

From the Benefit of Experience

CLEAN YOUR SHOP!

Dale Larson



DALE LARSON'S SHOP TRUTHS

SHOP TRUTH 1: Space is valuable.

SHOP TRUTH 2: Any horizontal surface will collect stuff.

CONCLUSION: Get rid of any tools and wood you know you will never use again. Don't hang on to them "just in case."

As I write this, I am in the process of helping yet another family clean out the shop of an older woodturner who has passed away. About once every year or two, I get a call like this from a friend in the woodturning community: "Can you come help clean up and sell Dad's woodturning equipment?"

I am happy to help friends, but in doing so, I have learned some hard lessons. At the top of the list: Clean up and organize your shop now, so your poor family won't be stuck with the job when you go to that big woodshop in the sky. They won't know which pieces of equipment are valuable and which are junk. They won't know which pieces of wood are prized timbers and which are firewood.

Shop stories

Here are some quick stories that will illustrate the point.

When a crew from Cascade Woodturners cleaned out Dale Hastay's one-car-garage-sized shop, the first thing we did was take five 55-gallon barrels of sawdust/chips out of the shop. Then we took many wheelbarrow loads of firewood out to the neighbor's woodpile. Only then did we finally have room to move around in the shop and evaluate Dale's equipment and wood supply.

Recently, I helped Harold Enneberg's family clean out his shop. Harold died at age 94, and he kept turning right to the end. His shop contained sixty years' worth of old tools and wood. What had value and what was junk? The family had no idea. Suddenly, we were in the position of organizing a sale of his tools and wood, despite being in the middle of a global pandemic.

In Harold's shop, when an old tool died, it was just pushed into a corner of the shop. But really, why keep it? Junk wood was piled up all over, with some beautiful, valuable wood under it. If you can't see the wood, you don't know you have it. Trust me, you will forget about a beautiful piece of wood if it is buried somewhere in the shop.

My good friend Malcolm Zander in Ottawa told me that several years ago, he looked around his small shop and saw several floor-standing tools that he hadn't used in years. He sold them and freed up more space for his current work. He has never regretted selling the tools.



I had the pleasure of visiting Dale Nish at his home many times during the Utah symposia. Dale was one of the great leaders of woodturning in the world, a wonderful woodturner and educator. He had access to the top woods of the world through his family business, Craft Supplies USA. In the hall just outside his shop, he had shelves of rosewood burl, tulipwood, and many other beautiful woods. But in one corner of his basement shop, there was a cavalcade of firewood that took up a huge amount of space. Dale hadn't seen the bottom of this pile in many years. Why did he keep all this wood? He had the same sickness we all do: he thought he might use it one day. But the cost was high, as he was never able to use that part of his shop for anything productive.

Bob Tuck, a founding member of the Cascade Woodturners (Portland, Oregon) and a longtime woodturner and teacher, called me about six months before he died and asked for help cleaning out his two-car garage/shop. A crew from our chapter spent a whole day cleaning out the shop. There were many bags of sawdust and an entire pickup truck full of firewood. Bob had access to the best woods available—why did he take up valuable shop space with junk wood? It's because he had the same sickness we all do—we worry unnecessarily that we'll run out of wood, and we convince ourselves that someday, we might just use that piece of wood for something! You simply have to get over this mindset and get rid of the wood you will never turn.

Bob also had more than 500 turning tools, some in drawers that hadn't been opened in thirty years. When I came home from organizing the sale of his tools, I went through all of my own tools and gave a bunch of them to my chapter to auction off. It's simple: Keep the tools you use and get rid of the rest. (The AAW has a tool bank and at many of its Symposia collects used tools for donation to various programs.)

The best story is about my friend Bob Mach. About four years ago on a Saturday about 6:00 p.m., I got a call from Bob's wife Barbara. She said, "I have some bad news. Bob died about 2:00 p.m. this afternoon." Without missing a beat, she continued, "Can you come over here and clean out his shop?" Bob had been ill, so his passing was not unexpected, but I almost said, "Do I have to pull Bob out of the way first?"

Barbara was so overwhelmed by the mess Bob had left that the first thing on her mind after he died was to clean up his shop. I asked how her calling me came about. Barbara explained that she and Bob had previously discussed it. She had asked him what to do when he died, and Bob had said, "Just call Dale Larson." Barbara told me, "He died, and I'm calling you." Thanks, Bob.

Bob's garage shop was stuffed from floor to ceiling with wood and tools, and it was a tight trail to move around in there. He had collected lots of old cheap bench-top tools, and he kept boxes and boxes of wood—mostly domestic hardwoods but also some beautiful exotics that were buried. It took a big crew from our chapter a whole day just to move the wood and tools out of the shop in order to determine what was worth selling.

Three years ago, I helped Wally Dickerman's family clean out and sell Wally's tools and wood. Wally served on destroyers in the Pacific during WWII. He was 94 years old and doing gallery-quality work right to the end. Wally had it figured out: He kept only the tools he used, all good tools, and the wood he actually needed. Thank you, Wally.

Don't wait to clean up

Do yourself and your family a favor—clean out your shop. Get rid of the wood chips and scrap that amounts to firewood. Get rid of the tools that are broken or that you no longer use. Free up that space for what you are doing now. You'll be more productive.

Organize your wood so you can see what you have. If you can't see it, you might as well not even have it.

A clean shop is just more fun to work in, more conducive to being productive, and much safer from a wood dust

and fire hazard point of view. Use that shop vac to clean your shop more often than once in a while. Install a good dust system. Get your shop organized. Be nice to your family (and friends who will have to clean up your mess). And finally, don't call me when you drop dead. ■

Dale Larson has been turning bowls for forty years. He is a founding member and past president of the Cascade Woodturners in Portland, Oregon. Dale served on the AAW Board from 2009 to 2014, both as symposium chair and president.

