

One of the first things you need to do when you are getting started in woodturning, is to purchase your tools. There are two basic ways to acquire a starter set of tools: 1.) Purchase a basic set of tools from a manufacturer or 2.) Purchase individual tools and build your own set. For most new woodturners, I recommend that you choose option two, *build your own set*. While it may be tempting to just buy a basic set of tools from your favourite manufacturer, it may not be the best choice for you in the long run. Tool sets typically require you to settle for a general purpose collection, which usually contain tools that you may not need, or want initially.

Woodturning tools are basically divided between spindle tools and faceplate turning tools. Spindle tools are typically used to turn spindle projects like pens and table legs, where the grain of the wood is parallel to the bed of the lathe. Faceplate tools are typically used to turn bowls, platters and other projects, where the grain turns perpendicular to the bed of the lathe. Specialty tools are also available including tools designed for deep hollowing, center saving, threading, texturing and more.

Alloy Choices

Numerous tool alloys are available in modern woodturning tools however, two main alloys are commonly used, M2 High Speed Steel (HSS) and Powder Metal technology steel, including the ASP 2030 and ASP 2060 alloys. If you're just getting started, choose M2 HSS for most of your woodturning tools. It's the least expensive alloy available in the high speed steel range and it offers very good edge life for the money. Although more exotic steels are available that offer increased edge life, they can cost several times more than a basic M2 HSS tool of the same size. Once you are more established and your interests are more clearly defined, you can look to the expensive exotic tool steels to meet specific requirements.

M2 HSS

M2 HSS is the industry standard alloy in woodturning, with an edge that can last approximately 5 - 6 times as long as traditional high carbon steel. M2 HSS can maintain its edge even if "blued" during the grinding/sharpening process. M2 HSS tools are economical and offer excellent value. M2 HSS is now available from some manufacturers in cryogenically treated versions. These tools are specially treated at temperatures of -300 degrees below zero. This treatment increases the durability and edge holding capability of the base tool steel approximately 250% or more.

ASP Powder Metal

Powder metal steel is a special type of tool steel that can hold its edge up to 4.5 times longer than traditional M2 HSS, depending on the particular alloy used. ASP powder metal tool steels offer exceptional edge life and are more expensive than M2 HSS. If you're working very abrasive timbers, or prefer longer edge life on your tools, a few powder metal tools in your workshop will be a welcome addition to your chisel inventory.

How Are Turning Tools Measured?

Most spindle tools are measured by the diameter of the round tool shaft. Most bowl gouges are measured by the width of the flute, with the diameter of the shaft being approximately 1/8" larger than the width of the flute. When selecting turning tools, bear in mind that many woodturning tools have multiple applications. This means that one turning tool may in effect, have many different uses.

Determining What Woodturning Tools You Need To Get Started

The first step in selecting which woodturning tools you need to get started, is to decide if you want to turn spindle projects, faceplate projects, or maybe a little of both. Next, you need to determine what size lathe you will be using, mini, intermediate, or large. Obviously, larger projects on big lathes require larger tools than what you would need with small and medium sized lathes.

Tools To Consider Purchasing

The following basic tool list is suitable for a beginner woodturner, organized by the type of tool. This list assumes you want to do a variety of spindle and faceplate projects and you're turning on a lathe that swings 12", or less. Lathe swing is defined as twice the distance from the lathe bed to the centre of the spindle. Looked at another way, the swing is the maximum diameter round blank that a lathe can turn without hitting the bed. If your lathe is larger or smaller than the example above, you will need to adjust the sizes of tools listed to meet your specific requirements.

Spindle Gouges

1/4", 3/8" and 1/2" spindle gouges. These will be your mainstay for spindle work and fine detail work. They can also be used on the outside of bowls for detail work, but never on the inside. Spindle gouges are unsuitable for bowl hollowing work.

Bowl Gouges

1/2" deep fluted bowl gouge for rough-out work and bulk wood removal. A 3/8" deep fluted bowl gouge would also be very useful for finishing cuts.

Detail Gouges

If your budget allows it, a 3/8" or 7/16" detail gouge would be useful for reaching long distances off the tool rest. Detail gouges feature a shallow flute, which adds rigidity to the shaft and reduces vibrations.

Parting Tools

Two main styles are needed a 3/16" diamond parting tool for general work and deep parting cuts and an ultra-thin kerf 1/16" tool for minimal waste when grain matching, working on boxes, pens etc.

Scrapers

A thick scraper is a great tool to use occasionally during bowl turning. The best scrapers are thick and wide with the 3/8" x 1.5" half round nose being a good overall choice. In addition, if your budget allows it, add a 3/8" x 1.5" dual angle scraper. This tool is an excellent choice for shear scraping of many faceplate projects.

Skew Chisels

If you're doing a lot of spindle work, a Skew Chisel is a must have to produce glass smooth surfaces right off the tool. A 3/4" or a 1" skew chisel would be a good choice. There are several styles including a straight skew, rounded skew, oval skew and full round skew. Most of my students prefer the straight skew, or rounded skew when learning this tool.

Micro Turning Tools

If you anticipate doing lots of bowl and platter detail work, or smaller spindle type projects such as pens, small inlays, vases etc, a few micro turning tools are nice to have on hand. Among the more useful are 1/4" and 3/16" micro spindle gouges, a 1/4" micro round nose scraper and a 1/4" micro skew chisel. You will use these regularly for various types of detail work on your projects.

Micro tools by their very nature are small in size, with very small bevels and short handles. This allows you to get into some really tight areas with ease and execute certain tasks that would be difficult, if not impossible with other (larger) tools. The micro bevels take a very light cut, allowing you to achieve near glass-smooth surfaces right off the gouge. As we all know, if you have to do a lot of sanding on fine detail you will probably destroy it, or radically change the exterior profile. Having the ability to get such a smooth surface off the gouge is invaluable, because your crisp detail stays intact and only requires the lightest of sanding protocols to prepare it for finishing.

I know at the start I said that it was better to build your own kit of chisels, but in the micro chisels it works out to be more economical to buy a boxed set.