TURN A WOODEN APPLE

Richard Findley

SYMPOSIUM DEMONSTRATOR IN SAINT PAUL!

Pro turner Richard Findley will be a demonstrator at AAW's International Woodturning Symposium in Saint Paul, Minnesota, June 12-15, 2025, where he will share his insights on a variety of topics. Don't miss this chance to learn from Richard, live and in person! For the latest details, visit aawsymposium.org.

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Templates/ storyboards

The author's original wood templates for turning apples and pears. With much practice, the templates become unnecessary.

I've been turning wooden fruit for years and they are always a popular item. They require only relatively small pieces of timber and show off the grain and figure in the wood nicely. They are also an interesting talking point and have a wonderful tactile quality. The process of making them is quite simple, but over the years I have learned what makes the difference between a good apple and a bad apple.

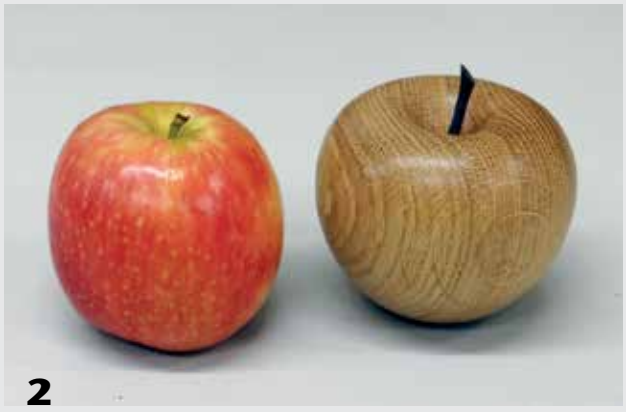
I first saw wooden apples displayed by a woodturner when I was on holiday on the south coast of England about twenty years ago, when I was very early in my turning journey. The maker, as we turners so often are, was only too happy to spend time talking me through the process of making them, and I was excited to give it a go. My first one was honestly a disaster. I realized that even though I thought I knew what an apple looked like, getting that shape into the wood was quite another matter, so I needed to put in some more work.

Research, practice, and realization

I went shopping with my wife at the local supermarket, which is usually not my favorite job, but this time I had an ulterior motive—to find the perfect apple, take it to my workshop, and study it. I made storyboards, much like I do regularly in my production turning, but I measured every detail of this perfect apple—from the diameter at various points to the depth of the dip at the stalk, or stem, to the fuzzy bit in the

bottom (which a Google search tells me is called the calyx). I even cut the profile of the apple out of a board as a template (*Photo 1*). My first few were made exactly to my detailed measurements, and I was very pleased with the outcome. Over time, as my confidence and experience grew, I no longer needed the templates and could do them by eye, but some were always better than others and I realized that a few points were vital to getting the proportions correct.

The main realization that impacted my thinking with wooden fruit, but with apples in particular, was that you shouldn't aim for realism. The goal is actually a caricature of an apple such that a viewer (or potential customer) can immediately identify it at a glance. A caricature will accentuate important or prominent features, in this case the most apple-like features, the things that really make an apple look like an apple. For example, my preferred apple is a Pink Lady, a lovely sweet, juicy apple but a terrible shape. If you were to copy that shape in a wooden apple, the result would be less than ideal (*Photo 2*). The main points for me in making the "perfect" apple include the position of the widest point, the depth of the dip at the top where the stalk comes out, the stalk itself, and the calyx.



Which one would you bite?

At left in the photo, a real Pink Lady apple, next to the oak version illustrated in this article. Don't strive for realism here; a caricature will appear more "apple-like" at quick glance.

Preparation

You can use any kind of wood for this project. I selected a piece of European oak, but apples show off exotics and anything with an interesting grain/figure equally well. I cut my turning blank 75mm (about 3") square and, importantly, 10mm (about ⅜") less in length/height than the square dimension, so mine was 65mm (about 2½") long. You can make your apples almost any size, but this proportion works well. When you cut the blank, you might think it looks too short, but trust me!

For the stalk, I used a small piece of ebony, which looks great, but you can also use any off-cut and stain it to a dark brown color after turning. ▸

Shopmade Screw Chuck

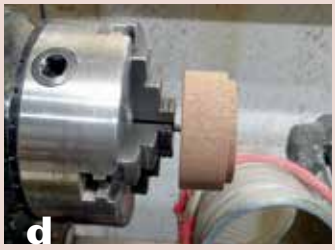
My bowl-turning screw chuck (shown at right in *Photo a*) requires an 8mm (about 5/16") pilot hole, which is ideal for bowls but way too big for the base of an apple. So for this shopmade screw chuck (left in *Photo a*), I used a 5mm × 50mm (2", #10) wood screw, which requires a 3.5mm (about ⅛") pilot hole.

To make the chuck, I turned a piece of scrap sapele around 65mm in diameter and 30mm (about 1⅛") long into a cylinder between centers and formed a chucking tenon.

Once the work was held in the chuck, I drilled a 3.5mm pilot hole through the blank (*Photo b*). I countersunk the back and threaded in the screw about halfway, adding a blob of epoxy to the threads before tightening it fully (*Photo c*).

One issue with shopmade screw chucks is that no matter how carefully you drill the hole for the screw and how carefully you thread that screw, the screw never runs true. Ever. This frustrated me for some time, until I had an epiphany: remount the screw chuck by the screw and true the body to the screw (*Photo d*). With this extra step, my screw chucks always run true.

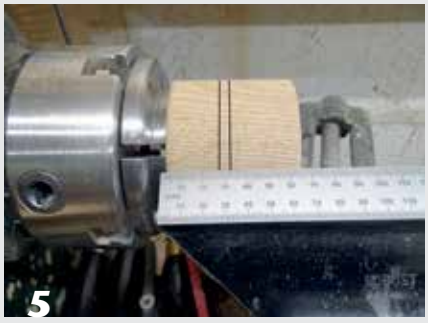
The final step is to trim the face of the screw chuck so it runs true and the screw protrudes the correct amount; here I aimed for 25mm (about 1") of visible screw with the same length epoxied into the wooden body of the screw chuck (*Photo e*).



Rough-turn blank

With the work mounted between centers, rough-turn the blank to a cylinder, then form a chucking tenon at what will be the top of the apple.

Turn bottom half



Mark the widest point of the apple, 5mm above the actual center height of the blank.

The author uses a spindle gouge to shape the lower curve of the apple, working from the widest-point line.

Drill and shape bottom

Drill a pilot hole for remounting the apple on a screw chuck.

A spindle gouge is used to create the dimple at the base of the apple.

You will also need a clove for the base and some glue to fix the stalk and calyx in place.

Before you start turning the apple, make a custom screw chuck to hold it. The screws we use to mount bowl blanks are too thick for this job, so you need to make one with a smaller screw (see *Shopmade Screw Chuck sidebar*).

Turn the apple's bottom half

With the apple blank held between centers, rough it down to a cylinder and form a chucking tenon at one end (*Photos 3, 4*). The tenon end will be the top of the finished apple, so if there is some interesting grain or figure that you want to show off, take that into consideration when mounting the blank.

With the blank held by its tenon in the chuck, mark the location of the widest point of the apple. This is the first of the important caricature details. Often people will put the widest point at center height, but it looks so much better around 5mm (about 3⁄16") above center. In *Photo 5*, you can see I marked the center height and a second line 5mm closer to the top. I used a spindle gouge to shape the bottom half of the apple, but you can use whichever tool you prefer to make this cut. The goal is a sweeping curve down to the base from the line (*Photo 6*).

Once I was satisfied with the bottom-half curve, I set up my drill chuck in the tailstock with a 3.5mm bit and slowly drilled a hole into the base of the apple, long enough to take the screw from my new screw chuck (*Photo 7*).

With the hole drilled, the next task is to create a dip, or dimple, to accept the calyx. I used my spindle gouge just as I would to hollow out an endgrain box, with the flute pointing to the 10 o'clock position

(if you imagine the blank as a clock face). I pushed the tip of the tool directly into the drilled hole to enlarge it and then used the lower wing of the tool to blend this small recess into the outer curve of the apple (*Photo 8*).

Another feature of an apple is that there are no corners. Everything should blend and flow smoothly around the shape, so I took a moment to check the curves I had produced, both visually and by touch, and made incremental adjustments until I was satisfied. I then sanded from 180 to 320 grit and finished it with a red abrasive pad (rated as 600 grit), which left a beautifully smooth, lightly burnished surface.

Turn the apple's top half

I swapped the four-jaw chuck for the screw chuck and added a folded pad of paper towel before threading on the workpiece (*Photo 9*). I have found that simply screwing the apple up against the wooden body of the screw chuck can mark the base of the apple, so I now fold one square of paper towel three times and push it onto the screw. The aim is to have just enough padding to protect the apple, but not so much as to add unwanted bounce and vibration during turning.

For the first few cuts, bring up the tailstock live center for added support as you shape the top of the apple. As before, I used my spindle gouge to turn the top part of the apple (*Photo 10*). You are essentially turning a wide bead here, with the highest point being 5mm from center height. Therefore, your bead will naturally be asymmetric, and a good apple shape will form quite naturally.

I turned down to the live center point and then pulled the tailstock out of the way. Then I adjusted the toolrest so it sat across the top of the apple and repeated the earlier process of drilling with my gouge into the top of the apple (*Photo 11*). There is no need to use a drill chuck, as the spindle gouge with a fingernail grind does this job well. As before, I used the box hollowing technique with the lower wing of the gouge to create a dip at the top for the stalk. I blended this dip into the outer curve I had already turned ▶

Remount on screw chuck

9 With the bottom half turned and sanded, the work is ready to be mounted on the screw chuck. Some folded paper towels protect the workpiece from marring.

Turn top half

10 Shape the top of the apple, again working from the widest point.

Drill and shape top

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12 The author uses a spindle gouge to drill into the top and create the dip naturally found there. Shearing cuts with the wing of the gouge help to blend the curves.

Drill hole for stalk/stem

13 Drill an angled hole for the stalk. Here, the drill bit is mounted in a chuck and the workpiece is pushed onto it.

using shearing cuts with the tool presented in the same way (*Photo 12*). Keep your cuts light, as the apple is held in place by only a small screw and you can get a little vibration, especially with dense timbers. I recommend using an easier (softer) wood for your first apple and building up to denser species. Light cuts with a sharp tool will do this job well, but if you do experience chatter, you can support the side of the apple with the fingers of your front hand.

The dip at the top of the apple is one of the most important of the caricature features. Most wooden apples I have seen are not cut deep enough here. If you look at a real apple, the dip goes right into the core. It is much easier not to do this on your turned apple, but it won't look as good. In my opinion, it is well worth the extra time and effort to get this dip at the top suitably deep. I'd go so far as to say that you almost can't go too deep here—the deeper the better. Obviously there is a steel screw in the base, so stop well before that, but go deeper than you initially think.

When you are happy with the shape of the top of the apple, sand it. Any slight runout between the initial mounting and the screw chuck mounting is blended by sanding, so if you experience runout, don't worry too much about it. Once again, I sanded 180 to 320 and finished with a red abrasive pad.

The stalk, or stem

The next step is to drill a hole in the top of the apple to receive the stalk (stem). With my early apples, I simply put the drill chuck back in the tailstock and drilled the hole straight in. The problem with this approach becomes obvious when you have a group of apples together in a bowl and all of the stalks are standing straight upright like soldiers. To avoid this uniformity, I decided to drill the hole at a slight angle. I removed the apple from the screw chuck and changed the chuck jaws to a set that would hold a drill bit. This could also be a drill chuck, or you can do it with an electric drill. Using the same 3.5mm drill bit, I drilled at a deliberate angle into the top of the apple (*Photo 13*). This adds character to the apples and makes them look more natural.

Years ago, I bought some ebony fingerboard rejects at a show. I'm told that instrument makers are a very fussy bunch and want only the blackest ebony for the fingerboards on their stringed instruments. They reject anything with lighter brown streaks, but these rejects are an excellent source for inlays, inserts, and, in this case, apple stalks.

I cut a piece from the fingerboard around 70mm (2¾") long and ripped a 10mm square from it on my bandsaw. I then cut one end at an angle and held it in a chuck with my smallest set of jaws (*Photo 14*). I used my spindle gouge to turn a long, flat cove, all the time supporting the work with the fingers of my front hand (*Photo 15*). I am

Turn stalk/stem


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Ebony is used for the apple stalk. A precut angle on the end is a nice touch.

Finishing options


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The author applies his favorite hardwax oil to the apple.


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Another option is to spray-finish the apple with lacquer.

naturally left-handed for spindle turning, and when working on small items close to the chuck, this is beneficial because I don't have to reach over the chuck; I can support the work easily with my front (right) hand. I turned the stalk as slender as I dared and ensured the stem would fit the 3.5mm hole that I had drilled. I then parted the stalk off; there is no need to sand this part. It can be difficult seeing dark wood on the lathe, so it can be helpful to place a piece of white paper on the lathe bed to help with visibility as you turn.

An alternative is to collect thin sticks or twigs that have fallen from trees and cut them to fit as the stalk. This can look very effective if you have a good source of twigs.

Finishing touches

Finishing choices depend on your taste. You can spray your turned apples with a gloss lacquer if you want a high shine or oil them to give a more natural sheen, as I have done (*Photo 16*). Some exotic woods look fabulous with a gloss finish, but I prefer a more satin look on open grained timbers like oak.

If I do use a spray finish, I hold the apple with a long screw threaded into the hole in the base, with a square section of medium-density fiberboard (MDF) at the head of the screw (*Photo 17*). This allows me to hold the MDF while I spray the apple and then stand it up to dry. I apply three coats of spray lacquer, rubbing down gently with a red abrasive pad before the third coat. But in this example, I used satin hardwax oil; three or four coats will usually bring out a beautiful satin glow that can be gently buffed with a soft cloth or a buffing mop.

I used a clove to fill the hole in the base, as it looks very realistic once in place (*Photos 18, 19*). Cloves have what appears to be a ball held in a claw on a stem. I picked the ball off and was left with the claw and stem, which I glued into the hole in the base of the apple.

The stalk can then be glued into the top hole. The angle on the top of the stalk should face in the direction the apple leans, so it appears to have been cut from the tree at an angle (*Photos 20, 21*). Once the glue is dry, your apple is ready to go on display in a suitably turned wooden fruit bowl, but you probably need a few more wooden apples to keep it company! ■

A clove for the calyx


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19

A clove with the "ball" removed makes for a perfect base, or calyx.

The completed oak apple


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Richard Findley is a fulltime production turner based in Leicestershire, U.K. It is the variety he enjoys, making a wide range of turned components for joiners, furniture makers, restorers, designers, and architects. Richard demonstrates for clubs around the U.K. and has appeared at international symposia in the U.K., Ireland, and the U.S. He has had around 200 woodturning articles published, some of which have been compiled into two books. For more, visit turnersworkshop.co.uk or follow Richard on Instagram, @richard_findley.