



# TURNING WOODEN TULIPS

BY BOB GOULDING

Several years ago, our woodturning club was given a President's Challenge of turning a vase and flower. I turned a large vase with a bouquet of tulips. It not only won the President's Challenge, but my wife swears that it is her favorite bouquet that I have given her in the 63 years we have been married. Turning tulips may look complex, but they are really quite simple.

A tulip consists of several parts. There are leaves, a stem, a blossom, a pistil, and six stamens. The stem can be made from a thin dowel, but a thin branch from a bush looks much more realistic. The leaves are easily made from wood veneer. The blossom is made from a block of wood. It can be beautiful wood like walnut or cherry, with a clear finish or, if made from a common wood like fir or pine, stained or painted. I recommend practicing this project with fir or pine before using a more expensive species.

## Stock prep

Start with a 1-1/2"-square × 4" (4cm × 10cm) turning blank. I used a piece of pine to demonstrate the project for this article. The blank must be square in cross-section and the ends cut perpendicular to the sides.



Draw a line on each side of the block, 1" (25mm) from the end (**Photo 1**). This defines the location of the bottom of the blossom. Draw a center line along the length on each of the four sides. Draw curved lines from the corners down to about 1" from the end on two sides.

## Cut the petals

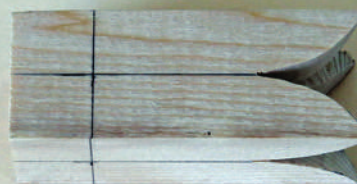
Cut along the curved line with a coping saw or a bandsaw with a narrow blade that will accommodate the relatively tight radius of the petals' curve (**Photo 2**).

## Lay out the form

1



2

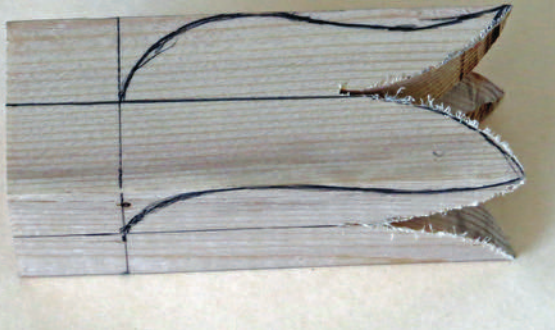


Locate the bottom of the tulip 1" from the bottom. Draw center lines, then connect the top corners to the center line with an arc. Cut along the curved lines.



## Add flower shape

3



Darken your design lines so they can be seen while the blank is rotating on the lathe. Mount the blank in a four-jaw chuck.

4



In the opening image, you can see that I have turned flowers in a variety of bloom stages, from open-to-closed. You can make yours in these various stages, and if you are planning a bouquet, you should consider a variety of forms. Draw the desired shape of your tulip on all four sides of the block. Make it a heavy, black line so that it's visible as the blank spins on the lathe (**Photo 3**).

Mount the blank in your four-jaw chuck, aligning the corners of the blank with the openings between jaws (**Photo 4**). Set the toolrest parallel to the block and rotate the blank to check its alignment and verify it's clear of the rest.

### Shape the outside

With a spindle gouge, shape the outside of the tulip to within about 1/2" (13mm) of the line that defines the bottom of the tulip (**Photo 5**). Be sure there are no flat spots. Sand the outside of the form.

## Shape the outside

5



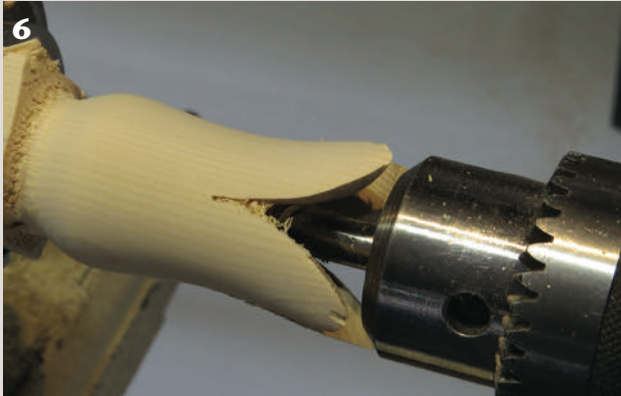
Use a spindle gouge to shape the outside of the flower. Stop about 1/2" short of your bottom mark.



# PROJECT: Turning wooden tulips



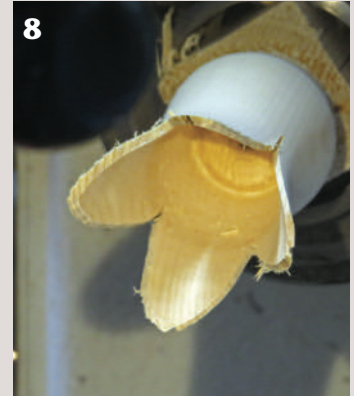
## Shape the interior



**6** Bore the center with a 7/8" Forstner-style bit, about 2" deep. Follow this with a bit sized to match your stem, drilling to about 2-1/2" deep.



**7** Use a spindle gouge to turn the interior, working down in 1/2" sections.



Insert a drill chuck into the tailstock and, using a 7/8" (22mm) Forstner-style bit, drill a hole 2" - (5cm-) deep into the tulip. I like to use a branch from a bush for the stem, which adds to the natural appearance of the flowers. When you're looking for a stem, take a caliper with you and find a section with the tip corresponding to one of your drill bits—1/4" or 5/16" (6mm-8mm) works well. Now you can drill an appropriately sized hole to receive the stem of your flower, about 2-1/2" deep (**Photo 6**).

### Turn the interior

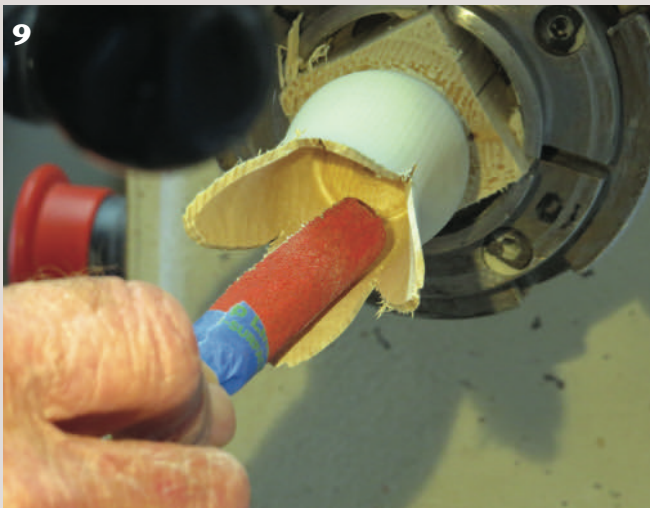
Using a freshly sharpened gouge, thin the petals to about 1/8" - (3mm-) thick (**Photo 7**). Work 1/2" sections at a

time, starting from the top so that the wood is supported as you work deeper.

The interior of the bottom will be covered by stamens and a pistil, so you needn't carry the inner curve all the way through to the bottom (**Photo 8**).

Inserting your fingers into a spinning form this small is not safe—especially with those petals, which look a bit too much like a propeller. Instead, roll a piece of abrasive sheet into a tube to sand the inside of the spinning tulip (**Photo 9**). Hand sand the edges of the petals with the lathe off (**Photo 10**).

## Sand the interior

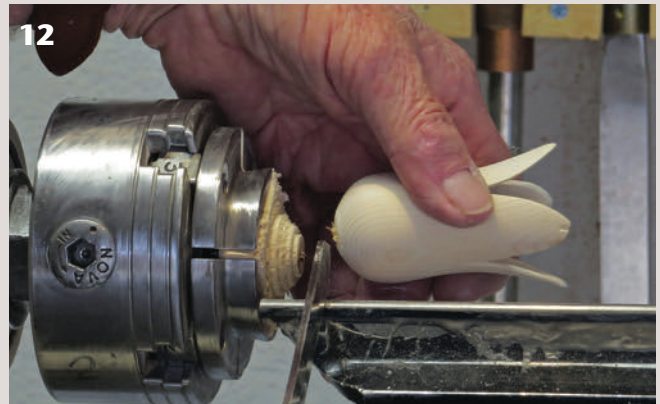
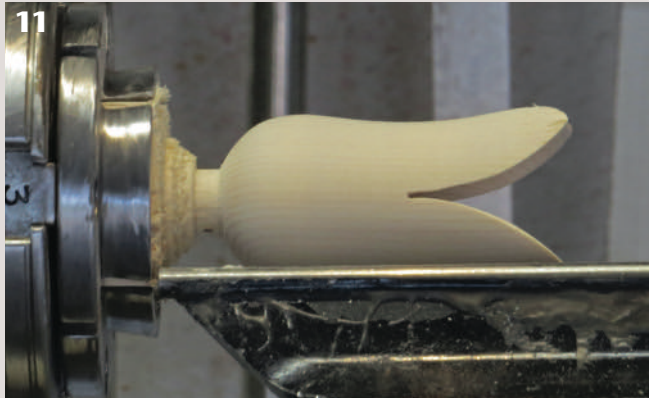


Use rolled pieces of abrasive to sand the interior. With the lathe off, sand the edge of each petal.

# PROJECT: Turning wooden tulips



## Complete the exterior



### Finish the exterior

Turn your attention back to the outside of the form. Finish shaping the lower section of the blossom, down to about 3/8" diameter (**Photo 11**). Sand this section to blend it with the petals and the section of the body you turned and sanded earlier.

Using a parting tool, part the finished tulip while catching it with your left hand (**Photo 12**). Sand the bottom by hand to smooth and blend the surfaces (**Photo 13**). Apply the finish of your choice. The flowers can be painted, stained, or given a clear finish.

### Make the pistil and stamens

The inside of your tulip needs a pistil and six stamens (**Photo 14**). Turn a 7/8"-diameter disk to fit inside the blossom. The disk should be between 1/8" - 3/16" (3mm - 5mm) thick. This can be easily accomplished by rounding a blank between centers and parting off a disk from one end. Make the pistil and stamens from

Shape the remainder of the exterior by rounding off the bottom of the tulip. Part the form and sand the base by hand to blend the adjacent surfaces.

toothpicks, pine needles, or whatever crafty object you have at hand, gluing each object into pre-drilled holes (**Photo 15**). Glue the disc with its pistil and stamens inside the blossom.

## Make the pistil and stamens



Turn a thin disk to fit inside your tulip and drill holes for your pistil and stamens. Toothpicks make good stamens, but you can use your imagination to come up with some other options.



# PROJECT: Turning wooden tulips



## Make leaves

Use sharp scissors to cut some leaves out of wood veneer. They should be about 2"-wide, 6"-long, and sharp at the top and flat across the bottom. Put the veneer leaves into a pan of very hot water and let them soak to soften for at least five minutes (**Photo 16**).

Roll each leaf up tightly and tie it at the bottom with string, rubber bands, or twist ties (**Photo 17**). Set the leaves aside to dry overnight.

## Assemble

Use hot melt glue to attach the stem into the blossom and the leaves to the stem. Your tulip is complete (**Photo 18**). Now you just need to turn a vase for your tulips, a topic for another time (**Photo 19**). ■

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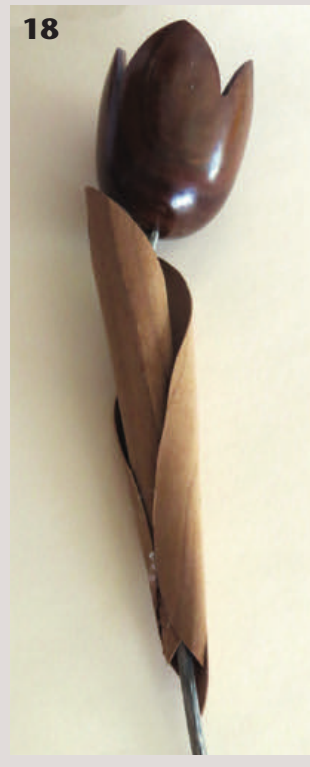
*Bob Goulding has been turning for over thirty-three years. Most of that time, he was an active member of the Woodturners of St. Louis and the AAW. He is now a member of the Southern Arizona Woodturners Association. After all those years turning the beautiful Midwestern hardwoods, he is finding it challenging to work with the Arizona desert woods.*

## Make leaves



To look natural, the leaves need to be molded to shape. Cut the leaves from veneer, soak them in hot water, and mold them to your desired shape. Secure the leaves in their new shapes until they dry.

## Assemble the tulip



Assemble the tulip using adhesive to connect the components. With experience under your belt, consider making a bouquet.