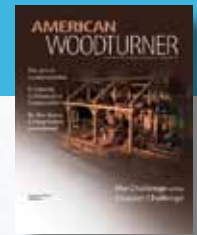
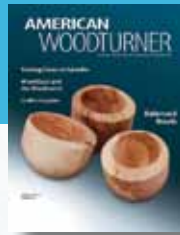


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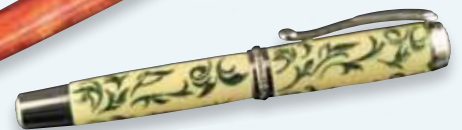
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# The Woodturner's Chainsaw

Proper use of a chainsaw  
can be a piece of cake

By Jacques Vesery

In a vast world of power tools, there are few as intriguing and enticing as the chainsaw—especially for those seeking speed and power. Many woodturners have this compulsion, if for no other reason but to get to the lathe more quickly.

But let's face it: For a woodturner's need, a handsaw can finish most jobs with just a bit more effort and sweat. Unfortunately, a handsaw isn't as much fun.

All fun and games aside, chainsaws are aggressive and dangerous tools when in the wrong hands. Why else would chainsaws show up so often in horror films? But instead of fearing chainsaws, we must appreciate these marvels for what they are.

In one of my many past lives, I served as a forest ranger and a crew boss in a Forest Fire Fighting Unit. In those days, I literally had a chainsaw in my hands every day, either working with it or maintaining it. I've been fortunate: I have had two close calls in 20 years—both caused by the same mistake almost 14 years apart to the day.

The blunder? I got lazy and lost my focus. Plus, for a moment I lacked respect for the tool and the power in my hands. More about my oops later.

"Know your saw and be prepared" should be your mantra for safe chainsaw use. This advice has the ring of the Boy Scout motto, but so be it. If we are obedient, courteous, clean, and kind in our chainsaw use, we will lead a long and happy turning life.

## Safety common sense

Thirty percent of all woodworking related accidents are caused by chainsaws, yet almost all can be prevented. The saw chain on this workhorse can move up to 50 mph. Compare that to a tractor-trailer zipping down the highway—no one would stand in the path of either.

Common sense is the best prevention of injury. Think the task through and be prepared for issues that could arise. Owning the proper safety equipment—including chaps, and ear and eye protection—are essential to safety.

Wearing appropriate clothing is just as important. Dangling shirtsleeves, shirttails, and long hair are hazards when working around any power equipment. Heavy-duty work shoes or boots are far better protection than Birkenstocks or sandals. Sandals you say? Yes, I have seen people run a chainsaw in sandals.



In 1990, Jacques and Minda cut their wedding cake with a chainsaw. Jacques treasures the surprised looks he saw when he handed the cake knife to the *maitre d'* and then pulled out an 18" Husqvarna. More power!

## Know thy chainsaw

Knowing and understanding this tool is part of being prepared. So many times, instruction and safety manuals are overlooked.

My father didn't like reading these same manuals. Years ago while standing in a cherry tree, he slashed through his wrist with a chainsaw while pruning. The emergency-room doctor told Dad that suicide is better accomplished with a razor blade and your feet firmly on the ground—and with less mess. Dad did not fully understand the dangers, which may have been more apparent had he read the safety manual.

## The right tool for the job

Chainsaws come in many shapes, makes and sizes. Finding the right one to meet specific needs is important. Bigger is not always better and the size of the bar is not what matters. The amount of





Safety equipment including chaps, ear and eye protection, and steel-toed boots.



Two chainsaws appropriate for most woodturners: Electric with 16" bar (top) and gas powered with a 20" bar.

### Seven Safety Tips

- 1 Know your chainsaw—read the manual! Every time I pick up a new chainsaw manual, I find at least one bit of useful information.
- 2 Always use a sharp saw chain—a sharp tool is always a safer tool.
- 3 Be prepared for the job with the appropriate tools. Wear appropriate clothing, shoes, and safety gear.
- 4 Understand what causes and how to avoid kickbacks.
- 5 When felling trees, know your danger zones and escape routes. Falling trees always seem smaller than they actually are.
- 6 Avoid working alone. Be at least within shouting distance of a family member or neighbor.
- 7 Have respect for your chainsaw. Never get lazy—even for the shortest task.

power behind it is what makes the difference. In most cases, middle of the road is more saw than any woodturner needs.

There are two basic types of chainsaws: gas powered and electric. Gas saws usually have more power and torque but electric chainsaws can be run indoors, so there is a place for both.

Commonly, the chainsaw has a power head or motor of 38 to 50cc displacement with a 16" to 20" bar. I own an electric saw with a 16" bar and a 46cc gas saw with interchangeable 18" and 20" bars. These mid-range saws have a

power head weight around 10 to 12 pounds, which is about as much as I want to lug around.

For a good fit, consult an expert. I find that the small-engine shops handling sales and servicing to be fair and knowledgeable. In my experience, they recommend the appropriate saw and are always willing to share tips on the use of products they sell.

### Sharper is better

We've heard this time and time again: a sharp tool is safer than a dull tool. The same is true with saw chains. A sharp saw chain cuts

cleanly, is more aggressive, and puts much less wear on the chainsaw. The proof is in the shavings. If the by-product of the cut is small curls, the saw chain is still sharp. Fine sawdust means the chain is due for a sharpening.

Back in my forest-ranger days, I sharpened the saw with a file (in many cases, while in the field). These days, I keep more spare saw chains handy and change them when dull. (It takes me about two minutes to change a saw chain.)

I also realized that having saw chains professionally sharpened saves me time. The drawback is

*Continued*



that professionally sharpened chains have a shorter life span.

### Purposeful task

Most standard saw chains are suitable for crosscutting and ripping. In fact, ripping may seem like the saw is overly aggressive. Specialized ripping saw chains cost about \$50 for a 16" bar. Remember to be kind to your chainsaw. When ripping, stop cutting often and give the saw a break to cool down at an idle. A constant ripcut through a 20" log can over heat and crack the piston head, which can cost almost as much as a new saw to replace.

### Dropping trees

Many woodturners are savvy with a chainsaw for cutting bowl blanks, but have little knowledge for felling or cutting down a tree. This is where many people get in a bind (in more ways than one) with a chainsaw.

The felling variables complicate the use of a chainsaw ten fold. There are many more things to consider: the height and lean of the tree, the wind, the obstacles (like your neighbor's house), danger zones and escape routes. Here's a good rule of thumb with a chainsaw: If you are not sure, don't do it.

Learn proper felling techniques from an expert, which will save you headaches, worry, and possibly an insurance claim.

### Jacques' brush with deja vu

I know some people are still caught up in the chainsaw mishap I mentioned earlier. Let me put your curiosity to rest and your mind at



For a chainsaw ripping cut, note the blocks supporting the log. The shavings affirm that the blade is sharp.



Every chainsaw task should begin with two hands on the machine. Note that the left hand is positioned directly in front of the chain brake on the handle.



ease. There's no gore or missing appendages. I got lucky twice—no blood either time. But I've learned my lesson well.

While serving as a forest ranger in 1990, I was bucking logs about 100 yards in front of the ranger's station, which was connected to our house. My wife, Minda, watched from the window when the near accident occurred.

I grabbed the side of the chainsaw handle with my left hand—as I had done so many times before—swinging the saw to my side as the chain slowed to an idle. In my haste, the saw chain hit my left thigh, tearing through my jeans. Of course this was one of those few times I wasn't wearing my chaps, since I was only planning on working for a short time. (A poor excuse: Refer to "Be prepared for the job....")

My first reaction was to drop the saw, then drop my pants to assess the damage. Minda thought it was quite amusing to see me standing there—pants around my ankles—in the middle of a Cub Scout camp.

I had another near accident in 2004, almost 14 years to the day of my first blunder. As I looked down at my jeans I was wearing (no chaps again), I had the same tear—and caused by the same operator's mistake. Guess who was watching out the window once again? Minda shares this tale whenever she can.

So remember this: Price of chaps, \$59. Price for an emergency room trip, \$359. Remembering to wear safety gear? Priceless.

Jacques Vesery (jvesery@tidewater.net) is an American Woodturner contributing editor. He lives in Damariscotta, Maine.

## Oklahoma chainsaws rip through hurricane logs

Tulsa's chapter thinks big with order of 25,000 pounds of Florida logs

After the 2004 hurricanes whipped through Florida, it occurred to me that tons of great turning timbers would be headed for the landfills. I asked several high-volume members of the Northeastern Oklahoma Woodturners if they would be interested in hiring an 18-wheeler to ship us an entire truckload of hurricane logs. Eight members enthusiastically approved the idea.

In recent years, I'd pulled a trailer back from Florida with about 5,000 pounds of logs, so I was confident our chapter could make this work—just on a bigger

scale. My tree-trimming friend in south Florida agreed to stockpile good logs and then send a trailer our way when we had a load.

In early December, an 18-wheeler rolled into Tulsa with 25,000 pounds of logs. We counted eight different species among the 60 logs (about 10 feet long and 14" to 36" in diameter). The original investors are now sharing the stash with members.

Projects like this build a great deal of camaraderie for our chapter. And when we split up the costs, we paid less than 16 cents per pound for the turning stock. Not a bad deal.

—Larry Anderson



Bob Hawks, John Hill, and Larry Anderson saw up Florida logs for their AAW chapter.

Photos: Ron Fleming