

WHITTLING

David Alty and Dan Watson of Woodlands.co.uk have both been working wood for many years, and here they offer up two fun but practical tasks for all you would-be whittlers out there

MANY OF US may have first encountered whittling on *The Beverly Hillbillies*, as Jed Clampett whittled away at a piece of wood by the pool of his mansion while Granny prepared a possum stew. Well, according to both experts and participants alike, whittling wood is such a fulfilling craft that it can develop into an addiction, and for many what started simply as a leisurely pastime has become something of a sculptor's art and a lifelong pursuit.

Whittling is certainly one of the easiest hobbies to take up, as it is cheap with virtually no costs involved. The requirements are simple – a sharp knife, a piece of wood and a bit of oil are all a novice will need to try their hand. But whittling also has a utilitarian side, producing many useful and loveable objects such as spoons, bowls and figures, which stand out for their sheer uniqueness and authenticity.

Whittling is renowned as a relaxing and hugely enjoyable craft, which can work wonders at settling down even the busiest of minds –

perhaps a meditation for the restlessly creative among us. In truth there is nothing to compare with holding a sharp knife in your hand and striving to shape a small, carefully chosen piece of wood as a means of exercising mental focus and becoming fully immersed in a task to the exclusion of the world



Dan Watson woodland products.

around you – an essential respite in the busy and stressful modern world.

If you are lucky enough to own your own woodland, or visit one frequently, the temptation to turn odd pieces of wood into useful or decorative objects can become huge. Such is the case with regard to our two contributors, David Alty and Dan Watson of Woodlands.co.uk. As seasoned whittlers they have provided us with step-by-step instructions to make two whittling projects, each with the emphasis on having fun whilst being creative.

David Alty of Brampton in Cumbria developed an interest in woodworking as a young Scout. In the last ten years alone he has turned out dozens and dozens of spoons and knives (the sort you use for spreading butter or cheese), progressing through various designs. For David, whittling is more than a hobby: it has become an essential part of his life. He says, "Every Christmas I make sure that many of my friends and family get a spoon I've made. This is my way of giving them something that is unlike anything else. Every single carved



Above: Shaping the piece of wood.

Right: The beauty of working outdoors in a woodland environment.

project is completely different in sheen, grain and shape. This keeps me busy creating things the whole year round." I am confident his views here will strike a chord with many Home Farmer readers.

David recommends making a spoon as a beginner's project and outlines here for us both the equipment and materials required, together with a step-by-step guide to completing the job.

TOOLS

- * Sharp-edged knife (but preferably not a penknife)
- * Saw (to cut the wooden pole in half)
- * Wooden mallet (or an offcut), to knock the wood
- * Hooked knife
- * Piece of charcoal or a pencil
- * Fine sandpaper (optional)

TYPES OF WOOD

Silver birch, willow or sycamore – all species that grow readily and easily in woodland areas. They are good woods to use, as they are soft and easy to carve. Sycamore is also germ resistant and therefore useful for making utensils.

Spoon

METHOD

- 1 Select a straight piece of wood from any part of the tree. There is usually a huge amount of wood waste in any woodland, so look around for a good piece. Green wood is best, and the fresher the better, as green wood is easier to work.
- 2 Start by cutting the wood block to a length just a little longer than you will need for the finished spoon, then split it in half along its length. You can do this by placing the knife with the edge across one end of the pole and carefully, using an offcut from your pole as a mallet, knock your knife into the pole. Do this slowly,



David Alty breaking down a small tree trunk.

- without forcing it. You could also use a froe or saw to split the wood in half.
- 3 Remove the pith along the log. This is the thin brown line that runs down the centre. This will reduce the danger of the final spoon splitting down later.
- 4 Split the wood in half again so you end up with a flat piece. Decide on the width, length and depth of your spoon – most beginners make the mistake of aiming for a deep bowl, which makes the spoon uncomfortable to use in the mouth and, of course, it takes rather more time.
- 5 Draw your spoon design on your wood block using a piece of charcoal or a pencil, marking both the handle and the bowl. A cereal spoon is usually no more than 15cm (6in) long and 7.5cm (3in) in diameter.

6 Using a very sharp knife (blunt is dangerous), whittle and slice around the outline. The best method is to work along, one dimension at a time, following the wood grain. Work from both ends of the piece, carving away from yourself in all directions, with small movements. You will end up with a square spoon with no depth in the bowl.

- 7 Carve out the bowl. You will need an Indian crook or a hooked knife that has a curved blade. Work across the grain, gradually scooping out the bowl, but don't go too deep. On a note of caution, this step requires the most patience and precision, and carries the greatest risk of cutting yourself.
- 8 Decide whether you would like to sandpaper the utensil. This is recommended for beginners, so as to obtain a smooth finish. If you do intend to sandpaper, store your work at room temperature for a few days in order to dry the wood out a little, which will make sanding much easier. ►



Whittled spoons by Dan.

9 ► Oil your finished spoon to stop it drying out or getting dirty by using a nut oil from your local supermarket – walnut is a good choice. Avoid using olive oil, as it goes rancid. Dip a cloth in a bit of oil and wipe the spoon, applying 2 or 3 coats. It is a good idea to allow 24 hours between coats. The oil enhances the grain, protects the spoon and prevents it from splitting. If you are allergic to nut oil you can use horse grade linseed oil, but not the normal woodwork linseed oil.

Dan Watson of Leeds in Yorkshire has been doing woodcraft for over ten years. When he first started working for Woodlands.co.uk he learnt crafts such as building woven fencing, making charcoal and whittling, as well as using a pole lathe. He began teaching his own bushcraft courses in 2006. Dan says, "I really enjoy whittling. I must have whittled at least a hundred spoons and other objects. I sell a few, but not many – although that is not really the point, as whittling is addictive. For me, eating breakfast from my own handmade wooden bowl and spoon is incredibly satisfying. Besides, the entertainment



Whittled work by David Alty.



A beautiful rustic bowl by Dan.

value of whittling is huge. Carving next to a campfire in the wood is far better than watching the best TV show. I hope my son will take it up one day."

Here, Dan explains how to make a butter-spreading knife.

Butter-spreading Knife

Find a green, straight pole. Later, as you get better at whittling, you can use a piece with a bend or curve. To make a butter-spreading knife you will need to end up with a



piece that is 25cm (10in) long, 5cm (2in) wide and 2cm (3/4in) thick. The finished knife itself will only be around 20cm (8in) long, but the extra length allows a firm hold as you whittle off. You should always hold the carving knife in your dominant hand and keep the wooden piece in the other.

METHOD

Follow steps 1–4 as above.

- 5 Mark the shape of the knife along the piece using a pencil, or charcoal from the campfire.
- 6 Start carving out the knife handle. Note which way the grain is running and whittle off a little bit at a time following that direction, and always away from yourself.
- 7 Turn your attention to the blade and start whittling off with the sharp knife. The spreading edge needs to be rounded and thinner. The back edge is straight, thicker and stronger.
- 8 When you are satisfied with the shape of your handle and blade, cut it to size with a saw, removing the extra 5cm (2in) from the handle so as to end up with a 20cm (8in) long knife.
- 9 Follow the sandpapering and oiling instructions as for the spoon. Recoat the knife with oil every so often. Do not clean it in a dishwasher!

TIP

If you are not able to finish the project in one sitting put the wood in the freezer, otherwise it will dry out and become unworkable. Before resuming work, give it time to thaw out before you start again. *



Further Info

- * The Woodlands.co.uk website provides lots of information on practical woodland courses such as green wood working and many other rural crafts and pursuits, including woodland for sale for the more ambitious whittling wannabe. Visit www.woodlands.co.uk/owning-a-wood/suppliers-directory/training-and-courses/ to learn more.
- * Check out the Dan Watson Woodland Products website at www.dwwp.co.uk for information on whittling courses and much more.
- * Check out www.greystokecyclecafe.co.uk to learn more about David Alty's courses on whittling later this year (20th July and 3rd October).