When I began woodworking, I visited a lumberyard specializing in native Arkansas woods and was hooked. The varieties of grain and color both surprised and delighted me. Even the smell of each species caught my attention. As I returned to my shop I felt like I was on a mission to share my discovery of the beauty of our native woods. And so, after years of mixing and matching native woods, I’ve devised strategies for combining them effectively.

Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder, and not all craftsmen like the same combinations of woods. That’s a good thing, as it allows each of us to find our own voice in our work. That said, it’s easy to get carried away. Large projects can appear overly busy and distracting when too many colors (or woods) are put into play. Two seems comfortable; three, proceed with caution. On small boxes you can safely use more combinations so they stand out and get noticed.

To improve your awareness of how woods work together, consider these guidelines for a successful match.

Guidelines for success
Playing with contrasts in color and grain, even texture, can serve as tools for calling attention to a craftsman’s work. From the visual standpoint, they should tie in nicely with a project’s final look and make good woodworking sense overall.
The concept “line” is more complex. While it can include the outline of the piece and the lines delineating the boundaries of parts, it has more to do with the lines of wood grain. Line leads the eye in exploring the finished work, like the left-hand box above. Matched door panels and edge-joined boards that show continuous lines or matching grain from piece to piece add to the viewer’s appreciation of the finished work. In addition

**Color**

Many woodworkers find color perplexing, but unlike painters, we deal with a much simpler palette, making it harder to wander off course. Colors differ from each other in two ways, tone (red vs. green) and value or intensity (light to dark). A single piece of wood contains a collection of related colors within the wood grain. When matching woods, look for similarities in tone to provide a natural relationship as shown bottom left. These often small similarities are your personal invitation to mix contrasting woods with confidence. The guideline: use woods that share a color relationship, be it ever so subtle.

Also, note that the color you see when you first cut a piece of wood may not be what you end up with. The effects of oxidation and sunlight are inevitable, especially on native species such as the cherry shown top right. The more you’re aware of these effects, both in native and exotic woods, the more you can work them into your project’s design.

Contrasting colors and continuous grain can direct the eye. The sassafras and cherry (box at left) are similar in value and differ in tone. The miter keys and lighter wood color streaks of the other box tie in with the lid.

The inside of this cherry box shows the difference between the original light color of the wood and the outside exposed surfaces.

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How well grain lines interact reflects craftsmanship. These pieces of ash from a single board show from left to right a near match, and an obvious mismatch.

Photos: Doug Stowe
to ensuring complementary edge-to-edge grain patterns, try to cut box sides from the same board and use them in sequence so the grain at mitered corners continues seamlessly. When mixing different species, however, divergent grain lines are expected in that they are separate pieces of wood and prove useful in accentuating contrast.

Some woods, such as maple and holly, have very fine, indistinct grain lines. In others, such as flatsawn oak or ash, the grain is much more pronounced. Fine-grained woods better lend themselves to effective mixing than woods with more pronounced grain. This is especially true in frame making where the exaggerated course grain conflicts where rails and stiles join. When choosing stock for pulls, accents, or handcrafted hinges, I look for close-grained woods as shown above left.

Woods that have a more pronounced grain require a greater level of attention. For example, when working with oak, familiarize yourself with how the wood is milled as shown below. Be warned that if you assemble a lot of flatsawn or cathedral grain parts throughout a project, they could fight with each other. If possible, mix in riftsawn and quartersawn stock or use these grains exclusively as shown in the Arts and Crafts coffee table bottom left. Here, carefully mix and blend various oak grain patterns so they complement each other.

Texture
A third contrasting element, texture, departs from a woodworker’s obsession with obtaining perfectly sanded surfaces and is often overlooked. I frequently use both rough and finely finished surfaces in a box or piece of furniture, as the effects of weathering on wood, the tool markings from its original milling, or a natural edge or defect provide character. The use of contrasting textures offers a special invitation to the viewer to touch the work and explore with both hand and eye as with the boxes opposite.

Tight-grained walnut corner dowels and handcrafted hinges present a pleasing contrast with the pronounced flatsawn grain of this red oak box.

This Arts and Crafts end table displays an attractive combination of quartersawn and riftsawn stock.
Breaking the rules

As woodworkers, we often end up with eye-catching pieces of wood. Perhaps they’re too small to make a whole box. Yet, we find these scraps so pretty or special that they deserve to be seen! I frequently use such woods as a contrasting panel in the top of a box, or, if suitable, as the entire lid. In a way, we’re breaking the rules with such alluring pieces. Rather than blend in, such pieces play starring roles. A box lid panel can appear like art in a frame. When I choose the adjacent materials I think about woods that contrast the colors and grain of the starring piece. A wood with less distinct grain makes the best frame, allowing the starring piece to serve as the focal point (below).

This white oak box, with its weathered roughsawn red oak top panel, is made with contrasting walnut miter keys and pull. Contrasting textures invite you to touch the piece while adding visual interest.

A walnut dovetailed box serves as the frame to present the unique waney-edged spalted maple top. The placement of the hinges directs the eye to the natural edge overhanging the box and invites the hand to open it up.

This split walnut top with its rustic natural edge stands out against the planer maple base.

About The Author
Doug Stowe is the author of Taunton’s Complete Illustrated Guide to Box Making, and Basic Box Making. He specializes in using native hardwoods in his Eureka Springs, Arkansas, shop.

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Strategies for wood movement

Whenever you mix woods, know that various species expand and contract at different rates, mostly across the grain. By simply gluing one species to another in a large piece of furniture can lead to joint failure. On small and large projects where you have frame-and-panel construction, whether of the same or different species, avoid joint failure by allowing the panel to “float” within the frame, as shown below. For cutting boards and tabletops, consider capping end grain with breadboard ends. Minimize movement in parts by taking care to seal the ends and faces of all joint members.

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Raised-panel construction lets you frame a figured or otherwise standout piece of wood, such as this quilted maple box top. By slightly undersizing the panel and letting it float (without glue) in the frame, you sidestep problems associated with expansion and contraction.
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