



woodwork for women

cutting a new path for beginners

patt gregory



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forwood

At dinner recently I discovered the table I was sitting at was hand-made by the man who had invited me. Dave. A thin man with a beard and a quiet, biting sense of humour. He was scooping salad onto a wooden plate at the time. He had also made the plate. And scooping fork. Dave and his wife had built the house too, from timber they had cut down on the site.

You're supposed to feel admiration for people like this. Not feel jealous, say, or mildly inadequate. Not drink a little too much red wine and find things to make fun of, like a Mortise and Tenon joint. Isn't that a couple of Italian opera comedians? I was glad of the wine. Dave hadn't made it.

My therapist for all this is Patt Gregory. Like my friend Dave, she has clear eyes that welcome you in. She doesn't build much any more herself, she tells me – although she could – but she teaches other people how to do it. She's passionate about this teaching. Woodwork for Women, one of the courses she runs from her small workshop in Mullumbimby, is how she does it, along with Woodwork for Beginners. This last one means there's room for blokes too.

Did I say passionate? As I sit down to talk with her she's telling me about the song of the saw, how its pitch changes as you near the end of the cut; about running your hand along the fur of the grain of freshly cut woods. This is not normal woodworking talk. She knows about tools. And a lot of different joints. Subtle things: how to hold handles, brace things, ways to look at possibilities of building stuff. But she also talks about the meditation of the work, the growth of project and self, how each project and the way to get there is unique.

And then she shows me a photo album. There's a photo of a woman with a calm, zen-like look. Her mouth is curved, every-so-slightly, at the corners. Beside her is a small table with neat, sweet dovetail joints, the timbers polished to a sheen of burnt umber and blonde.

Another shows a woman loosely dressed in purples and scarves. Her eyes are closed, head tilted up against the sun. She's holding a bookshelf of radiata pine. In another, a woman, who Patt tells me was sixty at the time, a mother of 8, is standing by a table made of Jarrah. Her smile says, simply, 'Look what I've done!' And all her friends in her class are grinning with her.

'I can't do that...' I mumble, a little pathetically.

'It's the journey', she tells me. One piece of wood at a time, one cut, one join, one nail. Everything unfolds. Patt will guide me at the start, but the design and finish will be mine. She keeps talking about bookshelves and projects but, most enthusiastically, about past students, and I flip open her book to a picture of a mother with her daughter of about twelve.

And that's when I get it: Patt is a life construction worker. No unions or uniforms. Just a love of something intangible and essential. There are many of them out there: teachers, parents, friends, supporters, social workers, gardeners. They have helmets in all different styles – sun hats, caps or even white hair like Patt's. It's about building connections, about constructing pride. And the photo of mum and daughter – and their smiles – teaches me that these things are worth building through the generations. Every joint and nail of the journey. I want to sign up.

I'm gonna build Dave a wine rack.

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introduction



about me

When I was five I snuck into my stepfather's shed and borrowed his hammer. I spent a few hours wandering around our dairy farm, trying to whack 4 inch nails into the shed door, the laundry window frame and the concrete foundations.

I wanted to build a tree house so I dragged planks of wood up into the wide flowering branches of our wattle tree and tried to nail them to the branches. I then pushed and pulled the less-than-enthusiastic farm dog up onto the couple of wobbly boards I'd wedged in place and together we looked out over the paddocks.

If I had been a boy, I suspect that I would have been shown how to hold the hammer the right way and I would have been told that 4 inch nails have rather limited uses. Instead, when my stepfather discovered I had his hammer, I was sent inside to help Mum with bottling the blackberry jam.

It would be another twenty-seven years before I picked up a hammer again. I was living in the UK and saw a one-line ad in the Bristol Evening Post. It read:

*Woodwork for Women – Evening classes –
Wed 7 pm – Totterdown – Tel 916743.*

I turned up at the terrace cottage and was ushered into a carpeted living room with velour lounges, a TV in the corner and a

few small portable workbenches dotted around the space. I was given some fragrant smelling pine, some measuring tools and some instructions to begin to make a slanted desktop writing case. There, in that stuffy lounge room, I had an 'aha' moment – this was what I really wanted to do; I wanted to learn how to build with wood.

The following month I enrolled in an intensive Carpentry and Joinery course. It was me and twelve lads in a classroom at the Bristol Skill Centre. The teacher gave us quick demonstrations and told us to get on with it. It was a 'sink or swim' approach and I certainly did my share of sinking.

I struggled to sharpen my tools (as proficiently as the men), couldn't get the hang of keeping my saw straight and upright (required for square and accurate joints) and I always felt like I needed more information but didn't know the right questions to ask.

Despite the frustrations, I loved the spicy wood fragrance as it wafted through the sunlit white workshop. I loved the gleaming sharp tool blades that promised precision and I loved the shooshing sound of the plane as it licked off paper thin, bright golden curls of pine. I was intoxicated by woodwork. Time stood still when I was immersed in building with wood. I found shaping and taming the wood wildly satisfying.

*When you are making furniture
you are making your life. You
are in woodwork who you are in
life and while you think it's you
shaping the wood, it's really the
wood shaping you!*

Bernadette

about this book

I learnt a lot about woodworking in that Bristol classroom but I also learnt some important lessons about how people learn. For a start, I needed the ‘obvious’ explained to me because I didn’t possess the grounding in tool use and woodwork that my fellow male students took for granted.

With this in mind, this book starts at the very beginning. I explain how to select tools and how to hold them. I introduce you to how wood behaves so that you might get to know the nature of the medium you will be working with. I give detailed instructions of techniques such as sawing, chiseling and assembling and I include problem solving tips called Splinters.

In Bristol I also learnt that practising on endless scraps of wood is boring. I prefer to make something, so I teach you the basic skills as you make a small pine shelf or box. It doesn’t matter if you have never picked up a saw before, I will take you step by step through the process and you will learn as you go.

The small pine shelf or box is simple in design, yet you will learn how to make three traditional basic joints using hand tools – the rebate joint, the housing joint and the butt joint. These provide a general foundation of furniture making. Once you have learnt all the skills involved making this project, you can then go on and make a rabbit hutch with the kids or a bookcase for the living room. You can make boxes, drawers and shelves, and later progress to tables, desks and daybeds.

about you

My hope is that as you work your way through this book, you will find yourself sticking your head under your wooden kitchen table to see how it’s joined, or maybe you will upend the coffee table with the drawer to see how it’s been put together.

I also hope you will stop, take time and listen to yourself as you acquire these new skills. When we rush from step to step we may miss the little red flags that tell us we need to slow down or that a low level of frustration is eroding our enjoyment.

Therefore, to ensure you get the most out of each new task, you will be prompted to ponder and write about what you did well and what you enjoyed and what points you would like to remember. The most valuable support often comes from within.

I have written this book specifically for women because, like me, many women may feel there is limited access to what has been a male-oriented area. However, this book is useful to anyone wanting to learn the foundations of woodworking. In the Woodwork for Women classes I hold at my home workshop in northern New South Wales, I create a supportive environment where women can discover just how practical and creative they are. It is my belief that learning woodwork is a vehicle for transformation and gives us the confidence to reclaim our capabilities. It is a journey which is both challenging and rewarding.

your first project

This book focuses on learning basic woodworking skills while building a project. It is about developing confidence working with wood and handling tools, learning techniques and feeling comfortable creating something practical with your own hands, and being able to do it yourself. Choose from either a small pine shelf or a box format.

Your very first project is designed to allow you to learn as you go, picking up tips and techniques. In building this project, you will learn three traditional woodworking joints and have a completed piece to show for it, ready to enhance with a finish of your choice (such as paint, oil or varnish), plus you will gain a basic knowledge of furniture making and the confidence to tackle jobs around the house and have a go at building your own designs.

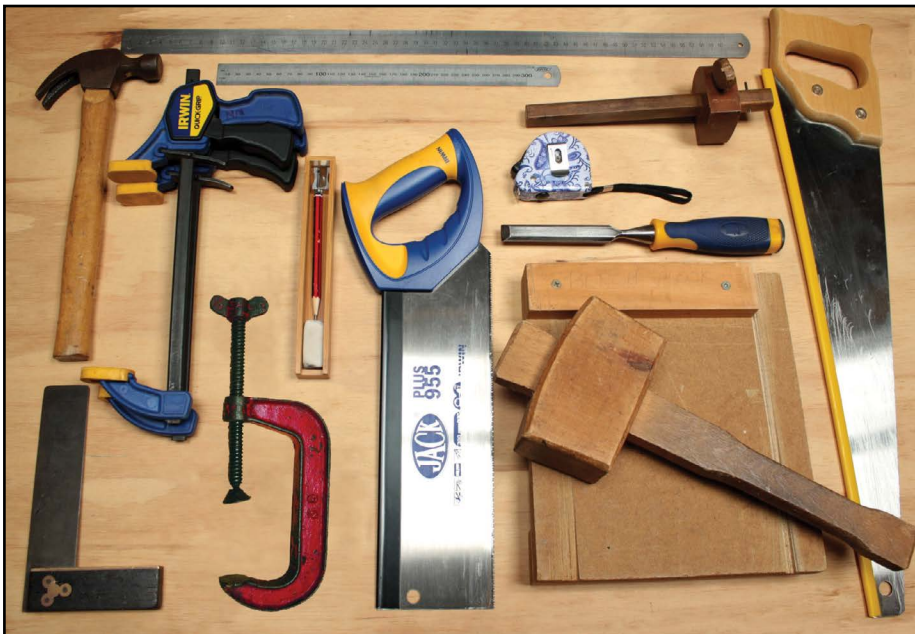
your tool box

Before we move onto designing and making your first project, you need to set up a basic tool kit. This needn't be too expensive. Check out second-hand shops and garage sales. Ask family, friends or neighbours if they have spares. You may find you already have some tools around the home, such as a hammer and tape measure. Gather a few friends to share tools and triumphs and learn together. This section looks at what tools you will need for this project. At the back of the book there is a shopping list and a tool guide looking at what to buy, what to look for in a tool, how much to pay and where you might find them.

a hardware romance

Get ready to start a new romance – with your hardware store or tool shop! I love tools, their look and their feel. Old tools are particularly beautiful, often made of both wood and metal with soft curves to mould into your hands. New tools are often sharper (saws) and power tools are faster and make woodworking easier.

This book focuses on the use of hand tools. In the first project, you'll experience the joy of cutting wood by hand.



A different kind of buzz comes from using a precise high powered spinning blade to do the same job in seconds. Using hand tools allows a connection to develop between you, the tool and the wood and that doesn't come so readily using power tools.

When selecting which tools to buy first, refer to the steps as they tell you the order in which you'll use the tools. Small, non-expensive items are required for steps one to six, such measuring tools and a tenon saw. More expensive tools are required for steps seven through to eighteen. You could spend between \$200 and \$400 for new tools not including the workbench with vice and materials such as the wood, nails, glue, putty etc. You can save a lot of money by buying second-hand, borrowing or asking for tools for birthdays and Christmas gifts. Watch out for specials on Fathers Day and at Christmas; these are great times to start a romance with buying tools.

workbench or work table

A workbench is not strictly a tool, but enjoyable and accurate woodwork relies on a good strong flat surface to work on. You might choose a folding workbench or convert an existing table, or you may be lucky enough to have a bench in your garage or workshop.

When I lived in a first-floor flat, I built a workbench in the tiny spare bedroom. I worked with hand tools and at the end of every session I just had to vacuum up the sawdust and wood shavings from the carpet.

the right work surface height for you

A standard size workbench is about 850 mm in height. If your work surface is too low you might experience a sore back and if it's too high you might find inaccuracies in your work from, for instance, holding the saw at the incorrect angle.

Stand by your work surface (it may be your kitchen table for now) and bend your arm into a right angle. The distance from the underneath of your bent elbow to the top of the work surface would ideally be about 150 mm or more. Or stand facing your table and reach out the palms of your hands at waist height. Imagine your hands flat on the work surface. Does this feel comfortable?



designing your own project

My ten year old son was asked at school to write something about his mother. "My mum is a cheerful, elegant woodworker. She makes furniture we can't afford."

Bryony



what will it be used for?



Thinking through your design is vitally important. Before making a cake you estimate which size pan to put your cake mixture in; there's no point in having the mixture erupt over the sides. In the same way, there's no point in making a dining table that seats only half the family, or cupboards that are too wide to fit through the door-

way to the bedroom, or a breakfast tray that fits only one plate and cup, when you had in mind breakfast for two.

Ask yourself the following questions.

- Will it fit where I want it to go, and will it hold all the items I want?
- Will any doors bang into it if it is positioned where I would like it to go?
- If it's a shelf, how tall and wide will the objects on it be? Do they vary in width and height? Have I taken into account the thickness of the shelf or shelves? (see sourcing the wood).
- Are the different parts or sections in proportion to each other? Will it look attractive, or is it top heavy or too light?
- Is it too heavy or frail for its requirements? Is it too heavy to hang on the wall or too frail to hold the china dinner plates?
- Is it practical to make, or will it require many more hours than I have to spare?
- Will the family be able to reach it (or do I want them to reach it)?

You won't need any final measurements yet.

the golden rectangle

Ancient Egyptian and Greek architecture is based on a simple ratio where rectangles are exactly 1.618 times longer than their width. The golden rectangle principle is pleasing to the eye and can be found in every day objects around the home including such things as credit cards and even bank notes. The façade of the Parthenon in Greece uses this principle and the ratio is also found in the face of the Mona Lisa. The golden rectangle expressed as a numerical ratio works out to be about 5 to 8.

making the joints

mind, body and saw: a (w)holistic approach

There is nothing quite like hearing the song of the hand saw gliding through the wood, changing its pitch as it nears the end of the cut.

To be able to make a straight, square cut by hand is not only useful but very satisfying. You don't need to be strong or push hard. Sawing is a gentle art. Most of us didn't get a chance to experience this growing up, so it is understandable to feel like we don't know where to begin.

It is possible to learn to saw straight with practice, patience and just a few tips. You will begin to see that it is not just a matter of luck whether you saw accurately or not, but it's a matter of attending to a series of morsels of information that together make up the success of sawing.

I thought sawing would be like hacking off a tree branch in the garden, but I found it requires a gentle approach, focusing on the whole body as well as the eye.

Lily



step seven: the housing joint

This joint, also called a dado or trench, has a flat bottomed channel cut across the grain of the wood. If it was going along the grain it would be called a groove. The sides of the joint are called shoulders. The housing joints are cut into the two sides. The joints need to be level with each other. It's called a housing because it houses a cross piece which in this case is a shelf. This joint is very strong and, if well made, only requires glue. Other shelves you might have planned are butt shelves which are glued and nailed and are added later.



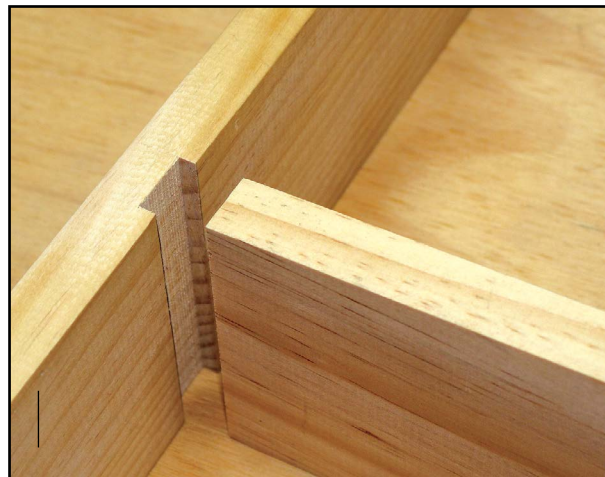
your tool box

- cutting list
- pencil box
- short steel rule
- try-square
- marking gauge

time 15 minutes

tech talk

- dado
- trench
- shoulders
- housed-in shelf
- butt shelves



the position of the housing joint

The cutting of the shelf is left until later when the housing joint is formed, so that you can get an exact fit.

The housed-in shelf will offer strength and stability to the project, so place close to the middle if possible.

We will measure and mark its position as follows.

- While you have your project laid out you can decide where you want to put your housed-in shelf. If you have already decided this, refer to your design.

- Measure and make just one mark on one of the sides with your pencil where you want the top part of the shelf.
- Push the two sides together in a pair (face sides out, face edges up) with the ends flush and use your try-square to square across them both.

splinters

If you find your sides don't match each other in length, you can solve this problem later and after you have cut the housing joint. For now, when marking up the housing joint, always keep track of and work from, the same two ends.

marking out the housing joint



- Using one of your other pieces of wood, lay it across both face edges and against the mark you made for the position of the top of the shelf.
- With a sharp pencil make another short mark the thickness of the wood.

- Using a try-square, square through the mark and across both faces.
- While the two sides are still pushed together, lay the wood back on to check. Measure twice. The pencil line needs to just show on either side of the shelf. If your housing joint markings are too wide or too narrow it is definitely worth re-marking it to save work later on.
- Lay the two sides down flat with the non-face side up.
- Use your try-square to extend the line across one of the non-face sides. As you do this, remember to keep the stock of your square on the face side or face edge.
- Square across the other side piece.
- Mark only three surfaces on each shelf. Don't mark the face side.



double check

Double check that the housing is the correct width by laying the wood on the markings on the non-face side. Only a pencil line should be seen on either side of the wood. This is crucial. If it is too big the strength of the housing joint will be compromised. It is a task to make it smaller. If it is too small, then the joint will be too tight and the shelf won't fit.

finishing the project

step nineteen: finishing

One of my students threw her project (a small pine cabinet with a door) down on her wood pile after the stain she used to finish it was so disappointing she felt it was ruined. It lay there in the weather for six weeks until she rescued it. Repainted and revamped, it now takes pride of place in her home and she shows it off to everyone who comes.

I've also used boot polish to give an old look but whatever you use follow three basic rules:

- apply it to both sides
- follow the instructions on the container
- allow plenty of time

finishing and types of finishes

There are two reasons to finish wood – to protect it and to beautify it.

Your project is now ready to complete with the finish of your choice. There are many different types to choose from: paints to polyurethanes, washes and stains to oils and waxes; non-toxic, environmentally responsible paints and wood finishes. I've even used olive oil. The secret there is to use it sparingly and rub it in hard and fast enough to produce heat so it will penetrate the cells and help prevent mould.

Woodworking is opening up a whole new world to me, that hitherto I had thought was out of my reach.

Diana



Finishing can be quite an art. There are many different schools of thought on the subject. There are plenty of good books and the internet is a great source of information too. When you have decided what you want, the best people to talk to are those who have actually done it themselves. Even then, test it out on a scrap piece first.

Finishing is a science and a skill. Take your time and enjoy the process.

There are a number of businesses supplying sustainable, non-toxic oils, stains, and water based finishes, for example, Painted Earth in Byron Bay www.painted-earth.com.au. You can find others on the internet.



karen's story

I thought, 'Woodwork for Women, I could do this!' And it was an absolute joy.

I went on to buy some basic tools and set about making little bits and pieces and introducing my then 5-year-old son to the world of wooden toys. We would make cars, planes and boats from the off cuts thrown out by a factory near where we lived. I made a beautiful table, the materials of which cost a grand total of \$86. I was living in a motor home at the time and had no room for it so gave it away to a friend.

I decided to do a course in general construction, which led to a six month part-time job with a woodworker where I would make my own fold up barbeque tables, bread boards and various knick knacks. We would sell them at the local markets for a small profit. It was enough to keep us buying and recycling wood. And it was never about the money, but the great experience and learning.

That gave me the impetus to study landscape design and organic farming which took me away from woodworking for some years, however my now 15-year old son wants to be a carpenter!

Woodwork has given me the know-how to project manage and have a hand in building my own home with confidence, sometime in the future.

Karen Hall