**. Then hold the wire in the groove. Pull it tight against the wood and wait until a burn line has formed as shown in **Figure 13**. Don't wrap the wire around any fingers. If it should wrap itself around the wood while it is turning, you might lose a finger. Pare off the spatula handle and hand sand any defect left behind.



Figure 12



Figure 13

To finish the paddle end of the spatula, use a pencil to draw the profile you desire as shown in **Figure 14**. Remove the waste area on the band saw and refine the curve on the belt sander or do it all on the belt sander with a heavy grit belt. Position the belt sander so the belt is moving away from you. That way if your fingers should slip onto the belt while sanding, it will save you a lot of skin.



Figure 14

Once you are satisfied with the profile of the paddle, start sanding away the flat sides, as shown in **Figure 15**. Your goal is to get the edge of the paddle about 1/16" thick. From there it should taper nicely to the neck of the handle. See **Figure 16**.



Figure 16



Figure 15

Use a coarse belt around 80 grit to do all the shaping. Then work your way up to about 220 grit. Inspect the flat surfaces for any scratches left behind from the coarser grits and resand as required. Bevel the edges along the tip of the paddle by quickly touching them on the belt sander. Hand sand all the sharp edges with 320 grit and you are done. See **Figure 17**. Give it a generous coating of vegetable oil or mineral oil. Let it soak in for a few minutes and wipe off the excess. I hope you enjoy cooking with your spatula as much as I do mine.



Figure 17