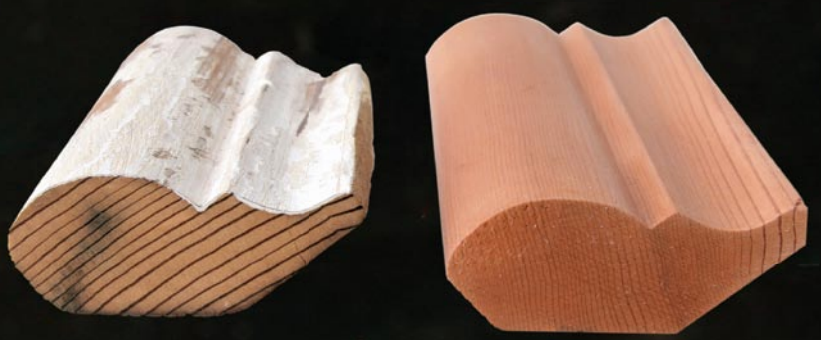
Site-Made Moldings in a Pinch

When all you need is a few feet of millwork to match existing trim, look to the tablesaw, a block plane, and some sanding blocks

BY KIT CAMP



Our little 1920s house suffered more than a few "improvements" before we purchased it. The most egregious was the installation of cheap vinyl windows. To add insult to injury, the installers didn't bother to match the existing trim when they replaced the apron moldings under the new windows. Although we have yet to remedy the window situation, I decided I could at least install some matching trim.

Because of the age of the house, I couldn't find a stock profile to match the aprons, and I didn't want to pay to have the profile custom-milled; I needed only a couple of 8-ft. sticks. I decided to make the trim myself using my tablesaw, a few hand tools, and a technique that I've used in the past to match baseboard, door casings, and crown in a pinch. I also use aspects of this technique to make profile-specific sanding blocks for fairing scarf joints on long runs of trim.

While not a speedy process, this technique can save you a lot of money in router bits, custom shaper knives, or order minimums at the lumberyard. That said, it's difficult to reproduce some smaller, more intricate details without the help of old-fashioned molding planes, scratch stock, or custom-made scrapers, so take a hard look at the molding you need to duplicate before jumping in. If you are on the clock, a practical limit is around 16 ft. of trim.

Take your time at the lumberyard, and look for quartersawn stock that has straight grain to use for moldings. Poplar works well for painted interior moldings; fir and redwood are good for exterior use.

If possible, make a clean, square cut in a scrap of the molding to be copied, and use this scrap to trace the profile to the end grain of the new stock. Old trim often has many layers of paint, which must be scraped away to reveal the original profile. If you can't use an actual piece, trace the profile onto a 3x5 index card. The profile then can be transferred to the blank stock. You can do this without removing the old trim; make a thin cut in the trim using a thin-kerf pull saw, slide the index card into the kerf, and trace the profile. (See FineHomebuilding.com/extras for a drawing of this technique.) □

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Bottom photos: Dan Thornton

1

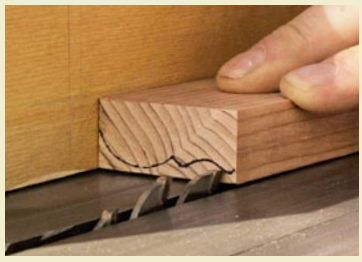
Scribe the profile to the stock

The first step is to mill the stock to the same dimensions as the molding to be copied. If it's possible, use a square-cut piece of the original molding to trace the profile onto the end of the stock. This cutoff later can be used to set the tablesaw blade. If the molding can't be removed, trace the profile onto an index card, then transfer this to the stock. A fine-point marker offers a thin, clean line in most cases, but if the wood is dark, consider a white-colored pencil.

2

Start with rips on the tablesaw

With the profile marked clearly, make a series of overlapping rips on the tablesaw, usually moving the fence ⅛ in. or less each time. It helps to leave a flat section of stock on each edge and in the middle so that the wood runs across the saw table evenly. Play around with the saw's bevel angle and its depth of cut to get as close as possible to the desired profile line. A full-kerf blade with a rip-grind (flat bottom) tooth pattern will remove more per pass and save you work later.



3

Dial in the details with a block plane

A sharp block plane is the hero of this technique, but a shoulder plane (photo below), a small rabbet plane (Stanley #75 or equivalent), and an assortment of curved-sole and miniature planes are also helpful. If you don't have a block plane, rough-grit sandpaper will do the job.

Whether planing or sanding, the goal is to work the length of the piece evenly, taking long, light passes from one end to the other and being careful to keep the details crisp.

4

Smooth the profile with sandpaper

Custom-made wood sanding blocks and store-bought sanding backers (below right) help to achieve fair curves and crisp corners.

For painted molding, start with 80-grit sandpaper, and finish with 120-grit paper. For stain-grade moldings, continue to sand up to at least 150 grit; 220 grit is even better. Make the blocks as long as possible for the most consistent results, and take even strokes that run from one end of the workpiece to the other.

5

Cut bevels to match the original molding

If the molding has a beveled back side, use the original piece to set the tablesaw to the appropriate bevel angle (photo facing page), and rip the molding to match (photo right). In some cases, this bevel will be steeper than 45° and might need some work with a block plane. Once ripped, compare the new molding to the original, and do any final detailing for a perfect match.