

Turning a hollow form from a burl cap by Peg Schmid

The first step in turning this form is to select a burl with a well-rounded shape on at least half of the burl. Look for deep bark inclusions and avoid them if possible. These will open in the turning process and can cause you difficulties while hollowing. Inspect the burl for cracks, bark inclusions, and clean away any excess bark. These burls are pressure washed to remove the bark and they set aside to dry. The process is very effective but does leave some bits of bark. A wires brush or a wire wheel on a rotary tool will generally clean up any issues. The quality of the burl will vary depending on the supplier.

Once you have selected a burl you will need to mount it securely on the lathe. To do this I set the spikes of the burl on a belt sander to create a flat spot on the wood. Do not sand the peaks to the surface of the burl but rather knock off the tops. Place the burl on a face plate, 6" is best, and secure the burl using screws. I use #8 stainless steel marine quality screws. These are strong and they will not rust if there is moisture in the wood. Be sure that the screws are secure and that the burl is tight against the faceplate surface.

A word of caution. Turning these burls is a delicate process. You must take light cuts with sharp tools. If you get a catch, you may damage the burl and it might be necessary to discard the piece. It is rare that you can remount these once you have pulled them away from the face plate.

Mount the faceplate on to the lathe. Begin by smoothing the surface of the cut side of the burl. This is the side where the burl was removed from the tree. Make a convex shape in the center which defines the size of the hollow section. Look at the bottom of the burl to determine this size. You will have some natural shapes that are not circular. These irregularities are perfect for turning a wing on the edge of the form. You will have to judge the size of the hollow form based on the size of the burl and account for any hills and valleys in the shape. It is not necessary to make the hollow form extremely thin when hollowing because of the voids in the surface.

Cut a 1" hole using a forstner bit or spade bit into the center of the burl. Gauge the depth of the cut based on the thickness of the burl. Remember to account for the point of the forstner bit in your measurements. Leave some thickness at the bottom as you will need to do some hand carving once the burl is removed from the faceplate.

The hollowing method and tools are determined by the size of the burl. For smaller burls, under 8", use hand hollowing tools but for larger burls it is best to use a hollowing system. This will lessen the strain of hollowing on your hands and shoulders. My personal preference for hollowing is an Elbow Tool. There are many systems on the market and you may you whichever you prefer.

Hollow the form. Watch for puffs of sawdust as the burl turns on the lathe. This will be a indication that you have violated the wall space of the burl. Most likely in the depths of one of the natural valleys. In most cases a small opening is acceptable but if it is too deep it can affect the strength of the burl and might need to be discarded. Do not ever be afraid to throw away a failed attempt. Do not waste your

time making repairs when you can better serve yourself by starting over with a new piece of wood. I consider the cost of the wood to be less than the trip to the emergency room.

Once you have completed the hollowing process you will create a threaded insert to fit into the hollow opening. I generally stick with a 1" insert and thread a finial to match.

You may wish to leave the hollow form with just the opening and no insert, which is perfectly acceptable. Once you have finished you will remove the burl from the faceplate.

Hiding the screw holes is accomplished by carving and filling the holes with sawdust. Try to use the same wood or you may wish to use a thin dowel glued into the holes. I prefer the dowel method and will use this in the demonstration. Cut the dowel off with the surface and then fill any cracks with wood filler or a sawdust mix with glue. I will show you a little optical trick that will help make these all but vanish.

Use a rotary tool carving device to reshape the peaks of the burl mountains you flattened when sanding.

Make them resemble the other peaks on the burl. This will hide the screw holes and of course, the better the job you do the harder it will be for someone to discover your secret.

Spray the entire burl with a clear spray finish. My personal preference is Krylon Clear Satin. The satin finish gives a very smooth coat and allows the beauty of the wood to show without drawing attention to the defects that a gloss finish will highlight.