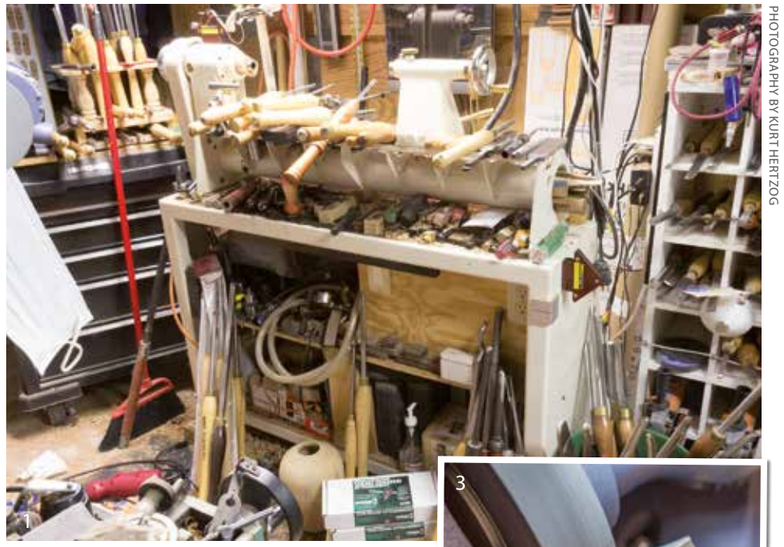
Kurt's clinic

Kurt Hertzog answers readers' questions

I know you avoid calling out brand names in fairness to all the vendors in the marketplace, but can you give me some hints as to the steel types and families?

Over the years, I've become friends with virtually every supplier, vendor, demonstrator, and the like in the woodturning community. In the 25-plus years I've been involved I have made some lasting friendships. The quickest way to ruin any friendship in this industry is to pick favourites. In my opinion, all the vendors, symposia, demonstrators and organisations are doing their best to provide the turning community with products and services that are focused on an enjoyable, safe experience. Are there some that perhaps do a bit better? Sure, but these are very subjective judgements – much like folks favouring certain cuisines. I can't tell you the number of tools I have but I am certain that I have every maker, every different chemistry of steel, every design and every concept of tool. They all work nicely and I typically use them all over time. A couple of key points I'd like you to walk away with. A properly sharpened tool presented to the work correctly will cut. When you are finished and have done a good job, nobody will know what brand of tool you used. A bit of wisdom I got from my dad well over 50 years ago – there is no magic in any tool. The magic always comes from the skill of the user.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY KURT HERTZOG

1 A sampling of the various tools I've accumulated over the years during a shop clean-up and tool rearrangement day 2 You'll find that there are a relatively small number of 'go-to' tools that you'll favour regardless of your accumulation. Mine are simple high-speed steel 3 Regardless of your tool selection and collection, my most important suggestion is to learn to sharpen your tools, actually touch them up often

I am planning on shipping some fragile turnings and I'm looking for some advice. How do you ship your fragile pierced eggshell work? Have you had catastrophes?

I have seen folks who have very valuable, fragile work do the double boxing. You pack your fragile stuff in a box using the Styrofoam peanuts or tissue paper. Then that box is packed into another box with plenty of padding. The concept is that any impact from rough handling will be cushioned by the padded box within a padded box. For the most part, this works. One of the things I learned from one of the turners on the World of Woodturners was packing fragile items in coffee. His technique was to buy a tin of coffee, remove enough to pack the turning inside, replace as much coffee as needed, seal the container and then ship that. Not only did the recipient wind up with an intact turning but also a couple of pounds of ground coffee. At today's coffee prices, I'm guessing this technique has fallen out of favour. I'll tell you my horror story with fragile turnings. I always hand carry my fragile turnings. I pack the pierced eggshell ornaments inside cut-off cardboard tubes. These cardboard tubes are the trash from the big industrial printers. I have friends who will get them for me and I cut them off to size.

4 While I don't own or use the removable, interchangeable tool handles, I often buy unhandled tools. They could be travelled with or without multiple handles 5 Depending on your use of each unhandled tool, you can either add a handle permanently or use one of the handles that fastens with set screws

Do you have any of the quick-change tool handles? I've seen them but don't know if I would get the value from them. Your thoughts?

I don't own any of the quick-change tool handles although I've seen the many versions available. They are quite convenient with their space savings. They excel for the travelling turner. For those who need to take an assortment of tools along for a remote turning session, classes or demonstrations, eliminating the extra handles can mean less bulk and weight to travel with. I've been tempted on occasion but have so far resisted. I'm content with my current array of tools and have managed to travel with the necessary tools via air. Travelling by car usually doesn't present a weight or space problem. Your needs may be different to mine, so don't be afraid to give the various makes a look.

I am a newcomer to the woodturning craft and am on a tight budget. Can you give me some pointers on getting some gear together at reasonable prices?

This question comes up often for several reasons. First and foremost, the craft or hobby, depending on the terms you favour, is quite pricey. Buying new can set you back a considerable amount of money. You are certainly welcome to do that but often your interest will wane quickly. Then you are faced with parting with all the new gear that you paid top bucks for. The other issue is the thrill of a new hobby. It doesn't take long for you to be shopping for all the 'gee whiz' stuff that will be nice to have. You'll often hear this as 'I'm only one tool away from greatness'.

I'm not certain of your location but regardless of where you are located, there are woodturning organisations, clubs, and local groups. My most important suggestion to you is to find and join one of the local clubs. The parent organisations to these club (chapters) and the clubs themselves will help you find mentors, attend meetings, take lessons, borrow equipment, and more. The cost of joining these groups is nominal considering the value they can provide to you. Once you are a member of one or more of the clubs, you often can get personalised lessons and even borrow equipment and tools. You'll get your feet wet without any large capital outlay. Much like test driving a car before you buy, you'll find that there are certain aspects of the hobby that you favour and other aspects you can live without. Probably the most advantageous thing about clubs is you'll be among those who are often upgrading and selling off their older stuff.

There is absolutely no reason not to buy used. Lathes, tools, chucks, etc. that are properly cared for will last for many years. Compared to new, used often is offered for half of the original cost. You also have the luxury of dickering with the owner on price (respectfully). Something that isn't usually available in the retail store or website. If you find what type and size of turning your favour, you can focus on that equipment for your purchasing.

The ornament is packed into the tube with plenty of tissue paper around the outside of the ornament. In all the years of carrying these types of turnings on an airplane, I've only had one terrible mishap. I had a duffle bag with all my pierced ornaments packed. Because the finials are long and delicate, they tend to draw the attention of security folks at the airport. I put my computer bag and my duffle bag with ornaments on the conveyor belt at the airport after being sure to inform the TSA folks that these items were very fragile artworks. I told them they could inspect as needed but to please be careful of their fragility. They were great about it until the guy ahead of me had issues with his carry ons. The TSA folks backed up the conveyor to deal with his luggage. The problem was that my duffle bag then fell off the back end of the conveyor belt on to the concrete floor. They were all kinds of apologetic and wanted to know if I wished to inspect the ornaments. No need at this point. I'm boarding a flight to go to the Utah Woodturning Symposium in Provo, Utah. If things are broken, there isn't a thing I can do about it. Besides, I didn't need the agony of a long flight knowing things were broken. I got to Provo and examined my ornaments. Every one was broken. Not much to do at that point since putting these into the instant gallery was a bust. A long-time friend who was also at the event, Brian McEvoy, took pity on me and did his best to mend the ones that were 'fixable'. There were a couple that I showed, but even with Brian's great repairs, the breakage was evident. Now I don't ever let my fragile turnings bag out of my hands until it is ready to go into the tunnel for examination.

How do you dispose of your finishes, adhesives and paints that are no longer functional? I don't want to just throw them in the trash and potentially pollute.

I applaud your concern for the proper disposal of chemicals. The best way is to check with your local municipality. There will be someone on staff you can advise you on how and when to dispose of these items. My local township has certain days of the week when you can deliver these items to the hazardous waste areas for proper disposal. My locality will take nearly any product that is legally purchased at certain times during the collection cycle. A visit to the website for your locality will likely give you the information you need.

I'm concerned that I'm spinning my lathe at the wrong speeds. How do you decide what speed to set the lathe to?

My suggestion to my students is to set the lathe to a speed that is fast enough to get good cuts but is safe. The key is safety. Depending on your mounting technique, the size of your blank, the balance of the blank and what you are trying to accomplish, the speed will vary based on those factors.

The actual rpm number really isn't that helpful at this point. The rotational speed needs to be appropriate for the factors noted. I have many lathes and none of them have rpm readouts. I start out at a dead stop and then increase the speed until I feel comfortable that it is safe and will provide good cuts.

6 Your speed selection will always be based on safety, followed by speed for quality of cut. Between centres is one of the safest mountings 7 A couple of points. No need to hog off huge cuts when stair-stepping away sections works – and cutting towards the headstock is best when possible 8 Even when light duty and slow speeds, any mounting – here a vacuum mount for sanding – will benefit by bringing up the tail centre for added security 9 The tail centre retracted to access the foot for sanding. Cole jaws or other soft mounts should be used carefully. Sanding is best done at slow speeds 10 The keys to good quality cuts are proper speeds, sharp tools and a light touch. Never go faster than you feel comfortable turning. Safety always 11 Eccentric turnings, even with the proper mountings, need to be turned at more modest speeds. Balance and types of cuts will help determine speeds 12 In balance, between centres, with a sharp spindle roughing gouge, quite a bit of stock can be easily removed with light cuts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