Kurt's clinic

Kurt Hertzog answers some readers' questions

Why is turning rings such a big thing?

Question: I see that rings are becoming a big thing in the turning crowd. I'm not certain I want to take the plunge yet. Do you turn rings? What are your thoughts on where the current interest in rings is going? Suggestions to get my feet wet with minimal expense?

Some necessities for doing rings. Measuring finger sizes and ring sizes will be key to achieving proper sizing to standards

Answer: Rings have been around for a while and recently become a popular and fast-growing project among the turning community. Yes, I've turned rings for many years, starting before the advent of kits for rings. I don't turn many but I keep a dish full of them to pass around at my turning demos and use them for teaching aids, particularly the work-holding aspects. I think the interest and demand for rings will continue to grow and be with us for many years, much like turned pens have grown and hung on.

Rings are quick and easy to do on smaller lathes, and can span the range from a beginner's project through to the very high-end collectables. You can get started with rings with no out-of-pocket expense except for the kit if you go down that path. The work holding can be done with easily shop turned mandrels using shop scraps. You can refer to *WT294* (July 2016), Turning Wearable Rings, and *WT296* (Sept 2016), Fundamentals of Turning Bracelets, for methods of work holding that will work well. That said, there are many excellent mandrels available at reasonable cost. Either way, you can get into rings, and for all practical purposes large rings known as bracelets and bangles, for minimal investment.

The kits, really a metal core, available from nearly all of the retailers, bricks-and-mortar or internet, are similar, differing slightly in design but mainly materials and certainly quality. If you turn rings without an internal metal core, you'll be faced with strength of materials issues and grain orientation considerations, though it's certainly doable. If you use a core, you'll be able to use virtually any material, from grained woods to pours and cast, the metal core being the final wearer sizing and material support feature.

Your path on mandrels, sizing tools, and ring cores will largely depend on your end goal. Are you going to turn rings for a few giveaways or gifts or to get into rings for sale in any quantity? If you are in it as a saleable item, bear in mind that each ring needs to be correctly sized for the final customer. You'll either have to have a range of sizes in whatever design(s) you are offering or measure the fit for the end user and turn that piece to fit. If you decide to do commissions, my recommendation is that you do the measurements on the person with your ring size gauge rather than accept their supposed ring size. The end fit is so important and personal that minor differences change from a perfect fit to unacceptable.

One of the facts that most people and ring creators don't think too much about is that everyone's finger sizes change during the year. The size variations from summer to winter can be minor or dramatic. Depending on when they are sized and bought, the wearability could be an issue when the seasons change. Also, your competition, exactly like the pen turning arena, will range all over the map from those trying to make a decent return on their efforts to those literally giving them away to partially recoup their material cost. Your competition in rings, like pens, ranges from folks just banging out results that are of questionable use and quality to high-end, artistic jewellery level pieces of art. Once you dive in, your place on the curve will be based on your turning and finishing expertise, along with attention to detail.

If you need inspiration, techniques or recommendations on tools and supplies, there is at least one Facebook group that is dedicated to rings. As with many information sources on the internet, there is a wealth of valuable and accurate knowledge along with some dodgy stuff. You need to be able to ferret out the good from the not so good. Like all turning learning, give rings a try and enjoy the journey.

I enjoy making rings without the modern hardware. Once set up, you can produce a bunch in a short time

Ring materials can be just about anything from woods to plastics to cast materials to precious metals

Modern mandrels for ring-making, typically using ring cores. The left mandrel is universal sizing and the right uses bushing sets

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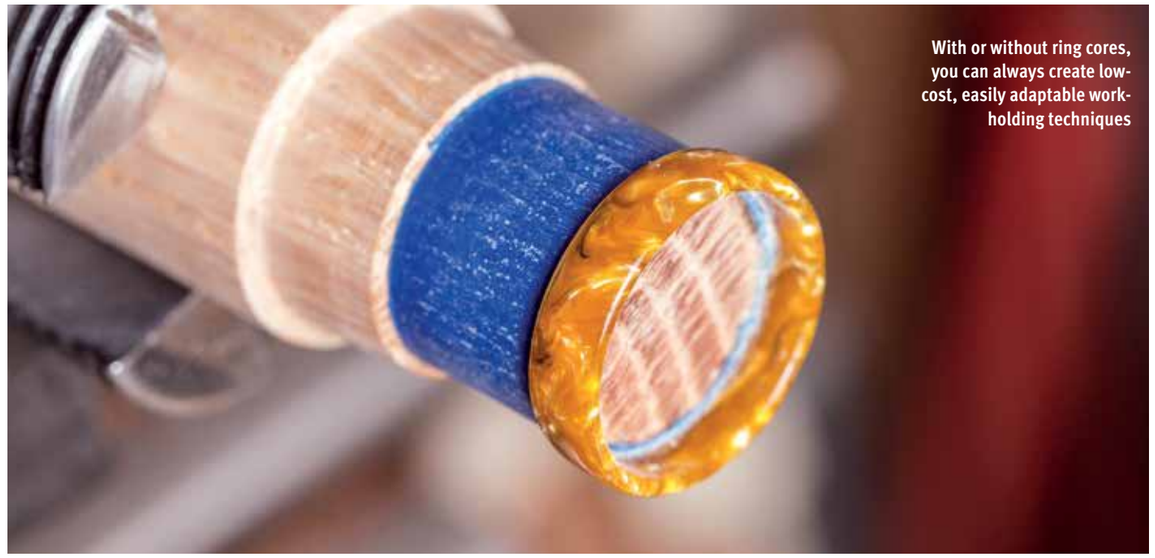

With or without ring cores, you can always create low-cost, easily adaptable work-holding techniques

Methods for delicate finials?

Question: I really enjoy your delicate finials on your hanging shell ornaments. How do you get them turned so delicate? What do you finish the finials with?

My go-to finial species is African blackwood, but on occasion when shorter and less demanding I'll use some rosewood species

Learn to support the spindle from behind as you cut. You are in essence squeezing the spindle between the tool and your finger

Answer: Turning thin and delicate finials, or any other thin spindle turning, does take some practice. Accept the failures that will come with that practice as you develop the technique and tool control that will get the results you want. That said, in my opinion a large part of the battle begins right at material selection. Not only is the species critical but also the individual piece selected for use. For my finials, I use African blackwood almost exclusively. Others may tout different materials, wood and otherwise, my experience has shown that blackwood works better than all else I've tried.

Although not really and totally black, the colouration goes nicely with just about everything. Close examination of African blackwood will show the spectrum of colours, including black, grey, purple, browns, tans, and more. To me, the most important characteristic is the tight, dense grain structure that allows crisp details and features that, while very thin, are incredibly strong. Before I even start, I may examine many blanks to find one I will use. Blanks with great figure, off-axis grain, or other 'defects' from my finial criteria don't ever go to waste. With the cost of blackwood, every bit of my stock ultimately finds a use. Either cut into shorter lengths that won't encompass the undesirable features, used as pen blanks, or lidded box stock, there is no

Like the very thin, long stem goblet shaft, you work in sections completely finishing each short section and then moving on to the left

If you aren't comfortable "catching" your finial as you part it off, use this trick to safely enclose and catch your prize as you separate it

wasted material. Blackwood has exquisite colourations and grain when closely examined. I love that but avoid it like the plague. I want perfectly straight grain that runs the full length of my intended finial. That will turn well and have great strength in the slender areas. On the rare occasion that I use a different wood, I follow the same selection process. I have used various rosewoods a few times. The straightness of the grain, especially in the thinner shaft areas, trumps all the other potential grain beauty. The finial turning is a single-ended mount and turned from the thin end in. I usually turn the selected blank between centres to round the stock and put a mounting tenon on one end. Once accomplished, the finial blank is mounted from that tenon and the tailstock is removed. The unsupported end will be the most delicate part so the turning begins there and progresses toward the tenon. All sanding and finishing is progressively done in short lengths from the thin, unsupported end towards the headstock. It is turned, sanded, and finished if desired in short lengths, much like the technique used for making long-stem goblets.

A technique that is worth developing is turning one handed and supporting the finial with the other hand. You essentially are 'squeezing' the work between the tool's cutting edge and your support directly opposite the force of the cutter. Care needs to be taken but it is easily learned. Just be certain that your watch, smock sleeves/cuffs, and any other potential catchable materials are well clear of the rotating machinery, or removed. Once a short section is completed, it is done. You won't be going back there because progressing up the finial will weaken the support for the thinner end portions. Deciding to make additional cuts or sanding in a finished area once you've progressed up the finial is usually a breakage waiting to happen.

Blackwood, properly turned and sanded, really doesn't require a finish since it polishes up beautifully. When I feel that a higher gloss is appropriate, I use a product called EEE-Ultra Shine made by U-Beaut in Australia. I believe it is really is a wax infused with tripoli abrasive. It takes the sanding to the next step and leaves a high-gloss shine. Since the finial will rarely, if ever, be touched, I'm unconcerned about a durable finish and this finish serves very nicely to punch up the looks. At completion, the spindle, a.k.a. finial, is parted off again, supporting it with your one hand to prevent it from sailing into space and being damaged on landing. Holding it with your one hand loosely will capture it safely once it is parted off. I find that V-cuts with a skew chisel are the best way to part off a finial. Give finials a try with less expensive stock as you learn. You won't be able to achieve the same thin sections or hold the same crisp detail but you'll be able to learn less expensively as you refine your technique. Best of luck as you progress.

I find the turning characteristics, the ability to hold detail, and the pleasing look of African blackwood make it the best choice for finials

Send your questions to Kurt's email: kurt@kurthertzog.com