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*Glitsa American's newsletter
for flooring professionals*

Magnificent Maple

Working with Maple and the Gold Seal System
By Duane Bartel and Randy Wirtz

In an industry traditionally dominated by the rich color and character of red and white oak, it seems designers and homeowners are increasingly drawn to the blonde natural beauty of Maple.

From installation to applying the topcoat of finish, maple offers unique challenges for the contractor. Each step builds on the next and it cannot be over emphasized that, especially with maple, craftsmanship at every stage of the project is vital to the quality of the end product. MFMA and NOFMA have developed good procedures for installation and preparation of maple floors for coating. Even so, look for future articles in this newsletter in which we will discuss some of the variations contractors use in sanding regimens for maple floors.

In this article we will concentrate on the application of the sealer and topcoats of our Gold Seal system. Reference will be made to other coating products as well in order to point out some of the advantages of using Glitsa's Gold Seal system on maple.

The Gold Seal system is comprised of two "Swedish Finish" sealers and two topcoat products. The sealers are Bacca and Glitsa Sealer. Both are excellent sealers with minor distinctions between the two. The choice of sealer usually boils down to the individual taste of the contractor. Bacca is more fluid than Glitsa Sealer. Accordingly, many contractors feel Bacca has superior flow and leveling qualities compared to Sealer. Glitsa Sealer dries faster than Bacca but is very similar to Bacca otherwise.

The topcoat products are Gold Seal and Lite Scent. Gold Seal is the original single component Swedish Finish topcoat. Lite Scent is very similar to Gold Seal, the principal difference being that Lite Scent was formulated to allow recoating over Gold Seal or itself following a 24-hour dry time. Recoating over Gold Seal using Gold Seal requires a longer wait. There are other minor differences, but like the sealers, the ultimate choice boils down to personal taste. Each has a strong

following and contractors have been known to argue over which sealer and which topcoat is the best choice.

Understanding the characteristics of maple before undertaking the coating job is essential to the contractor's success. Maple is more challenging than oak to achieve an ideal appearance. Maple's uniform surface, dense grain structure and subtle character make it very revealing of not only sanding defects but also the presence of any dust or debris that is permitted to get into the coating. Additionally, any defects in the coating application itself will stand out prominently. For these reasons, it is a good idea for the contractor to plan on putting in a little extra time and care into every step of a maple job. From floor prep and cleaning to coating, these efforts will all add up to make the difference between an outstanding or an unacceptable floor.

Cleanliness is crucial. The contractor should pay special attention to dust control throughout the preparation and coating steps to avoid having debris show up in the finish. Because of maple's character, it will prominently display dust or related debris as "junk" in the coating. In contrast, the high degree of variation of grain density, grain character and muted reflectivity in oak creates a lot of visual "distraction" from imperfections, making them much harder to notice. With maple, the contractor's skills are truly on display.

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For the Gold Seal system, intercoat abrasion is best achieved using a well-worn screen. Alternatively, many contractors have good success using a maroon pad with sanding strips. When the coating is cured sufficiently for abrading, care must be taken not to abrade too aggressively. Swirl marks created during intercoat abrasion will show prominently through the coating on Maple. Oak is more forgiving in this regard.

Maple requires careful consideration when selecting the type of coating. Sunlight alone will cause maple to change color over time regardless of what coating is applied. This color change can vary from yellowing to fading or bleaching. Additionally, some types of floor coatings yellow or amber over time. This could impact the appearance of the floor as it ages. Floor coatings that amber, or yellow as they age include polyurethanes and some water base coatings that have an oil or urethane component. Many interior decorators feel that rooms with yellow floors are difficult to decorate and draw too much attention to the floor. Swedish Finishes and some waterbase coatings have considerably less tendency to amber, so are a good choice with maple in this regard. Ambering is much less noticeable with oak than with maple.

Some water base products or polyurethanes will have an appearance over maple similar to a sheet of plastic, producing an “artificial” appearance, especially if the room is very bright. This should be taken into account if the room receives a lot of natural light or is brightly lit internally. One of the strengths of the Swedish Finishes is the “natural” appearance they impart to the floor.

Although it is a matter of personal taste, if a room receives a lot of light, either natural or from light fixtures, the completed floor may appear overly reflective if a gloss sheen topcoat is used. This may draw too much attention to the floor and make every kind of defect more pronounced. Matted sheens versus gloss topcoats on maple may achieve a more optimal level of reflectivity and reduce the appearance of sanding marks and coating application defects.

Matted sheens offer the benefits of hiding sanding defects on both the surface of the wood and from intercoat abrasion, as well as hiding dust and other debris that may have been introduced to the finish during the coating operation. However, there is a down side to using matted finishes. Possible sheen inconsistencies, streaking and other flattening agent orientation problems can pose problems for the contractor. Careful and consistent lapping technique, uniform coating thickness at the recommended coverage rates and thorough mixing of the product to evenly disperse the matting agent will help achieve

optimum results and avoid streaking or sheen variation across the floor. The best compromise may be to use satin or semigloss topcoats. Once again, because of the highly reflective nature of maple, these sheen problems may appear in maple more so than in oak.

As a general rule of thumb, when coating maple, fewer and thinner coats are best. A contractor who applies four coats in an effort to get exceptional depth of finish is truly pushing his luck. The homeowner who has his or her mind set on a highly glossy, thick looking floor coating should be educated on the associated risks relating to appearance and possibly performance.

Seal coats should be kept thin. When sealer is applied to maple in excessive amounts, a degrading of the appearance can take place. Most noticeably, dive down can occur along board edges. The sealer penetrates into the seams at a more rapid rate than on the board face. The result is an unsightly break in the uniformity of the seal coat. This is most noticeable where coats are applied on the heavy side. Thinner coats will help greatly to reduce dive down. Also, when seal coats are put down too heavy, light reflects through the film surface much more, making defects stand out clearly.

Like the seal coat(s) before it, the topcoat should be applied at the recommended coverage rate and no heavier. Avoid applying the finish coat too thick for the same reasons as above. Some contractors will flood the floor with a thick topcoat in an attempt to gain more working time. Others will apply heavy topcoats with the idea that they are creating a thicker wear surface that will provide superior service. This is not the case. A heavy coat will take longer to fully cure than a coating applied at the recommended coverage rate. Because its ability to cure has been compromised, the thick coating can scratch and scuff more easily and have less ability to resist damage during the initial curing phase. Coatings applied at their recommended coverage rates will provide the best possible performance and have a better appearance than those applied too thick.

If the contractor must apply a gloss topcoat to a maple floor, the extra step of hand sanding with the grain is an effective, though labor intensive, alternative to avoid swirl marks from screens or abrasive strips. Sand paper mounted to a sheetrock sanding pole is a useful tool in this instance.

A well-done maple floor is a thing of beauty. However, It will demand more from the contractor than a conventional oak floor. But if he carefully applies his skills and goes the extra mile, he can be proud of the finished product. ♦