

SHOPPING FOR WOOD; Part 1 – How Much Is Enough

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I decided to make a bathroom mirror frame in a style to mimic the bathroom window; that is, I used a colonial window casing (to match the bathroom window), but trimmed, cut and re-glued it from 4-1/2" wide to 3", and turned some reduced size rosettes to mimic the original ones in the window trim of this 1908 house. I got 4 good rosettes out of 6 during my first session trying faceplate turning, so I was happy with that part. For the casing, I'd bought a 10' piece, needing to make only 7' of reduced size product.

The project, however, eventually required several 10' lengths. Cut wrong, go get another length of casing. Measured wrong, go get another piece of casing. Glued poorly, go get ..., etc. And, of course, several lengths of molding meant several separate trips to Anderson-McQuaid in Cambridge. Although I finally succeeded in making the mirror frame, what should have been a 3-4 hour task took 3 weeks. When I add in the gasoline and tolls, I think I paid mahogany prices for poplar.

Lesson learned -- make that lesson reiterated: don't try to get away with a minimum amount of stock. Buy extra.

I was taught to make a stock list from the project plans, develop the number of board-feet required and buy extra to allow for wasting the checked ends, maybe some sapwood edges, a knot or two, harvesting a special piece from the board's grain orientation, etc. I was taught to get 10-30% extra, depending on the project complexity and the kind of wood I was buying. However, in my novice phase, which continues to this day, I've found 50% extra to be an absolute minimum value and 100% to be reasonably safe (the mirror frame was an unusual case – honest, it was). And I've actually wasted very few checks, knots or sapwood. But I've found plenty of "Oops!" hidden in the boards and oops use up a lot more wood than checks and knots. Buying plywood is the only exception. Even then I tend toward 30% extra. I've found that even plywood has hidden oops.

I think I'm going to spend a long time in this perpetual novice stage of my woodworking career. My scrap wood pile is growing so fast that I'm thinking of buying a wood-fired furnace to heat the house next year. And I'm favorably considering projects that use lots of very small pieces of wood.

Oh, and a word of advice to those planning a new workshop. Look at the amount of space you are proposing to dedicate to lumber storage. Trust me, it's not enough. Double it and add more for those inevitable piles of shorts and other "potentially useable" scraps that all woodworkers hoard like gold pieces.

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