

azWoodman.com DIY Tutorial:

How to Strip Paint Off Wood

How to Use Heat Guns and Chemical Strippers

Stripping an old finish from furniture or trim is almost like finding buried treasure. A good stripping job can transform a yard-sale bargain or restore an antique to its original glory.

There are two ways to strip wood:

- » A heat gun softens the finish and works best on thick, many-layered paint.
- » Chemical paint strippers, on the other hand, partially dissolve paint, so they're favored for removing fewer layers of paint and clear finishes.

Either way, you'll have to scrape the softened finish from the wood. Professional strippers often use both methods on a single job.



Safety First:

We'll give you step-by-step instructions on how to use heat guns and chemical strippers, along with safety tips for each method.

Read through all the information before you begin your project, and **before you start to work**, take the necessary precautions to prevent fire and protect yourself from harm. Let's start, though, with some important general safety tips:

1. Before you start a stripping job, make sure that you have the gear, workspace and knowledge to do it safely. Many strippers can burn you chemically; a heat gun can burn you, period. Almost everything you're working with is flammable, so be careful.
2. Always keep an AB-rated fire extinguisher handy when you're working with a heat gun or solvent-based chemical stripper. Never use solvents near an open flame (such as the pilot light in a gas water heater or gas stove). Read the safety label on the stripper container and take its commands to heart. That includes knowing what you need to do *right now* if the unexpected happens.
3. Toxic fumes can rise out of softening paint, and both chemical and heat-gun methods can release them. That's why good ventilation is important. A respirator is a good idea, too. Lastly, wear gloves, goggles, long sleeves and old clothes.
4. Beware of lead-based paint. It was widely used on houses built before 1978. Lead is wickedly toxic stuff. If you think you have lead paint, **do not** remove it with a heat gun, by sanding, or in any way that releases lead dust or fumes into

the air. There is no totally safe way to strip lead paint, though chemical strippers come close.

Wear a respirator with a NIOSH-rated P-100 HEPA filter if there's any possibility that you're dealing with lead. Contact your local government's hazardous-waste program to find out how to dispose of lead-based paint peelings. You'll find more on the lead question in the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's lead paint safety guide.

If you suspect that there's a lot of lead paint in your house, have it checked (and perhaps removed) by professionals. CornerHardware.com can hook you up with reliable, prescreened experts; just visit our Services department.

Heat Guns: An Overview:



Heat guns work best on thick, built-up layers of paint. While an inexpensive heat gun will eventually soften any finish, you'll work faster with a gun that can blow air at 1,000 degrees. Hotter than that isn't better, since higher temperatures release more vapors.

The thinner the paint, the less effective a heat gun will be. To lift just one or two coats, use a chemical stripper. Same goes for varnish, lacquer and shellac; heat will just make them sticky, and they could catch fire. Use a chemical stripper on window sashes, too: heat can (and will) break the glass.

Equip yourself with a putty knife and a molding scraper to remove softened finish. Don't scrape paint with sharp chisels or knives: they're liable to dig in. Your scrapers' blades may get hot, so choose tools with substantial handles to protect your (gloved) hand from the heat. You may want to keep a few scrapers handy; the blades don't work as well when they're hot, so if you can trade off, each one will be able to cool completely before you need it again.

Heat Guns: Step by Step:

1. Put down a canvas drop cloth to catch paint peelings: newspaper catches fire too readily.
2. Hold the gun 5 inches away from the painted surface, and apply heat until the paint bubbles. Keep the gun moving. With your putty knife, scrape the softened paint away from the wood as you direct hot air over the next patch of paint. At times, you may need to bring the gun's nozzle closer to the wood, but be careful not to scorch it unless you plan to paint it again.

Take care not to scratch the wood with your scraper. Remove only the finish that comes away easily. The last layer of finish is often best removed with a chemical

stripper.

3. Dump the paint peelings onto your drop cloth or set up a box to scrape them into as you go. Left on the workpiece, they'll reattach themselves as they cool. When you're done, bag them and put them in the trash.

Chemical Paint Strippers: An Overview:

Except for furniture refinishing compounds, stripper usually comes as a thick gel that you apply in a heavy layer. That keeps the active ingredient from evaporating too quickly.

Strippers can be highly specialized, so select the right type for the job you're planning. Follow the recommendations below, and always read the label so you're sure of what it is and how it works.

Furniture refinishers are solvents that dissolve aging shellac and lacquer. You can then remove the finish altogether using steel wool or, working more gently, just take off the cracked or dirt-impregnated top layer. Hazardous (and flammable) ingredients acetone, toluene and methanol make good ventilation essential. Again, never use solvents near an open flame.

Methylene chloride stripper loosens finish from the bottom up, lifting multiple layers in one go. This stripper works fast and well on all finishes, but its fumes are seriously toxic use it outdoors only, wearing old clothes, rubber gloves, goggles and a respirator with black (organic vapor-rated) filter cartridges.

Solvent-based stripper works more slowly than methylene chloride, but faster than the "safe" types described below. While not as dangerous as methylene chloride strippers, solvent strippers require protective gear and good ventilation. And, of course, they're flammable.

"Safe" strippers are safe (to varying degrees) for use indoors. 3M Safest Stripper™ is a very slow but very safe product whose active ingredient is dibasic esters (DBE). You don't have to wear a respirator when you use it and it won't hurt your skin. It can take up to 24 hours to do its work.

Citristrip® and other relatively safe strippers use n-methyl pyrrolidone (NMP) and other solvents that aren't as volatile as the traditional strippers. Nonetheless, you'll still want to work in a well-ventilated area and wear gloves and eye protection. These chemicals work slowly, so apply several coats, then cover the stripper with plastic to slow evaporation.

Chemical Paint Strippers: Step by Step

1. Prep your work area. If you're stripping inside, make sure your ventilation is adequate. Put down newspapers to catch the mess. Again, wear old clothes, long sleeves, goggles and rubber gloves.

2. Apply the stripper. Pour some stripper into a wide-mouthed container. With a cheap or worn-out natural-bristle brush, paint it thickly on the workpiece. Brush only in one direction, and go slow to minimize splashes. If you're working on a large piece with fast stripper, do one part at a time one side of a wooden chest, for example. To improve a slow stripper's performance, cover the piece with a plastic (poly) sheet or seal it in a plastic garbage bag.



3. Wait for the bubbles, then scrape off the finish. When the finish has softened, it will form bubbles and wrinkles and pull away from the wood surface. That's when you start scraping. Apply more stripper in areas where this loosening hasn't occurred. **Note:** Latex paints don't always bubble; let the stripper work awhile, then test for softened paint with your scraper.

Scrape flat surfaces with a putty knife and contours with a molding scraper. Use an awl or probe and a toothbrush to get into tight spaces. Use a fistful of dry wood shavings to scour complex surfaces; shavings also absorb leftover stripper. To remove finish from the crevices of lathe-turned legs, pull twine back and forth as if shining your shoes. Keep those goggles on: the gunk will fly.

Don't scrape too hard where finish is reluctant to come off. You can always apply a second coat.

4. Rinse and smooth the wood. Citristrip makes a wash with a mineral spirit base that removes chemical residue. Soak a fresh scrub pad with it and wash the piece thoroughly. This stuff puts out a lot of vapor, so ensure good ventilation and use your goggles and gloves.

Let the wood dry and smooth it with very fine sandpaper or steel wool before you put on the new finish. Look closely for areas that need attention: loose veneer and holes that need patching, for example.

5. Clean up the mess. While the mixture of stripper and old finish is wet, it's hazardous. Let your slime-covered newspapers dry in the open air before you bag them.

The safe DBE- and NMP-based strippers take a long time to dry. Find a place where your safe-stripper-based mess can dry out without the risk of a child or pet getting into it: perhaps an open-topped cardboard box in your attic or up in the rafters of your garage.

Check with your local hazardous-waste office to see if you can add the stuff to your ordinary trash. Many municipalities require that you take old paint, cans, residue, solvent and the like to a special disposal facility.

Tools & Materials

- » Stripper: methylene chloride, solvent-based, DBE or NMP
- » Goggles
- » Drop cloth
- » Rubber gloves
- » Refinisher
- » Respirator
- » Heat gun
- » Paintbrush
- » Putty Knife
- » Paint remover wash
- » Molding scraper
- » Awls and probes
- » Scrub pad
- » Steel wool
- » Fire extinguisher
- » Portable fan

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