Get a Smart Start in Woodturning

For about $800, you’ll have everything you need to work wood in a revolutionary way

By David Heim

Safety gear. Instead of relying on safety glasses alone, many turners prefer the additional protection provided by a full face shield.
For less than the price of a good bandsaw and less space than you need for a planer, you can set up a great basic woodturning center. Spending about $800 on a small lathe and some versatile turning tools will let you greatly expand your woodworking horizons. You can make unique spindles and legs for chairs and stools, balusters for a staircase, finials and feet for period chests and dressers.

You can branch out to make one-of-a-kind gifts like pens, bottle stoppers, pizza cutters, and barbecue tools (see photos at right). You might even try your hand at turning a bowl or a nice box with a lid and a decorative finial. Just ahead, I’ll explain what equipment will give you the best value from your turning start-up fund. For prices and product numbers, see the Buyer’s Guide on p. 66.

A full-sized lathe requires a fair amount of floor space and can cost as much as $8,000. For your first lathe, think small. A mini lathe like the $400 Rikon model shown here is surprisingly versatile. You can use this lathe to turn anything from tiny pen blanks and ornaments to 12"-dia. bowls and 16"-long spindles. The 1/2-hp motor delivers plenty of power, and the reliable step-pulley system (shown in the photo at left) provides six speed options (from 430 rpm to 3900 rpm). Electronic variable-speed control is available on other mini lathes for faster speed changes, but it typically increases the price by $200 or so.

Check the alignment. Run this quality check on a new lathe. The points of the two centers should meet. If they don’t meet, something is out of alignment. Exchange the lathe for another one.

Shop-made support. Factory-made stands are available, but you can build this mobile lathe stand for less than $100. For dimensions and construction details, see the project that begins on p. 32.
You may be tempted to buy a set of six or eight turning tools. I did that when I started turning. But experience taught me that the five tools featured here can handle just about any turning project I tackle. Try these five first, then add to your tool selection as needed. You’ll also want a 4-jaw chuck like the one shown at bottom right, to give you versatile gripping capability for different turning projects.

Spindle specialist. You’ll need a **spindle roughing gouge** to take a long spindle blank from square to round. Get one that’s at least ¾" wide; bigger is better here. This tool is only for spindle work. It isn’t safe to use for shaping bowls because the gouge could break where the shank enters the handle.

Super shaper. Though tricky to use at first, a **skew** will soon become your go-to tool for shaping beads, cutting thin grooves, or making fine finishing cuts.
**Workhorse tools.** A 1⁄4” **spindle gouge** and a 1⁄2” **bowl gouge** will be the tools you rely on for many shaping operations. Although they look similar, they aren’t interchangeable. Their flutes are shaped differently and the cutting ends are ground with different bevel angles. To make them cut, rub the bevel on the wood, then pivot the handle to bring the cutting edge into the wood for controlled cutting action. Use the spindle gouge to shape beads and coves. The bowl gouge shapes both the outside and inside of bowls and tall vessels.

**Plunge cutter.** With its narrow blade and sharp point, a **parting tool** can easily make deep cuts to cut a turning free or establish a target turning diameter. You can also use the sharpened sides of the tool for shaping details on spindles. A diamond-shaped parting tool won’t easily get stuck in its kerf, but a tool that’s rectangular in cross-section will work fine, too. An ¼”-wide parting tool is your best bet.

**Great gripper.** The jaws on a **scroll chuck** adjust with a pair of rods or a geared wrench and are self-centering. This enables you to grab a spindle blank or tenon while keeping the workpiece on-axis. The chuck will also expand against a circular recess, making it ideal for bowl turning.
Take your turning to the next level with two key accessories

There’s no shortage of specialty tools and accessories for turning, and a turner’s favorite accessories usually depend on the type and scale of work being done. But you can’t go wrong with the two accessories mentioned here. Get these first.

Flexible support. This *Oneway Wolverine grinding jig* is a favorite among turners because its adjustable support and tool-holding features make it easy to sharpen a variety of turning tools.

More woodturning info

For my money, the smartest thing a beginning turner can do is join the American Association of Woodturners as well as a local woodturning club. A year’s membership in AAW costs $60 and gives you access to the most comprehensive store of woodturning instruction and advice available anywhere. The AAW offers members *Getting Started in Woodturning*, a book featuring practical projects and expert advice on safety, tools, and techniques. It costs $18.95. As a member, you can also access the AAW Video Library, an ever-growing roster of informative videos. For more information, go to [www.woodturner.org](http://www.woodturner.org).

New or used?

Websites like Ebay and Craigslist almost always have plenty of used turning tools, lathes, and accessories for sale. Ebay is also a good source of wood for turning.

But it’s risky to buy tools or machinery sight-unseen. Here’s my advice for playing it safe:

- Comparison-shop. Check sites like [woodcraft.com](http://woodcraft.com) or [woodturnerscatalog.com](http://woodturnerscatalog.com) to familiarize yourself with reputable tool brands and current prices.
- Look for new tools. “Vintage” tools may be made of carbon steel, which cuts very well but needs frequent sharpening. Old tools may be rusty. Worse, they may have unseen damage that would make them dangerous to use.
- Avoid sets. Buy only the tools you really need, one at a time.
- Don’t buy a used lathe unless you can check it out first. If you’re new to turning, it’s smart to bring an experienced turner with you to check out the equipment. Your buddy will know the difference between problems that can be fixed and problems that are deal-breakers.

Diameter duplicator. If you want to make multiple identical turnings, you’ll need some good calipers to make sure diameters are uniform from piece to piece. Expect to pay $15 to $25.

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