

WOODTURNING FUNDAMENTALS

American Association of Woodturners

November 2020 • Vol 9 No 4

Gifts for the kitchen and garden

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Garden Dibble

By Michael Hamilton-Clark

Last fall my wife decided we should plant bulbs so there would be some color around the garden come spring. To make the job a bit easier than using a trowel, I turned a dibble (also called a dibbler or dibber), a tool I remembered from my childhood helping my mother plant bulbs.

For those who raise vegetables, dibbles have another application. A pair of dibbles and a length of string make an elegant system for marking out rows for planting.

A handmade dibble makes a thoughtful gift for gardening family members and friends. This is a straightforward spindle turning exercise that builds skills through creating simple profiles using a skew chisel and spindle gouge.

Design the tool

A search online turned up several shapes and sizes, but rather than simply copy something, I decided to make my own design (**Figure 1**).

The planting instructions for the various bulbs showed that the smaller ones (like Crocus) should be buried about 3" (8cm) deep, and larger bulbs (like tulips) about 6" (16cm) down. To accommodate this range of depths, I decided my dibble would have a 7" (18cm) tapered shaft with reference grooves in 1" (25mm) increments.

The top of the dibble—the handle end—would need a collar and a ball top to comfortably push and wiggle the shaft into the soil, and encourage a firm grip to extract the dibble from the earth. The bottom end of the shaft would be 3/4" (19mm) diameter, the top end 1-1/2" (4cm) in diameter, the collar 2" (5cm) and the ball handle at the top 1-1/4" (3cm).

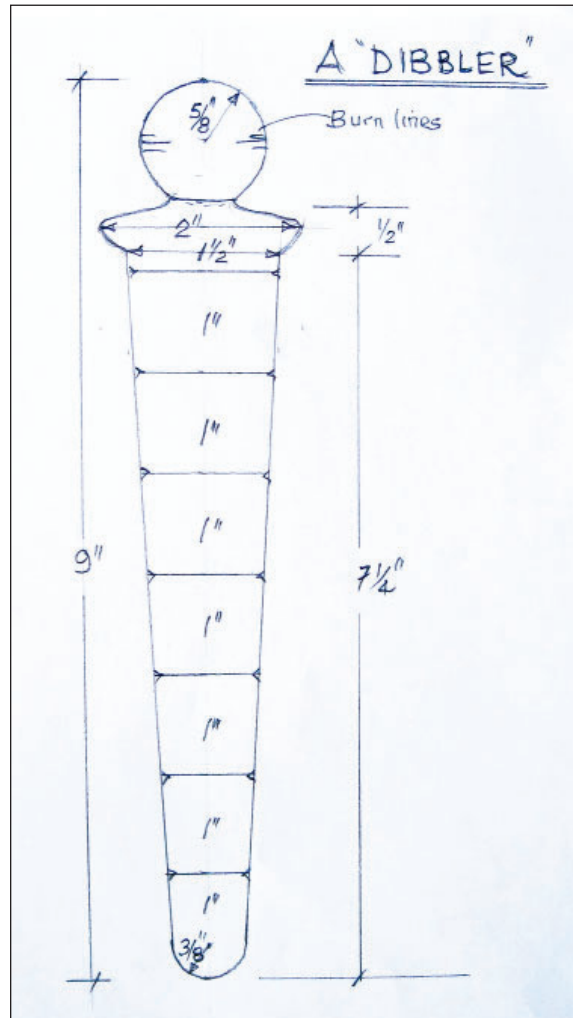


Figure 1. If you don't know where you're going, you probably won't get there, so start with a plan. Notes and a simple sketch are usually adequate.

Prepare the stock

Start with turning stock that is about 10" (25cm) long and about 2-1/4" (8cm) square. The dibble can be turned from hard- or softwood, though hardwood will outlive its softwood counterpart. Look for clear timber without defects, and because this tool will spend its life diving in dirt, save your fancy burl for another project. I used a section of a reclaimed oak handrail.

Rough the blank

Locate the center of each end and mark with a center punch. Mount the blank between centers using a spur drive in the headstock and a live center in the tailstock to engage the punch-

PROJECT: Garden dibble

marked centers (**Photo 1**). Round the blank using a spindle roughing gouge (**Photo 2**).

Use a pencil to transfer the defining design elements to the blank. Mark out the total length of the dibble and the location of the top, center, and bottom of the collar. Locating the center of the ball handle is also helpful.

With these locations defined, use a parting tool and caliper to reduce the diameter of the blank down to its design dimensions at each of the pencil marks. A narrow parting tool is helpful for marking the top and bottom of the collar because the collar itself is narrow, and the connection to the ball handle is a tight cove. A narrow parting tool lets you define these locations without removing material required to define the ball and the collar. Because pencil marks are quickly turned away, the diameters established with the parting tool guide your cuts, helping you define the tapered shaft.

Form the shaft

Forming the shaft provides a good opportunity to practice skew chisel skills. Cut the taper with the heel (the shorter point) of the skew, maintaining bevel contact along the lower part of the edge while progressing away from the headstock (**Photo 3**). With these two actions the heel of the chisel does the cutting and the grain is supported, so a catch is less likely, and a cleanly cut surface is possible.

To establish the taper of the shaft, start by removing material from the collar (headstock) end. Work your way down towards the tailstock with each successive cut.

Checking progress with calipers shows how the taper is advancing. Use a thin parting tool to pare material from the bottom end of the taper. This defines the end of the dibble and the shoulder will be rounded away later with a spindle gouge.

Mark planting depths

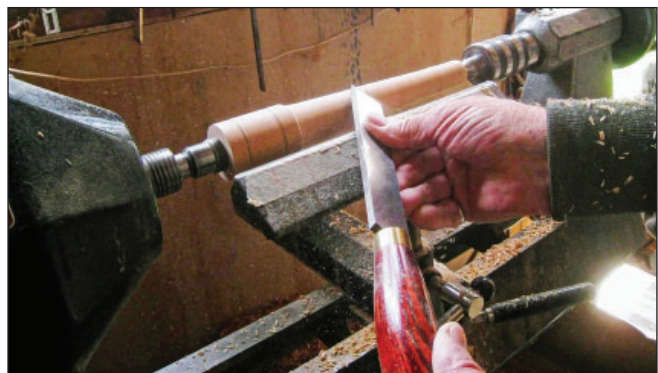
Mark out the location of the depth rings at 1" intervals on the shaft (**Photo 4**), measuring from the bottom. Use the toe (long point) of the



1. Securely mount the blank between centers using center-punched holes for alignment.



2. Round the blank using a spindle roughing gouge.



3. The long gentle slope of the dibble shaft provides a good opportunity to practice skew skills.



4. Use the long point of the skew to define the planting depth marks on the shaft.

PROJECT: Garden dibble



5. Use a spindle gouge to create the simple bead between the shaft and handle.



6. Cutting a cove on either side of the handle quickly removes waste and creates space for subsequent tool movement.



7. Round the corners created by the coves to create the large bead form comprising the handle.

skew to cut a groove at each location. Widen each groove by cutting in from each side at a slight angle.

Define the collar

Use a 1/2" (13mm) spindle gouge to turn the simple bead that defines the collar separating the shaft from the handle (**Photo 5**). Start at the center of the bead with the flute facing up and rotate the cutting tip through an arc. End each cut with the flute facing 90 degrees from where you started—pointing towards the headstock on the left side of the bead, and towards the tailstock on the right side of the bead.

Turn the handle

Like the collar, the ball-like handle is simply a large bead at the top of the form. Continue with the 1/2" spindle gouge to form this bead, cutting from the large center diameter towards

the top and bottom of the form. You may need to cut away some of the material at the headstock to give you access to the top of the ball. I usually leave about a 1/2" of material to support the blank; take care not to contact the spur drive with your gouge.

I like to begin turning the ball by cutting a cove at either side (**Photo 6**). These cuts are initiated with the gouge on its side (flute facing perpendicular to the lathe axis). Twist your wrist as you move through the cut, finishing with the gouge facing up at the bottom of the cut. From here I round off the edges of the cylinder to create the spherical profile (**Photo 7**). Always make these cuts from largest-to-smallest diameter.

Decorate

The decorative burn lines come next. Using the toe of the skew, lower the point gently into the rotating blank to make just-visible cuts in the handle. I use a wire pressed into the grooves to burn in the lines, using the friction generated by the rotating lathe. My wire burner is made with a metal guitar string and dowel handles at each end (**Photo 8**). Don't hold a wire with your fingers—it can get dangerously hot, and wrapping it around your fingers to hold it securely could lead to a gruesome accident. Use handles.

Sand and finish

Sanding and finishing your dibble requires you to balance your pride of workmanship against



PROJECT: Garden dibble



8. Use a length of wire to add decorative burn lines. The author uses a guitar's G string with handles added to each end.



9. Round-over the bottom of the dibble, leaving about 1/4" of material attached to the waste end.



10. With the lathe off, part the dibble from the waste material. A nokogiri (Japanese saw) is ideal for this task.

the fact that this tool is in for a hard life. If your tool skills have produced a decent surface, you might consider not sanding at all.

Likewise, you could choose to apply no finish at all, but I opt for two applications of mineral oil to provide some protection from damp soil. Any oil finish would be suitable and can be easily renewed with another application at a future date.

Part-off

Make any final adjustments to the ends of the dibble with your 1/2" gouge. Continue to cut the arc of the ball handle towards to center of rotation, and round-over the tip at the bottom (**Photo 9**). Take light cuts, preserving about 1/4" of material at either end.

With the lathe off, use a saw to part the dibble from its waste material. I hold the dibble with one hand and the saw with the other (**Photo 10**). Sand off the saw marks by hand and fair the curves. Apply finish (or not!), and the project is complete (**Photo 11**).

Enjoy the process and the practice, and Happy Dibbling when bulb planting time arrives.

Michael Hamilton-Clark lives in the Fraser Valley, BC and has been turning for 15 years after retiring. His work is sold through craft shops and at shows; see more at alberystudiowoodturnings.com.



11. The completed dibble.