

Nova Scotia woman finds fulfillment in woodturning

Premium content

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Dianne Looker turns the outside of a bowl using a lathe. Contributed photo/Dianne Looker

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Dianne Looker is creating from wood in the Gaspereau Valley

When Dianne Looker was a girl, she wasn't encouraged to set up shop in well, a woodshop. But now as a retired sociologist, she's found creativity and enjoyment in woodturning.

"I was doing flatwork, you know, making cutting boards, boxes, and at the time I asked my husband for a drill press. But he wanted a lathe."



Dianne Looker turns the inside of a bowl using a lathe. Contributed

When the pair split up, Looker was left with the lathe but didn't know how to use it.

After taking courses on using the tool, she joined the Nova Woodturner's Guild.

"I love the way wood responds as you work it and finish it."

At first, there was frustration.

"There would be a catch, where the tool gets stuck into the wood, and then a thump as the wood hits to the floor.

"So, I needed to get the basics down. And because it was a challenge, I kept going until I figured how I was supposed to do it."

Looker, 72, said turning is a rewarding craft.

"You can turn something in a couple of hours. It's really enjoyable, you can get your head in it. You can just lose yourself. It's very therapeutic."



Dianne Looker sands and polishes the outside of a small bowl. Contributed

Guild alliance

Usually, the guild, which has about 60 members, meets once a month from September to May. But due to the corona virus (COVID-19 strain) pandemic, the group hasn't met since February, said Looker, a former president of the organization.

But members of the group's executive have put forth challenges to members to create specific items by woodturning.

The first challenge was a mallet or a gavel. Now members have been challenged to make a rolling pin. "It's good practice for a number of skills," said Calum Ewing, the guild's secretary.

With something like a rolling pin, he said, "you have to pay attention to make sure you're getting everything straight."



*After eying the wood she's set up on a lathe, Dianne Looker dons eye protection and starts to work.
Contributed*

“There’s really something to these regular challenges. It’s real encouragement to get people in their shops during this time - practicing, maintaining interest in the craft, but also to maintain that sense of connectedness the group has.”

Ewing, 58, has been involved with the guild for about 12 to 13 years.

Like Looker, he had been into woodworking for some time before joining. When a friend encouraged him to learn the skill of woodturning, he acquired a lathe and went to a few classes and meetings.

He said in the time he’s been involved with the guild, he’s seen the skill turn from more a utilitarian technique to creative and artistic.

“There are some members who are artists and some who are craftspeople. I fall somewhere in the middle.”

There are turners who are creating bowls and items for use, others are starting to use more embellishments like colours and dyes, joining different woods.



Dianne Looker turns the outside of a bowl using a lathe. Contributed

Ewing says he tends to build bowls and platters.

“My mother was a potter and we used to have conversations about shape, form and texture. I’ve also gotten into embellishing as well.

“I’ll make platters with decorated rims. Just because something is useful doesn’t mean it can’t be beautiful as well.”

'Turning is something anyone can do'

For Looker, the skill keeps piquing her interest.

“I really like signing up for hands-on things. I’ve gone to symposiums where you watch and listen. It’s so inspiring. It’s like my mind gets set on fire.”

One of her favorite events the guild has for members is the “fun turn”. Each member is given the same block of wood – but it’s up to them to decide what they’ll make of it.

“It’s amazing to see what they make of the same block of wood. Not only will we turn different shapes, but also use different embellishments, grooves, paints, embosses and burns.”

Looker was encouraged to try the skill in the early 2000s by another woman turner.

She said getting started can be intimidating.

“Probably the most intimidating is that you have to sharpen your tools all the time. And that’s different than say flat work, where you’re using a piece of equipment that you might be able to take into a shop and get repaired or sharpened. With turning you might be sharpening your tools multiple times an hour. It’s manipulating metal.”

Ewing said the lathe itself is a power tool, so there’s always a level of precaution that needs to be taken.

“It can be fairly awkward. But you can learn how to use it properly – ideally through taking courses or joining groups like this. It’s a great option for people to try things and learn a new skill in a safe way.

“Turning is something anyone can do, because the machine is doing most of the work for you. A novice woodworker might catch on and make a jewelry box in two or three weeks. But with turning, you could go to your shop and within a couple of hours have something made. There’s quick gratification to it.”

Looker said firsthand learning is different than reading and recording the skills.

“Part of it is the feeling of putting your inspiration into practice and making something. You’re constantly pushing yourself and there’s a sense of accomplishment and pride to that.”

She said she looks forward to a woodturning competition each year. This year the competition had to be canceled due to the pandemic.

“I made a calligraphy pen for one competition. I made it out of African blackwood. I called it ‘mightier than the sword,’ because, you know, the pen is mightier than the sword. I won first place for it.”

Another piece has a dark line in the middle, called “Into the Dark”, inspired by the song by Rose Cousins. She created it by turning the piece and then cutting it in half and gluing it back together.

“It’s a statement piece. Woodturning is a way to let my imagination go wild.”



Dianne Lookers calligraphy pen she made out of African Blackwood. Contributed photo/Dianne Looker



Covered in dust, Dianne Looker proudly displays her little box she made from African Blackwood. Contributed

She said she tends to work with a lot of maple and cherry wood, as well as apple because she's located in Nova Scotia's Gaspereau Valley.

One time while in a hardware store, she got caught up in looking at the different varieties.

"Do you have wood lust?" a store employee asked Looker.

"Yes, I do," she said, explaining the moment with a chuckle.

"It was that feeling of 'I'd made it,'" she said, again with a small laugh.

By being a part of the guild, Looker said woodturners get the chance to watch a demonstration in a show and . . . get feedback from peers.

"The biggest misconception is that it's very difficult. There aren't a lot of things you can learn to do in a number of days. But all you need is a small lathe, a few turning tools and some space. It's really good fun."



Dianne Looker wears a protective shield and other equipment while turning a piece of wood.