

## **Making Your Own Tools ... ... Mallets, a Cautionary Tale**

**Text & Photos by  
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Historically, woodworkers made their own tools, at least the wooden parts, often leaving the metal parts to the local blacksmith. Mallets are, for the most part, wood. The business end being made of wood and not metal is what makes a mallet not a hammer.

There is little reason, short of the lack of a lathe, for the wood workers to not make his/her own mallets, maybe not even than as the many older mallets and clubs carved out of a log with a drawknife and finished with a spoke shave will attest.

But a word a caution is in order, as this is “a cautionary tale”. Only a limited number of mallets are needed in the workshop and it is not necessary to get carried away to the point of making them a distraction from real woodworking. A recent informal survey of real woodworkers indicated that two or three mallets at most will get the job done. Pictured below are my seventeen mallets.



My first mallet I call “Mallet Too”(left). It was made of cherry and is ‘too’ soft, ‘too’ big, and ‘too’ light. Cherry is also much ‘too’ pretty to beat up on the handle of a chisel. It was a carvers mallet as most of my mallets are. You’ll need a carvers mallet or two. Don’t get carried away, though.

My second mallet (right) improved on “Mallet Too” in that it was made of hard maple. That solved the too light and too soft, and two pretty but it was still too big for anything but the heaviest work.



I needed something more modest, easier to hold. So I took a piece of the heavy maple and turned it to my satisfaction, drilled the center and inserted a nicely turned walnut handle. The walnut provided some beauty and the maple provided weight and durability (right).

A piece of Osage Orange (hedge) from a woodpile came my way (center). Now of the free domestic woods, if I could have it my way, osage orange would be my first choice. It is extremely hard, extremely tough, and it’s heavy. When aged and un-battled, osage orange is a real beauty. There is a problem. It likes to split. It really likes to split. Especially on drying. It is so stringy and tough that it will never pull apart.

So it remains useful, but the splits are unsightly. To avoid splitting I started with a three foot log to get a 9 inch mallet without splits and a smaller piece that we’ll discuss later. This is a real workhorse mallet ... small, heavy, tough. The bulge in the handle fits well in the palm of my hand. When I chop dovetails in oak, I can feel the carpal tunnel starting all the way to my elbow.

The mallet above on the right has a handle of maple. The head is mesquite. The mesquite came from Arizona. My friend John brought it back from a business trip. There was this barbecue restaurant way out in the desert that had a woodpile out back where the green mesquite was stacked for smoking pork and beef. A small log disappeared (all mesquite logs are small as far as I can tell). He brought it back wrapped in a motel laundry plastic bag so it would not dry out and crack. I coated the ends with paraffin wax and let it dry for the appropriate time and turned it. I drilled out the center (still wet.) and inserted the maple handle. Mesquite is attractive and heavy. It is difficult to damage with use, doesn’t seem to want to crack. If it were available I’d like it much better.

Froes are more common in the Eastern United States, because as civilization move west across the United States, over time, the sawmill replaced the Froe as the device to split out planks from a log. This left this device the task of providing work for old men to split shingles, which should be split and not sawed anyway. The metal blade, hammered out by a local blacksmith who also forms the eye for the wood handle (see comments on drawknife above), is hit by a Froe Club, splitting out the shingle. This club, just a crude mallet, is often severely beaten up in the process. You’re not likely to find one so if you want to split kindling, you’ll need to make one (froe and club at the right).



On the left is a small “granny” mallet. My elderly mother, some years ago, needed a mallet for a craft project and I made this for her from maple and firewood plum.

This little mallet on the right is a favorite. Remember the small piece of Osage Orange left over from the discussion above, well this is it. Several years ago when I had bypass surgery I need a project to take my mind off Bonanza and Gunsmoke during my recuperation. So I turned this and sewed on a leather handle cover for a nice grip. The handle is treaded with beeswax and lanolin for a firm grip.



Of course all mallets are not turned and may not be entirely made of wood. The mallets above and to the right are examples. Above left is a light mallet for tinsmithing. Next to it is a square head mallet with brass faces for setting the blade on a plane. The middle mallet is walnut with a thick bronze bearing adding hardness and weight for light work with the hand nearly wrapped around the head. Second from the right is a small mallet with a curly maple handle. The faces are wood but the brass head adds weight. The commercial brass head mallet at the right has a dogwood handle shaped with a spokeshave.

At the far right is a traditional carpenter's mallet made of Oak with a turned maple handle. Oak is a ready 'found' choice in many cases but not the best as it tends to split off when used. One face of this mallet is fitted with 1/4 inch thick leather so as to protect the head and also protect the work as it is usually used to move mortises into tenons and the like.



The large mallet with iron hoops (right) is manufactured. While I did not make it, it is of key importance in any workshop. Mallets of this type can be used at carnivals to raise heavy projectiles into the air to ring bells and to drive heavy ten spikes into the ground to secure circus tents. They are also used to nudge heavy beams into place for barn and log cabin building. I find similar uses around the shop almost every day.

Last picture at the right is perhaps my best mallet, made of almost perfect Osage Orange, totally without splits, and aged to perfection to bring out the wonderful color. Perhaps I may bring myself to use it someday.



Comments are invited and appreciated and may be addressed to:

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