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FAST FIXES

Need to repair a dent, chipout, or a scratch? Check out these quick, project-saving solutions.

Even now, I'm not sure exactly how it happened. I *thought* the clamp was securely in its holder on the wall. But as my hand let go of it, I realized the clamp was falling. And that it was going to hit the drop-front desk I'd just finished assembling.

It was one of those times when everything slows down, and your muscles just won't respond. As if epoxied to the floor, I stood there watching as the clamp put a long gash into the side of the desk. And nothing puts a scratch into a piece of wood like a five-pound clamp.

Most accidents aren't so drastic, and many projects go together without any mishap. Still, you can expect an accident like this at some point.

Other times, the damage isn't caused by a catastrophe. It's just a "bump" in the building process. Like the chipout that occurs on the last pass around a large glued-up panel.

Then there are those small dents and scratches that seem to appear "mysteriously." It may have been caused by a glob of dried glue that the top of the table was set on. Or a tiny piece of sandpaper grit that did

not get cleaned off and then was wiped across the surface.

Fortunately, there's typically a good solution for removing the damage (or at least minimizing it). And remember, people aren't looking for mistakes — sometimes a little camouflaging can go a long way.

In fact, if you do a good job at the repair, you might just find yourself pointing it out to others. After all, you can be as proud of a good repair as a tight joint. Besides, everyone likes to hear "disaster" stories — when they have a happy ending.

Dents

At the time, a dent can seem like a major disaster. What was a smooth, clean face now has a deep indentation. And of course, if you know the dent is there, your eye will always be drawn to that spot.

You can relax. Most dents can be completely removed or at least minimized a great deal. That's because a dent is just a small area where the

wood fibers have been compressed (not broken or severed) by a blunt object, like a clamp.

The trick is to reverse the compression, forcing the wood to swell back to its original level. And the solution comes from an unlikely source — water. Usually I try to keep water away from wood. But here it can be used to force the fibers to expand.

If the dent is a small one, simply place a drop or two of water on it to see if the cells swell back to shape. Sometimes this is all it takes to do the trick.

If this doesn't work or if it's a large dent, you can "help it along" with an iron. To keep the wood from scorching, you'll want to put a damp cotton rag under the iron. (Some synthetic fabrics will melt.) The heat from the iron creates steam that penetrates into the wood, causing it to swell.

▲ *With a little steam from a hot iron (see photo at left), the compressed fibers of a dent will swell back into place.*

Doesn't this raise the grain? Yes. But I take a few precautions to avoid any problems. First I sometimes wet the entire face to raise the grain on the piece. More importantly, you need to be sure to sand the piece to the same grit that the rest of the project has been sanded to.

Chipout

Generally, by the time I start routing a profile along a large panel, there's already been a lot of work that's gone into the piece. Which is why chipout is so frustrating. It can mean a lot of work is ruined. But I've learned that you don't always have to start over.
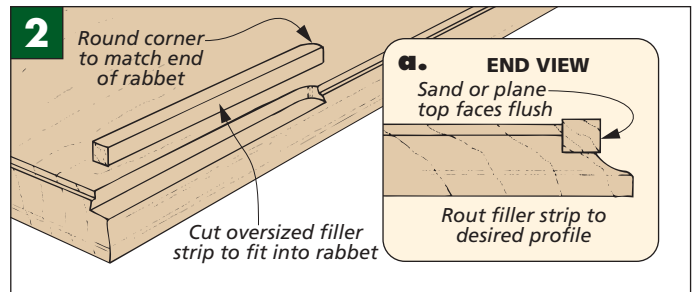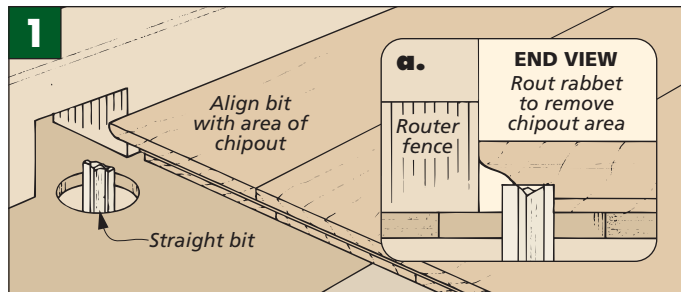
When the chipout is minor, you can sometimes minimize it by sanding it out or by planing the thickness of the entire workpiece. As long as this doesn't affect the joinery, this will often get you by.

When the chipout is a little more extensive, there are still a couple of options. Believe it or not, there have been times when I've actually found the piece that's chipped out and have been able to glue it back into place. But most times, the chip is torn up or sucked into the vacuum.

The last resort is to perform reconstructive surgery. First, to remove the chipout, I use a straight bit in the router table to create a small rabbet, as shown in Fig. 1. This rabbet leaves a straight edge that will accept a filler strip.

To make the filler strip, the important thing is to find a scrap piece that matches the color and grain of the workpiece as closely as possible. I start with the filler strip slightly oversized and glue it into the rabbet (Fig. 2). Now the top surface can be sanded or planed flush, and the original profile can be routed along the edge (Fig. 2a).

1 Align bit with area of chipout — Straight bit

a. Router fence — **END VIEW** Rout rabbet to remove chipout area

2 Round corner to match end of rabbet — Cut oversized filler strip to fit into rabbet

a. **END VIEW** Sand or plane top faces flush — Rout filler strip to desired profile

Scratches & Gouges

How many times have you inadvertently dropped a clamp on a project? Or knocked a panel into a sharp corner? Scratches and gouges are probably the most common accidents that occur in the shop. Unfortunately, you can't reverse a scratch or gouge like you can a dent. The wood fibers have been broken or severed, so you have to sand, scrape, or fill the scratch to minimize the damage.

SAND OR SCRAPE. The first thing I try to do is sand or scrape the scratch out. Both tools do the same job; the scraper just works a little more quickly than the sandpaper. And

although there aren't any special techniques for this process, there are a couple things to keep in mind.

First, even though a scratch is small, you don't want to sand out just the scratch. You can end up with a depression that's still noticeable. Instead, you want to feather out the repair by sanding a much larger area around the scratch.

Second, after you've removed the scratch, you need to make sure to sand the area to the same grit as the rest of the project. Otherwise, it won't accept the stain the same and can end up noticeably different.

PUTTY. If I can't sand or scrape out a scratch or gouge, as a last resort I will use putty. Here are two quick tips I use for getting the right color.

First, if you add putty *before* you finish, then you'll want to have a test piece with finish on it to compare it to. (This is especially true if you're planning to stain the project.)

Second, getting a perfect match is nearly impossible. So for darker woods like walnut, I find the patch less noticeable if the putty is a shade darker. And the opposite is true for light woods (like maple). The putty should be slightly lighter. **W**

PUTTY TRICK

A little prevention always works better than the best "fix." Once I was filling some nail holes with putty — and smeared the putty around without much thought. But the putty stained lighter than the wood around it, so I was left with large ugly blotches (instead of tiny nail-sized spots). Fortunately, this "accident" can be prevented. Here's how I avoided it on my next project.

▲ *Before picking up the hammer and nails, first apply a strip of masking tape. Then drive and set the nails.*

▲ *Now force putty into the holes and remove the tape. The small "bump" that remains can be sanded away.*