Dyes are an indispensable tool for a professional finisher: I use them to give mahogany that rich brown found on antiques, to enhance figured maple, and to brightly color a contemporary piece. However, many woodworkers have a deep fear of coloring wood. I’m reminded of Groucho Marx’s witticism: “Die, my dear? Why that’s the last thing I’ll do!”

In part, this comes from confusion between dyes and pigment stains. Unlike stains, dyes never look muddy or hide the natural beauty of wood. With that in mind, let’s take a closer look at what dyes are, where they come from, and how to use them.

**What is a dye and how is it made?**

For centuries, dyes were obtained from natural products such as roots, berries, insects, and nut husks. Then in the mid-19th century, William Henry Perkin discovered how to make a synthetic purple dye from aniline, an organic compound derived from coal tar. This was a giant step forward: There was now an inexpensive method to mass-produce dyes. Today, most dyes are derived from crude oil but the term aniline is still widely used.

Many woodworkers think that dyes, like stains, are simply finely ground pigments, but this is not true (see facing page).

Although you can buy dyes already dissolved, powders offer the widest range of colors and are the most inexpensive option. You also have full control over the color strength by adding powder or diluting the solution.

The three main dye groups associated with woodworking are acid, basic, and solvent dyes. The water-soluble dyes are, for the most part, the acid group, and the alcohol dyes

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**THE SUM OF ITS PARTS**

Dyes are usually a blend of three colors. This can be seen clearly with a water dye. Drop a pinch in water, watch the colors separate, and get a lesson in basic color theory. A reddish-brown dye may contain yellow, orange, and blue. Since orange and blue are complementary colors (opposite each other on the color wheel), they offset each other. In other words, if the dye has more orange than blue, it will be a warmer red brown. Add more blue and the color shifts to a deeper, less reddish brown.