Guide to "Oil" Finishes

FINISH	Protection[1]	Sheen	Application	Cost	Color[2]	Penetration[3]
Raw linseed oil	Poor	Satin	Very easy	Low	Dark	Deep
Boiled linseed oil	Poor	Satin	Very easy	Low	Dark	Deep
Pure tung oil	Poor until five or more coats	Dull until five or more coats	Very easy	Medium	Medium	Deep
Polymerized oil	Potentially excellent if built up	Gloss	Easy on small surfaces	High	Light	Medium
Oil/varnish blend	Medium	Satin	Very easy	Medium	Medium	Deep
Wiping varnish (not an oil but often sold or marketed as oil)	Potentially excellent if built up	Gloss, unless flatting agents added	Easy	Medium	Light	Medium

1. Indicates protection against water and water-vapor exchange.
2. Indicates the relative degree of color (darkness) the finish adds to the wood.
3. Indicates how deep the finish will penetrate if the surface is kept wet.
4. Indicates hardness, speed of cure, and sheen.

Raw linseed oil

Boiled linseed oils

Cure[4]	Comment
Soft and extremely slowly—weeks or months—to a satin sheen.	There's no reason to use raw linseed oil in finishing unless you have a specific need for a very slow-curing oil.
Soft and overnight when excess is wiped off—to a satin sheen.	Always wipe off excess, or the finish will be soft and gummy.
Soft and slower than boiled linseed oil—to a satin sheen.	Requires five or more coats, sanding between each, to produce a pleasing satin sheen. More water resistant than boiled linseed oil. Always wipe off excess, or the finish will be soft and gummy.
Hard and faster than wiping varnish—to a gloss sheen.	Very thick unless thinned with mineral spirits, which it usually is. Develops cracks in the film if applied thick.
Generally soft and very slowly, but varies depending on the ratio of oil to varnish. Produces a satin sheen.	Always wipe off excess, or the finish will be soft and gummy.
Hard and fairly rapidly—usually to a gloss sheen after several coats.	Can be built up to any thickness you want by leaving each coat wet on the surface.

Pure tung oils

Polymerized oils

Oil/varnish blends

Wiping varnishes

Comparing Finishes

	Wax	Oil-Containing Finishes	Shellac	Lacquer	Varnish	Two-Part Finishes	Water Base
APPEARANCE							
Film build	0 to 1	0 to 1	1 to 5	1 to 5	1 to 5	1 to 5	1 to 5
Clarity	4	4	3 to 5	5	4 to 5	4	3 to 4
Non-yellowing	5	1 to 2	1 to 4	3 to 4	1 to 2	4	5
PROTECTION							
Water resistance	0 to 1	0 to 2	2	3	4 to 5	5	3
Water-vapor resistance	0 to 1	0 to 1	5	3	4 to 5	5	3
DURABILITY							
Wear resistance	0	0	3	3	4 to 5	5	4
Solvent and chemical resistance	0	3	1	2	4 to 5	5	2
Heat resistance	0	3	1	2	4 to 5	5	2
APPLICATION EASE							
Brush or cloth	3	5	3	1 to 3	5	1	3
Spray	3	5	4	5	4	4	4
Dust problems	5	5	4	4	0	4	3
SAFETY							
Health	5	3 to 4	4	2	3	0	4
Environment	4 to 5	1-5	4	0	1	0	4
Safety for food contact	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
REVERSIBILITY							
Repairing	5	5	4	4	1 to 2	0	3
Stripping	4	3	5	5	2 to 3	0	4
RUBBING QUALITIES	N/A	N/A	4	5	3	3	3

Legend: 0 = very poor; 5 = best

** All finishes are safe for food contact once they have fully cured.*