WESTERN CAPE WOODTURNERS ASSOCIATION

NEWSLETTER : MARCH 2026

The Western Cape Woodturners Association is a group of folk with a common interest in woodturning and wood.

We aim to promote the art of turning wood and to create awareness of this craft in the community and encourage young members to join the fellowship.

Members meet every Wednesday at 6.30pm to do " hands-on " turning and get instruction and help.

The venue is the Pinelands Hobbies Club, Nursery Way, Pinelands, Cape Town.

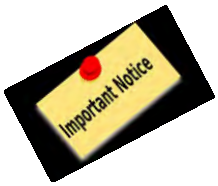
The Formal Meeting is on the 3rd Wednesday of the month at 7pm.

Visitors are welcome .

MARCH 2026:

The main meeting on 18th March will be Prof David Gammon interviewing Peter Nicolle about his history, experience and interest in art and woodturning.

There will also be a **"LUCKY-DIP"** after the talk.



REMINDER

The Turnfest at the Old Mutual Conference and Exhibition Centre at Kirstenbosch 2nd to 6th April 2026.

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EDITOR'S NOTE :

This month I have dedicated the articles to Johnny Wilsenach.

It's all about the Skew chisel, which usually gives me a certain apprehension every time I pick it up. I am sure most turners will remember their first dig-in with their skew chisel.

Russ Fairfield's article using vegetables to practice on, is very interesting and fun. I must say I had to look up what a rutabaga is - we probably know it as a Swede or a large turnip.

Jim Scarsella and Keith Tompkins give their version of learning the skew.

We hope there will be more spindle work at our Show and Tell table in future.

A big welcome to newcomers :
SIMON CARTHEW & MIKE LANCASTER.
We hope you learn lots of new skills and have many happy hours in front of a lathe.

Birthdays in March :

Best Wishes to you all for your birthdays in March :

Chris Briers, Graeme Hill,
Hans Hitzeroth, John Lugg,
Andre Schreuder, Shane Swiegers,
Jaco van der Westhuizen
Mervin Walsh.

Our grateful thanks to The American Association of Woodturners, American Woodturner & Woodturner magazines and authors :- Thomas Pakenham, Russ Fairfield, Jim Scarsella and Keith Tompkins for their permission to reprint their articles.

GOING DOWNHILL FOR 60 MILLION YEARS

TO COMPARE THE GINKGO FAMILY WITH SOME ARISTOCRATIC FAMILY FROM CENTRAL EUROPE, WHO HAVE BEEN GOING STEADILY DOWNHILL SINCE THE MIDDLE AGES, HARDLY DOES JUSTICE TO THE GINKGO FAMILY.

They have been going downhill ever since Tertiary times, 60 million years ago. In fact the lineage of this tree, *Ginkgo biloba*, makes the dinosaur look like an upstart. The family became powerful 350 million years ago, before the Alps and the Himalayas were a gleam in the Creator's eye; the tree took an early form 150 million years ago, before the first pterodactyl had hatched in its nest up a tree fern.

That is why botanists give this one tree the unique honour of one species, one genus, one family and one order, all for itself.

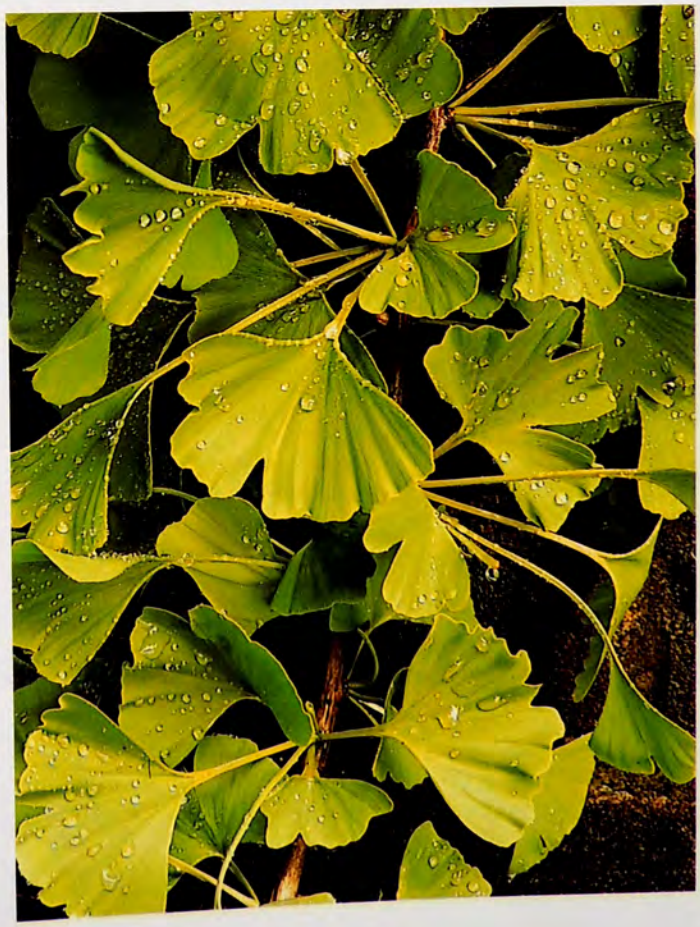
With such a pedigree, the ginkgo might be expected to look somewhat fossilized (and in a literal sense it does). But this fine specimen at Kew (*see left*), first to be famous in Britain and still one of the biggest there, is healthy enough. That it came from China you might suspect from its irregular cascade of branches, and its nobbly grey-brown trunk with breast-like protuberances called 'chi-chis'. But the leaf shaped like a butterfly would baffle you. There is no rib bisecting it. It reminds one of a maidenhair fern (and 'Maidenhair tree' is the English name). Of course, this is the clue. When ancestral ginkgos were making their way in the world 350 million years ago, there were no other trees, only ferns.

This specimen arrived at Kew in 1762 by way of a Thames barge; it spent the first few years of its life at the Duke of Argyll's estate at Whitton, then Lord Bute moved it to Kew for the Dowager Princess of Wales' new arboretum. He also transplanted a Chinese pagoda tree (*Sophora japonica*), which survives today, a stretcher case, recumbent on steel crutches. Sir William Chambers had already been commissioned to build a ten-storey pagoda nearby which made Chinoiserie all the rage.

To keep up with the times, 18th-century gentlemen planted ginkgos in their pleasure grounds. But the tree has a drawback. Although it is almost extinct in the wild, its last natural home was in south-east China, where they have hot summers. So it turns up its nose at most parts of Ireland or Scotland. But it is happy in the stockbroker belt of the Home Counties. It also enjoys life in the gardens of Buddhist temples in China, Japan and Korea and in the pavements of Washington DC.

At home in China it might live 1,000 years or more. Here it will grow faster and die sooner. But its ancient lineage gives it one advantage. It evolved long before any leaf-eating insect existed.

So the insects that mutilate the leaves of other trees – oaks, beeches and so on – cannot touch a hair on the ginkgo's head.



Humanizing the Skew Chisel

Russ Fairfield

I have yet to meet a woodturner whose skills weren't improved from learning to use a skew chisel. The skew teaches how wood is cut, and it teaches the importance of the bevel better than any other turning tool. Learning those two lessons will make anyone a more skillful woodturner, regardless of the kind of turning. In addition, the skew leaves the smoothest surface of any turning tool, and a sharp skew makes clean cuts easily in the most challenging of wood-grain patterns—more so than any other turning tool.

In my article, "The 'Compleat' Woodturner" (*AW*, vol 25, no 1), I described spindle turning as a skill to be learned before becoming a *compleat* and accomplished woodturner. There is one additional step, however: mastering the skew chisel.

My favorite skew chisels: a 1¼"- (3 cm-) wide rectangular skew with a curved cutting edge and a concave bevel (top) and a 1½"- (4 cm-) wide oval skew with a straight edge and flat bevel.

The *skew* does not make these lessons easy. The very name skew strikes fear in the hearts of woodturners, beginners and experts alike. We have all heard stories about the dreaded skew. Some will have mustered the courage to use the skew chisel, only to have a humongous catch that convinced them never to try again.

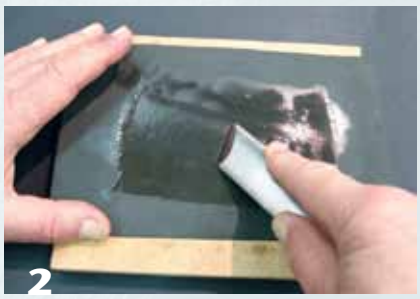
The reality is that the skew is no more difficult than whittling on a stick of wood or peeling a carrot with a knife. The only difference is the wood is spinning when the skew is cutting.

The tool

When you are learning how to use a skew chisel, practice with one that is at least 1" (25 mm) wide. Wider is even better—the wider the tool, the easier it is to see the cutting action and to control the cut. Additionally, a heavier tool causes less vibration. Save narrow skews for when you have mastered the use of this tool.

The cutting edge of the skew chisel *must be sharp.* Everything else is a personal preference. The skew can have a round, oval, or rectangular shank; the cutting edge can be straight or curved; and the bevel can be concave, flat, or slightly convex *(Photo 1).*

If the shank of your skew chisel has square edges, take it to the grinder and make the edges round and smooth. The skew has to slide smoothly along the toolrest, and a round edge will slide easily; sharp, square corners won't slide. It is worth the extra dollars to purchase a skew that already has rounded edges. There is an argument for rounding only one edge so the flat on top can be used as a reference for vertical cutting, but I prefer rounding both edges so they slide along the



The oval skew with the flat bevel is sharpened on a sheet of 600-grit sandpaper with some thinned mineral oil as a lubricant. The backing is a piece of particleboard that is ¾" (2 cm) thick.

The edge at the toe of the curved skew is at 90° to the top of the tool, and has a short (no more than ¼" [6 mm]) straight section before starting the curve.

The curved skew is ground on an 80-grit wheel, and then honed with a 600-grit India stone.

toolrest. An oval skew is fine just the way it is.

Sharpen a skew chisel

The skew should be the sharpest tool you own. A variety of machines can shape the bevels and form the cutting edges of skew chisels: a high-speed grinding wheel, a Tormek grinder, belt sander, or disc sander. Use a buffing wheel, slip-stone, bench stone, or sandpaper to hone—the wood doesn't know or care which was used. Honing will create a cutting edge that is razor sharp.

For skew chisels with a straight-profile cutting edge, I frequently hone or sharpen using a fine-grit bench stone or 600-grit wet/dry sandpaper placed on a piece of particleboard that is ¾" (19 mm) thick. I apply a few drops of oil to the sandpaper as a lubricant. I use a 50/50 mixture of mineral oil and kerosene (or mineral spirits) as a lubricant *(Photo 2)*. Over time, and after repeated sharpenings, this method gradually changes the bevel from flat (or concave) to slightly convex, which I believe is good; the tool seems to cut better.

For curved-edge skew chisels, it is important that the toe (long edge) meets at a right angle (90°) to the top edge of the shank *(Photo 3)*. This holds true for all skew chisels with a curved cutting edge.

To shape the profile of a curved-edge skew chisel, grind the bevel to create the desired curve, using a grinder, and then hone the tool to a sharp edge with a flat stone *(Photo 4)*. In addition to creating a sharper cutting edge, honing with a flat stone bridges across a concave bevel, creating a narrow secondary flat bevel along the cutting edge. That tiny secondary bevel is what slides along the wood as the tool is cutting, making the tool easier to control.

Before applying the skew chisel to wood, make sure the top surface of the toolrest is smooth and free of dents and dings. A smooth toolrest is important when using the skew, more so than for larger-radii spindle and bowl gouges.

Carrots, rutabagas, and a permanent marker

A carrot is an excellent object to use when learning how to master the skew chisel. Carrots are easy to peel and there is no wood grain to catch. I give Ted Bartholomew of Tacoma, WA, credit for introducing me to the benefits of turning vegetables; rutabagas are his favorite.

Buy a bag of large carrots, the larger the better, and a rutabaga—several rutabagas. Cut a carrot into pieces that are 4" (10 cm) long, and mount one piece onto the lathe, between centers *(Photo 5)*.

Select a sharp skew chisel, and then blacken both sides of the bottom half of the bevel that is closest to the heel (short edge) with a permanent marker ▸

Cut a large carrot to about 4" (10 cm) long and mount it between centers.

Mark the lower half of the bevel with a permanent marker. This will identify the safety zone.

With the lathe off, make a flat cut, checking that the bevel is supporting the cut in the middle of the safety zone. Adjust the height of the toolrest so that you can hold the tool handle in a comfortable and controllable position.

Make the same flat cut in both directions with the lathe off.

Now make the same flat cuts with the lathe running at a slow speed.

Make the same sequence of flat cuts with the toe of the skew chisel down. Note that the safety zone is now located on the opposite half of the bevel.

Practice flat cuts on a piece of wood. Run your lathe at about 1600 rpm.

(Photo 6). This black mark is the *safety zone* for cuts that are made with the blade while not using the tip of the skew. The best and safest cutting will be somewhere near the center of this safety zone. For a 1"- (25 mm-) wide skew, this safety zone is ample.

The flat cut

With the lathe off, hold the skew with the shank at 30˚ to 45˚ from perpendicular to the lathe's centerline and with the heel closest to you. Roll the tool until the bevel in the middle of the safety zone rests flat on the surface of the carrot. Raise or lower the height of the toolrest so that you can hold the tool handle in a comfortable position. You have just gone through the ABCs of anchor, bevel, and cut. Now push the tool forward by sliding it along the toolrest, bevel touching the carrot, cutting edge engaged. A smooth curling carrot shaving should appear *(Photo 7)*.

Do this several times in both directions, and left and right handed *(Photo 8)*.

Now turn the lathe *on*. Have it running at about 100 rpm (or at the slowest speed possible if 100 rpm is not an option). A slow speed allows you to see what is happening with the tool. Position the skew to make the same cut as when the lathe was off. Move the bevel along the surface of the carrot with the cutting edge engaged. Practice this cut in both directions, and right and left handed, until the carrot is used up *(Photo 9)*.

You have just learned how to make a flat cut with a skew chisel. Repeat this cut until the movements become natural and you can make them without having to think about what you are doing.

Practice some more, but this time try the cut with the toe of the skew pointing down *(Photo 10)*. Some turners will find this is an easier way to hold the skew for turning square pieces of wood into cylinders. Note that when you are using the skew with the toe pointing down, the safety area is at the other end of the bevel.

Clean up all of the carrot peelings and mount a piece of wood onto the lathe. A section of a green tree limb is ideal, but any soft hardwood or construction lumber that is about 1½" (4 cm) square will work. At this point, avoid hard, dense wood. To begin, turn the spindle into a cylinder using a spindle-roughing gouge.

Then, do the ABCs, and make the same flat cuts as you made on the carrot *(Photo 11)*.

The round cut (beads)

The next vegetable to tackle is a rutabaga. Trim the ends first, using a knife, then mount the rutabaga onto the lathe between centers. A spur drive may be the best drive center to use in order to get a proper grip. With the lathe *off*, peel the rutabaga by following its curvature with the skew. Always cut downhill by starting at the larger diameter. The toolrest may have to be raised so you can hold the tool's handle in a comfortable position.

Swing, twist, and raise the tool handle to keep the cutting action located in the center of the safety zone. All the while, keep the bevel (at the point where the edge is doing the cutting) in contact with the rutabaga. Make this cut as many times as necessary until every peeling of rutabaga is continuous and is the same thickness, from the center around to both ends *(Photo 12)*.

Turn the lathe *on* at a slow speed (100 rpm or less), and make the same cut *(Photo 13)*. Make as many cuts, and use as many rutabagas as needed, until the swing, twist, and lift movement of the tool handle becomes a natural motion. It is much easier to learn how to move the tool using a rutabaga than with a hard piece of wood where catches can be inspirational events.

Practice peeling a rutabaga with the lathe off. This is a safe way to learn how to follow a curve with the skew, using the bevel to support the cut.

Make rounding cuts with the lathe running at a slow speed.

When rounding the end of a piece of wood, make sure the cutting action is taking place in the safety zone, with the bevel supporting the cut.

This is what the wood looks like when a catch happens...and they do! Use light pressure and make sure the safety zone area of the bevel is supporting the cut.

Remove what's left of the rutabaga and mount a length of wood onto the lathe, about the same diameter as the rutabaga. Turn it to a cylinder, and use the skew to turn a radius on each end *(Photo 14)*. Keep practicing until there are no catches *(Photo 15)*.

The V-groove

Mount a new piece of soft wood or another tree trimming onto the lathe. Turn it to a cylinder, using the skew as in *Photo 10*, or use a spindle-roughing gouge.

Move to the center of the cylinder to make V-groove cuts. Use the tip of the toe of the skew chisel. Hold the tool almost vertical to the toolrest (angle it slightly to one side or the other). Start the cut by holding the tip lightly to the surface until the tip starts to penetrate the wood. Angle the tool slightly in the opposite direction and do the same thing to form the other side of the V. Keep making thin slicing cuts to widen and deepen the V *(Photo 16)*. V-grooves are made in a series of light cuts, first one side of the V, then the other.

Move a short distance away from the previous V, and do the same thing again to make another V that is separated by a short flat area *(Photo 17)*.

Round over the sharp edges at the tops of the Vs, using the rounding cut practiced with the rutabaga *(Photo 18)*.

You have just turned a bead using a skew chisel.

Now, grab another piece of wood and practice some more. If the wood is problematic, use another section of carrot or a rutabaga to practice V-grooves and beads.

Other cuts

There are four other basic cuts using a skew chisel: *peeling, facing, pommel*, and *cove*. These will be easier after mastering the flat, V-groove, and beading cuts, and gaining confidence with using the tool.

The *peeling* cut is an efficient way to make a tenon on the end of a turned furniture part, or to quickly remove a lot of wood. Hold the skew flat on the wood, with the bevel rubbing. Raise the tool handle to start and maintain the cut, similarly to how a parting tool is used. I find this cut is easiest to make using a skew chisel that has a curved cutting edge and a flat shank (*Photo 19*).

The *facing* cut is made with the tip of the toe in the same manner as for the V-groove cut. The only difference is that the resulting shoulder is perpendicular to the axis of the lathe (*Photo 20*). If you are still getting catches with this cut, make sure you have enough (but not too much) ▸

To make V-groove cuts, use the toe of the skew, holding the tool almost vertical. Make light cuts on either side of the V. I am using an oval skew with a straight cutting edge, but any skew will work.

Move down the piece of wood and make another V. Leave a flat area between the two Vs. This space will establish the width of a bead.

Round the edges of the Vs using the same cut you practiced with the rutabaga to create a round end. Note that the cutting action is taking place in the safety zone.

The peeling cut is made with the skew held flat on the toolrest. The 90˚ angle between the cutting edge and the toe of the skew is important to make this cut successful.

The facing cut is made like the V-groove cut except that the result is a 90˚ shoulder on the wood. Make sure there is a slight clearance between the wood and the side bevel of the skew.

The pommel cut is also like a V-groove cut and is used for making a transition from square to round.

To learn how to make a cove cut, practice first on the end of a piece of wood. Next try turning a complete cove in the center of the cylinder by cutting from both ends and meeting at the middle. Most likely, you will find that coves, especially smaller ones, are a lot easier to make using a spindle gouge.

clearance between the shoulder of the wood and the side bevel of the skew chisel. The bevel that supports this cut is underneath the toe, not the side bevel.

The *pommel* (sometimes spelled *pummel*) cut is a transition from square to round, as at the top of a table leg. It is a one-sided V-cut that may be either straight (90˚) or slightly curved—the only difference is that the cut is started where the wood is square. It is made with the tip of the toe of the skew, the same as for a V-groove cut. Take a light cut and enter the wood very gently on the spinning square to avoid tearing the corners (*Photo 21*). A wood that splinters easily, such as oak, ash, or fir, can use some help from wrapping it with a layer of glass-reinforced tape (strapping tape), and then cutting through the tape into the wood.

The *cove* cut with its concave curvature has been saved for the last; it is not an easy cut to make with a skew chisel. Everything just stated about following the bevel is ignored. As soon as the skew enters an inside curve the tool is touching the cutting edge and the backside of the bevel, and we already know that is a sure way to lose control of the tool and get a catch.

Additionally, it is challenging to start a cove cut because the skew will want to run away when making a shallow entry. Follow the rule of always cutting downhill from the larger to the smaller diameter *(Photo 22)*. Cut downhill from both ends of the cove and have them meet at the bottom. Approach the cove cut with caution, and practice making the cut until you discover the limit of the curvature that can be cut with the skew. Shallow, wide curves are easier. Trying to turn a cove using a skew will illustrate why many of us prefer to use a spindle gouge or small scraper for cutting anything but the long sweeping curves of a large cove.

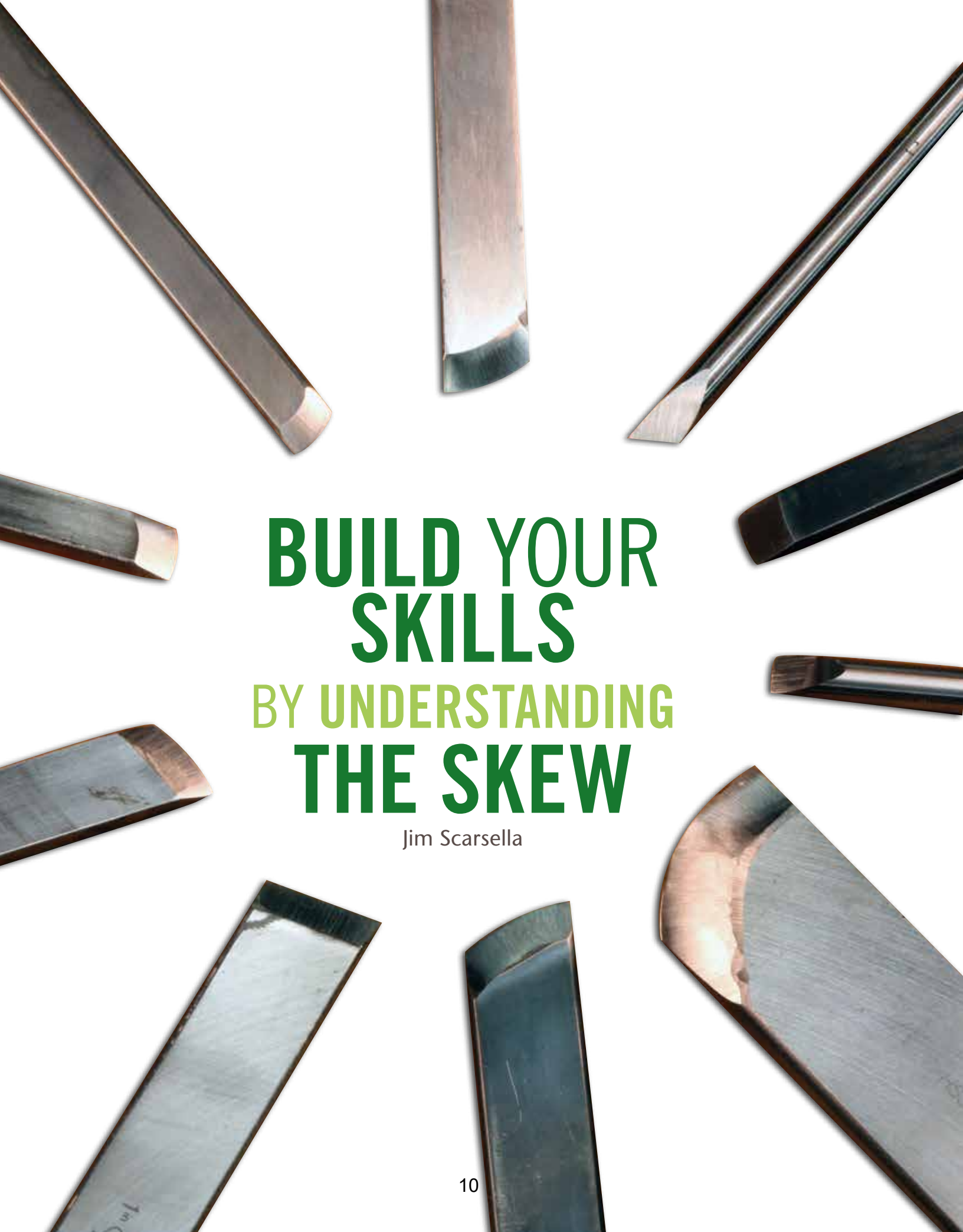
A functional turned object

After following the instructions and practicing the exercises, you will know how to use a skew chisel and will have learned the importance of the bevel on a turning tool. Now it's time to incorporate the use of the skew chisel into your repertoire of turning accomplishments on your way to becoming a compleat woodturner. I suggest additional practice.

A good project for practicing the use of the skew chisel is the candleholder described in my previously referenced article. Simply substitute a skew chisel for the large spindle-roughing gouge, follow the instructions, and turn a candleholder *(Photo 23)*. ■

Russ Fairfield is an active member of the Inland Northwest Woodturners and the INW Pen Turners Association. He teaches woodturning classes at the Woodcraft store in Spokane, WA, and has traveled extensively demonstrating at local clubs and regional symposiums. For more information, visit woodturner-russ.com.

Practice your new skills by turning a candleholder with the skew chisel.



BUILD YOUR SKILLS BY UNDERSTANDING THE SKEW

Jim Scarsella

Certain cuts achieved with a skew chisel are superior to those of any other tool. However, the skew seems to strike fear in the hearts of many woodturners. In truth, it is that very reputation that got me interested in the skew when I was new to turning. I had to find out for myself exactly why this tool is despised by so many. It did not take long for my untrained hands to discover the answer. So began my quest to better understand and develop skill with the skew. Hopefully, what follows will convince you to give the skew a chance and to shorten your learning curve if you do.

It is true, if you exclusively make facegrain-oriented bowls, you may not find much use for the skew. But you do not need to be a production spindle turner to find countless applications for this tool. Any time you are working on projects with the grain running parallel to the ways of the lathe, the skew shines—and not just on spindles for furniture or architecture. Endgrain hollow forms, toys, pepper mills, ornaments, and boxes present numerous applications for the skew chisel. So let's take a closer look and see if there is a place for the skew in your shop.

Anatomy of the skew

There are a several skew shapes, bevel grinds, and sizes, but they are all just variations of a simple flat-edged chisel. Those who are fans of the skew have varying preferences, and this can be confusing for novices just learning about the tool. But the reality is that, provided the tool is sharp and free of nicks along the shaft, most will perform well, regardless of their differences. *Photo 1* illustrates the names of individual parts common to all skew chisels.

Three cross sections

Skew chisels are available in three different cross sections: rectangular, round, and oval (*Figure 1*).

Probably the most common shape is the rectangular skew. However, some are made from unaltered bar stock and are sold with sharp, square edges, rendering them nearly useless out of the box. The sharp edges will catch on any imperfection in the toolrest and make it difficult to slide and roll the tool smoothly. At the very least, the sharp edges need to be rounded over and softened. Ideally, a rectangular skew has the edge that runs to the short point fully radiused, and the edges that run to the long point chamfered and softened, removing any nicks and bumps. This allows for fluid movement of the tool when planing and rolling the short point and provides a stable surface when holding it vertically for penetrating cuts with the long point. Most tool manufacturers now sell skews already machined with this profile. Look for this shape when shopping for a new tool, and know that with older, used tools, you may need to tune them for optimal results.

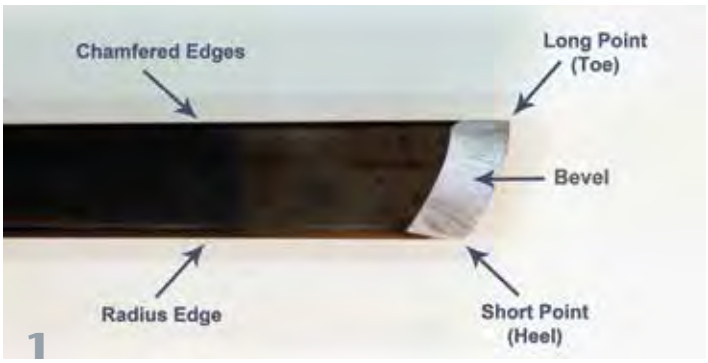
Round skews, ground from small diameter steel blanks, are great for forming details on finials, chess pieces, and other fine spindle work. As round skews get larger, the width of the tool limits their usefulness because they cannot easily reach between close elements. Many turners also find them difficult to sharpen due to their tendency to roll when presented on a grinder. For these reasons, I limit my use of round skews to fine details.

Oval-shaped skews allow smooth travel over the toolrest and are great for planing cuts and rolling beads. They are less stable on the toolrest than a rectangular profile during facing or V-groove cuts. Also, because of the curved body, some find it more difficult to sharpen with consistency. However, there are many woodturners who prefer this shape, and in skilled hands it makes a great all-purpose skew.

Skew sizes and angles

Skews come in a wide variety of sizes. The very small and very large do offer some advantages in particular circumstances, but I find that I reach for my ½" (13mm) and 1" (25mm) skews most often. If I were to recommend one tool to the new turner, it would be a ¾" (19mm) or 1" rectangular skew for the versatility that size and shape offers.

Most skews come ground with a cutting edge that forms a straight line from long point to short point, typically with about a 70° angle measured from the long axis. This is a very usable profile and a good place to start when learning. However, many experienced turners favor a curved profile, with a straighter section for only about a third of the tool ▸



Common names of skew parts.

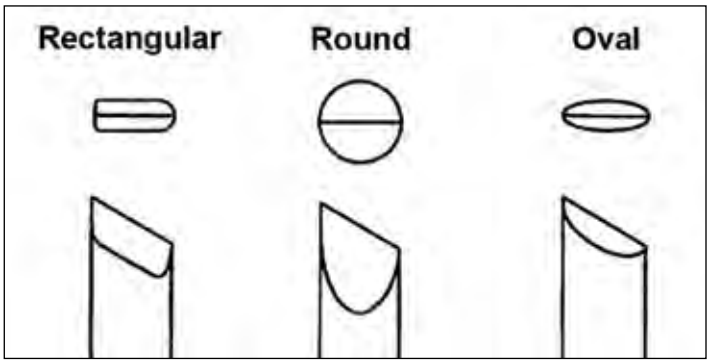


Figure 1. Skew cross sections.

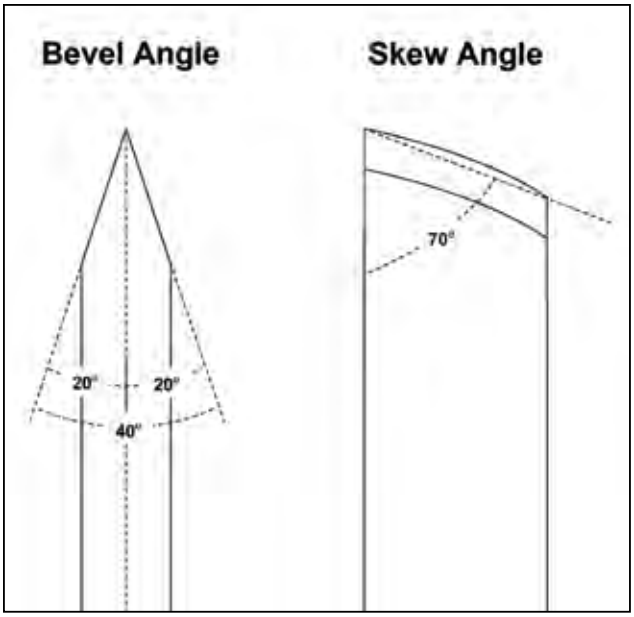


Figure 2. The difference between the bevel angle and skew angle.

near the long point, arcing into a gentle curve to the short point *(Photo 2)*. The overall slope is maintained at about 70°, but the curved profile offers an advantage when making rounded or arcing cuts.

The typical 70° skew angle can be altered to good effect for individual uses. Steeper angles are great for cutting shallow, sweeping coves and working in tight areas, and some may find flatter angles better for rolling beads.

Note that the skew angle and bevel angle are two different parts of the tool, as illustrated in *Figure 2*. Bevel angle considerations are discussed later in this article.

Geometry of a skewed cut

The skew chisel can make exceptionally clean cuts because, as the name implies, its cutting edge is skewed, or angled relative to the directional rotation of the wood. This orientation creates two benefits. First, cutting occurs by slicing along the wood grain rather than directly into it, reducing the tendency of wood fibers to pull out. Second, when any cutting edge is skewed in relation to the rotation of the wood, the actual cutting angle is reduced, effectively making the cutting edge "sharper" and generating a cleaner cutting action (*Photos 3, 4*).

This effect occurs with many other turning tools, too. Think of how we manipulate a bowl gouge, tilting the flute to the side or rotating it vertically when shear cutting. Even a spindle roughing gouge, when presented with the bevel pointed in the direction of the cut, has a skewed cutting angle. These are all examples of skewed cuts, and they produce a finer surface because they slice along the wood fibers and effectively introduce a sharper edge to the wood. With this in mind, when using a skew chisel on a difficult piece of wood, experiment by altering the presentation angle of the edge simply by swinging the handle one way or the other. This can dramatically affect the quality of the cut.

Bevel angle

A 40° included bevel angle (20° on each side) is considered typical for skew chisels, but the exact angle is not critical. In practical use, an included bevel angle anywhere from 25° to 55° is common.

Skew angles can be straight (bottom image) or gently curved.

Skewing the angle of the tool effectively produces a "sharper" edge, which generates a shearing or paring action and ultimately a cleaner cut surface.

Skew with a hollow-ground bevel.

Skew with a convex-ground bevel.

Skew with a flat-ground bevel.

Depending on the application and material, moving toward a more acute or obtuse angle may offer advantages. A blunter angle can provide added durability to the edge when working with very hard wood. More acute angles work well on soft woods, and the thinner cutting edge also allows clearance when working in tight transition areas. As illustrated in *Photos 3 and 4*, the actual cutting angle is not just dictated by the grind angle, but rather a combination of the grind angle and the angle of attack relative to the directional rotation of the wood. It is not possible to position the tool and have a cutting angle greater than the grind angle, as that would cause loss of bevel support and become a scraping cut. But, depending on how much you skew the position of the tool, the cutting angle can be greatly reduced from the grind angle.

I find a 40° included bevel angle a good all-round compromise between durable and sharp. A handy, nontechnical method of finding that angle is to grind the bevel length to about one-and-a-half times the thickness of tool. It so happens this bevel length will equal about 20° (actually 18.4°) on a tool of any thickness. The result is a tool with an included angle of about 40°.

Sharpening

There are three common ways to sharpen a skew chisel: hollow grind, convex grind, and flat grind. Opinions vary on which is the best. Ultimately, tool skill is the most important factor and someone proficient with these tools will work effortlessly with any grind.

Hollow grind

Grinding a bevel on a round stone produces a concave profile or a "hollow" in the bevel, as indicated in *Photo 5*. The smaller diameter the wheel, the deeper the hollow grind. In my experience, a concave bevel on a skew has the tendency to make the tool catchy and harder to control, especially when you are learning. The back edge of the bevel becomes a pivot point, which prevents the bevel's surface from supporting the cutting edge directly behind the cut. With this pivoting action, the cutting edge is not naturally pointed in the direction of the cut, but rather deeper into the wood. As a result, a hollow-ground tool tends to self-feed and is a little more grabby in use. This tendency can be overcome with practice, but I find this grind less user-friendly, especially for beginning turners.

You can improve a hollow-ground skew's performance by honing the edge on a flat surface after grinding. This produces two flats in a single plane at the front and back edge of the bevel. These flat surfaces lead the tool in the direction of the cut and reduce the tendency of the tool to dive farther into the wood. If you hollow-grind your skew, try honing with a diamond stone between trips to the grinder. You may find it makes the tool more stable and easier to control.

Convex grind

You can produce a slightly convex bevel by gently rolling the bevel up on the grinding wheel while sharpening. After sharpening the edge, gently advance the chisel up the wheel. This removes the trailing edge of the bevel and produces a slight convex or bullet shape (*Photo 6*). I find this grind easy to master freehand on the grinder with only a toolrest set to the appropriate angle, and it is very good for most of the common skew cuts. Keep in mind, the key here is a very slight convex shape. It is easy to overdo it and render the tool nearly useless. Monitor the shape closely as you grind the tool, as you only need to remove the concave hollow and nothing more.

Flat grind

After much time using all manner of grinds, I favor a dead-flat bevel on a skew chisel (*Photo 7*). Since it is easy to control and maintain bevel contact during the cut, a flat-ground skew is the easiest for beginners to use. As noted, the flat surfaces lead the tool in the direction of the cut and reduce the tendency of the tool to cut aggressively. I sharpen all my skews with a flat bevel. The problem is, it is hard to consistently produce a flat bevel freehand on a grinder. Practically speaking, this requires a belt sander sharpening method with a platen, which produces a flat, even edge.

To be sure, you can have a long and happy woodturning career, making beautiful work, without ever mastering the skew. In fact, there probably isn't anything you can do with a skew that you can't do with some form of gouge or scraper. However, I believe there are many things the skew simply does better. For one, it leaves a cleaner surface off the tool, which means less sanding. I think if you give it a fair chance, you will be glad you added this tool to your workshop. ■

Photos by Roger Meeker

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(Editor's Note: A detailed description of how to make the most common skew cuts can be found in Keith Tompkins' article on page 32. Also, please see page 34 for a link to an instructional video by John Lucas that further illustrates the techniques.)

Skew Chisel PRIMER

LEARN THE BASIC CUTS

Keith Tompkins

The planing cut, made with the skew chisel's bevel rubbing, leaves a surface requiring minimal sanding.

The skew chisel, one of the most versatile spindle-turning tools, has a bad reputation. It is sometimes the butt of woodturning jokes: "I brought along my skew chisel," says a demonstrator, "for opening this can of paste wax." Many otherwise expert turners refuse to use the skew. Yet others, having mastered its use, swear by it.

The skew is ideally suited for efficient, high-production spindle turning and continues to be a favorite among production turners. With this one tool, a variety of spindle-turning functions are possible: peeling, planing, V-grooves, beads, fillets, facing off endgrain, and even coves. But the skew's versatility comes at a price: In order for the tool to cut both to the right and to the left, a bevel must be ground on both sides of the cutting edge. This design is the primary reason the skew has a tendency to catch.

The difficulties of mastering the skew have not gone unnoticed among manufacturers. Several companies market alternatives to the traditional design, with the main selling point being that their tool can help you overcome the skew chisel's propensity to catch. But if you take the time to master this tool, you will be able to make cuts other tools cannot—and leave a finer surface on the wood.

Learning to use a skew chisel is well worth your time and energy. Here is how to make the most common skew cuts.

Peeling cut

Let's start with the peeling cut, which does not usually leave a clean surface but is perhaps the best way to remove a great deal of wood quickly. Use it to rough a cylinder to size and for forming tenons.

To start the cut, place the tool high up on the turning with its cutting edge parallel to the axis of the turning (*Photo 1*). Since this cut is rather aggressive, you can lessen how heavy a cut you take by using only a small part of the cutting edge at one time. As the wood rotates, allow the bevel of the skew to rub without the cutting edge engaged. Pull the tool back toward you until the edge begins to cut, then raise the handle and feed the edge in and upward to complete the cut. As you raise the handle, imagine moving the cutting edge in a slight arcing motion as it cuts the wood—up slightly and then toward the axis of the workpiece.

Slide the tool over to begin another cut.

Planing cut

The planing cut is one of the most frequently used skew cuts because it can leave a highly polished surface off the tool. This cut involves riding the bevel of the tool. To begin the cut, lay the tool flat on the wood and gradually rotate it until the bevel is contacting the wood and the edge begins to cut. If you are cutting from right to left, rotate the tool counterclockwise; from left to right, clockwise. When you have engaged the cutting edge, simply slide the skew along the toolrest, taking a light cut.

Turners have their own preferences as to exactly how to hold the skew chisel during the planing cut. Note in the *lead photo* that my left index finger is riding against the straightedge of the toolrest, while light pressure from my thumb maintains bevel contact with the wood. I find this grip gives me better control of the depth of cut and allows me to feed the tool smoothly along the toolrest. There is no need to muscle the cut with brute force; a light touch is all that is required. Also notice that the cutting edge is skewed, or positioned at an angle in relation to the rotation of the wood. This allows the tool to cleanly peel away, or pare the wood, rather than scrape directly into the surface.

V-groove

The V-groove may be the simplest cut to make with a skew chisel, but no other

tool can do the job as well, leaving clean, sharp sides of the V-grooves all the way to the bottom. The traditional method involves positioning the toolrest fairly high in relation to the turning. The long point of the skew is used to define the centerline of the V-groove, arched downward until it contacts the workpiece, and then the handle is raised to deepen the groove. To widen the groove, the same cutting action is made alternately from the right and left until the V-groove is to the desired width and depth. The bevel is rolled slightly away from the cut for minimal bevel contact. This is called "floating the bevel" and helps with tool control when cutting into the narrow bottom of a V shape.

An alternate cut I use successfully involves lowering the toolrest until the point of the skew is aimed directly at the centerline of the turning. Rubbing only the portion of the bevel near the long point, I complete the cut by pushing the tool straight in. Admittedly, this method will cause consternation with some proponents of the skew, but it works. Since the tool is situated lower in the cut, there is no need to arc the tool down into the wood. As the tool is fed straight in, the revolving wood meets the edge and is peeled away. With this cut, I control the amount of wood being removed by regulating the amount of side pressure I apply to the bevel as it cuts. The result is a clean cut, and catches are rare (*Photo 2*).

For a peeling cut, present the skew chisel with the cutting edge parallel to the axis of the turning. This cut will remove a lot of wood quickly.

Here, the skew is being used to turn the left side of a V-groove shape. The tool is presented with the long point down and rotated very slightly clockwise so the bevel can "float" behind the cut.

Beads can be formed with a skew using either the short point (heel) or a small portion of the cutting edge with bevel support (pictured here). Notice with this method the cutting action is near the horizontal centerline of the turning, so the cut stays on the same plane from start to finish. When the heel is used for cutting, the action begins near the top of the cylinder and finishes near the centerline.

The sides of beads can be cut similarly to a V-groove—with the long point down and gently riding the bevel for support.

Beads

A major advantage of using a skew chisel to turn beads is that it can reach into the narrow area between the beads, leaving a clean, crisp line at the bottom—no sanding needed. Here are three ways the skew can be used for rolling beads.

Cutting with the short point

The traditional method of turning beads involves holding the skew high up on the turning, presented on its side as you would for a planing cut, then using just the short point (heel) to roll the bead. This cut requires a few different but simultaneous movements of the tool: its shaft must be rotated to keep the cutting edge in contact with the wood; the handle must be swung (right to left for cutting the left side of a bead); and the handle must be raised as you cut the side of the bead deeper. During this cut, if any part of the cutting edge other than the short point comes into contact with the wood, a spiral catch can occur.

Ride the bevel

Another technique is to cut with a portion of the actual cutting edge, as opposed to using just the point at the heel. The bevel "rides" the wood as you cut the bead (*Photo 3*). The key is to gently ride the bevel all the way to the base of the bead. The tool's bevel supports a portion of the cutting edge, which helps to avoid a catch.

Long point down

Yet another method is to cut the bead using the toe (long point) of the skew, similar to making a V-groove. Rather than using just the point, however, ride the bevel at an area just above the long point when cutting with the long point down (*Photo 4*). It helps to use your body movement to swing the tool smoothly to form the curve of the bead. Control the depth of the cut by modulating the pressure applied. This cut works equally well cutting either to the right or left, ▸

Position the bevel of the skew chisel parallel to the wood to begin cutting a fillet.

Finish cutting the fillet by advancing the tool as you would for a planing cut.

To achieve a clean cut on endgrain, use just the toe of the skew chisel. To avoid a catch, lean the left-side bevel slightly away from the endgrain (exaggerated here to illustrate the concept).

and gives an unobstructed view of the cutting action. The result is a clean cut with little tendency for a catch.

Fillets

A fillet is a flat, horizontal area of a turning useful for visually separating various spindle elements. For example, a fillet can be used as a transition between a cove and a bead. Fillets must be cut clean and crisp, without the need for sanding, and the skew chisel accomplishes this task better than any other tool. Many turners cut fillets with a parting tool because of its ease of operation, but the parting tool leaves a surface of torn fibers, which requires sanding. Sanding is useful in some cases but can dull, or round over the clean, crisp details of a well-turned spindle. A parting tool can be used to rough-size a fillet, but it should be followed up with the fine finishing cut of a skew.

Cutting a fillet involves making the initial cut without the benefit of bevel support. To begin, position the skew chisel with one of the bevels (depending on the direction of the cut) parallel to the turning, as you would perform a planing cut. Raise the handle gently until the short point contacts the wood. Just the slightest pressure will cause the tip to form a slight groove in the turning (*Photo 5*). Once the groove is formed, rotate the toe of the skew away from the wood slightly to create clearance and avoid having the entire bevel making contact with the surface of the wood. Then, advance the tool as in a normal planing cut (*Photo 6*). With experience, you can eliminate the step of shifting the toe away from the cut. This cut is also useful for sizing tenons.

Cutting endgrain

The skew chisel works well for cutting across endgrain, whether on steps, shoulders, or the absolute end of a spindle-oriented blank. This can be useful for truing the face of an endgrain blank prior to hollowing for a box or goblet.

The endgrain cut is performed with the toe, or long point. Present the tool with the long point down so the toe is just touching the surface to be cut (*Photo 7*). The key to avoiding a catch is to keep the bevel nearest the wood tipped slightly away from the endgrain. If the long cutting edge touches the endgrain, a dig-in will happen. To finish the cut, simply raise the handle and advance the tool across the endgrain. This cut leaves an exceptionally smooth finish on endgrain surfaces.

After years of using the skew chisel, I have learned the secret to its misbehavior. Simply put, the cutting edge of a skew chisel will catch when the correct portion of the bevel is not supporting the cut. Even a slight twist of the tool handle can allow the wrong portion of the bevel (or the wrong bevel) to contact the wood; a spiral catch is the result. Keep the cutting edge supported by the bevel when beginning a cut whenever possible.

Although there are new tools constantly being brought to market, the skew's versatility and quality of cut will ensure its continued presence in nearly every turner's tool assortment. You, too, can learn to use the skew chisel with patience and practice. ■

Keith Tompkins is an accomplished lifelong woodworker and turner. For contact information and examples of his work, visit keithptompkins.com.

You read the article—now see the video!

This article has an accompanying online video in which John Lucas demonstrates how to make the skew cuts described here. To view the video, visit tiny.cc/skewcuts (case sensitive) or scan the QR code with your mobile device.