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“The Fine Art of Woodturning”

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CD's hints for working with Banksia Pods

Choose the right pod for the project.

Not all pods are created equal. The lighter, browner ones tend to be more sound inside. Whitish or yellowish color can indicate a punky interior. Cracks at the core will not yield a good finial, knob or stem, but make a great looking mushroom cap. Nicely formed, undamaged “eyes” and a less weathered exterior make a better natural edged piece, but if you are turning the exterior away the weathered ones work just as well. A lot can be told about the pod by cutting off the ends.

Make sure the pod is dry.

Weighing is one way to keep track of the drying process, and “just giving it plenty of time” is another. A simple drying kiln can be made from an insulated box with a light bulb inside and holes around the top and bottom to allow airflow.

Think of it as a piece of branch wood.

A natural surface around the circumference, and a small diameter but long length, make a pod suitable for projects that you would think to make out of a branch.

The core has no structural integrity.

Although it looks like the heart of a branch, the core of a pod has no grain structure and a thin finial will break off very easily.

A Banksia Pod is made in layers.

The outside is a layer of hard glaze, over a layer of fuzz. Next is a semi-hard layer that needs stabilizing with CA glue if the eyes are going to stay in when the piece is hollowed, then a sound layer and a pith-like core with a flower pattern around it.

Be sure to use eye protection!

When roughing the exterior of the pod, there are fur and sharp particles flying around. Also, expect to need a bath after turning a pod (they are very dusty)!

Be careful cutting the ends off on the bandsaw.

A vee-groove shaped sled to hold the pod from rolling is a good idea. Keep your body parts out of the path of the blade!

Start with the pod between centers.

After cutting the ends off, the center core of the pod can be used for the centers to mount the pod evenly most of the time. A chucking point can be cut, or a tenon for mounting into a recess in a faceplate-mounted waste block. I have not had good luck cutting the end off and just gluing it flat onto a waste block.

Pods scrape well, and cut well, but they are abrasive.

High speed steel, or especially the new “powder metallurgy” tools, carbide tipped drill bits, and good quality sandpaper are really valuable for turning pods.

A pod jam-fits better onto a waste block than onto another piece of the pod.

Using a waste block of soft Maple, Alder, Mahogany or other compressible wood gives a better and more secure jam chuck. Also if the delicate, thin-walled pod piece is jam-fit into a recess instead of over a tenon it will reduce the risk of cracking it.

Use tape for insurance when finishing the bottom without the tailstock.

Jam-fits with thin-walled pod pieces are never very strongly gripped. It is easy to break the piece or knock it off the jam chuck.

Use CA glue to strengthen thin walled pieces.

When hollowing to the maximum diameter of the pod, the “eyes” can tend to fall out. CA (“Super Glue”) soaked over the outside of the piece before hollowing will glue in the eyes, and will not stain the finished piece.

A balloon inflated inside a hollow form, or masking tape over the holes on the inside, makes inlaying material such as stone, inlaid, metal filings, etc. in the holes easier.

Be careful to not over-catalyze CA glue, or the heat will cause the balloon to burst.

Pods take a good polish with abrasive.

But they dull the abrasive quickly! For best results plan to sand to at least 600 grit.

For best results, finish off the lathe.

Some finishes that I like are: General Salad Bowl Finish or any thin-bodied oil that penetrates well (to minimize wiping finish off from inside the eyes), Spray on film finishes such as lacquer, polyurethane, shellac, etc. It is very tedious to scrape wax or French polish out of the eyes! That is why I finish off the lathe.

Tight fitting lids are not a good idea if the piece is delicate.

Pods are brittle and have no grain structure to lend strength to thin walls, finials, knobs or stems. Having to use force to remove the lid is more likely to cause something to break than with "normal" wood. In addition, a woodturner might appreciate a tight fit, but a lot of non-woodturners are intimidated by it. They usually expect to lift the lid and have it come off of the box without forcing.

Signing your work.

The "Gelly Roll" Metallic gel ink pens write on the sanded surface of a pod and show up well. Be careful that your finish will not cause the ink to run. I usually use a Dremel vibrating engraver to sign my pod pieces. Filling the engraving with the "Gold Stick" wax stick gives a gold engraved look. For best results with the Gold Stick, do the engraving after the finish is dry.

Explore your creativity, and be willing to risk.

Banksia Pods are an unusual material that offers a lot of possibilities, both for success and failure. Buy an extra pod or 3 and don't be afraid to lose one on a new idea. The greatest successes come to those who are not afraid to fail!