

Debark SAFELY with a Hand Adze

by Bob Heltman

Once upon a time, about 20 plus years ago, I had a forge and became quite interested in blacksmithing. Pounding on red hot steel, especially on a hot day, gives one a deeper appreciation for what our forefathers did in developing our country! At around the same time, I was beginning in woodturning, and forged a number of gouges and scrapers. Two related tools I developed were to aid in larger scale wood carving; these were hand adzes. As it turned out, I became more interested in woodturning, and the adze pictured in Figure 1 was ideal for removing bark from the center of half-logs prior to pinning a log in place between Steb center in headstock and the tailstock.

There were, and are, two approaches to mounting a half log. One is to trust in the firmness of the bark, which often leads to the log coming loose. After a few such accidents, particularly if damage to toes occurs, the second way is to use a hand axe and remove bark in the center of the log. The problem here is that the downward swing can come close to your thumb as your hand steadies the log!



Figure 1. Hand adze that the author made for stripping bark from a piece to be turned.

When using the hand adze, one is facing the full bark side of the half-log. If necessary, the other hand can steady the log and tends to naturally hold the log at its upper left, out of harm's way. A few carving strokes with the adze gets one down to the wood itself which is a safer grabbing point for the tailstock's center. Figure 2 shows my two adzes.



Figure 2. This photo shows the author's two adzes.

I tend to use the longer end of the adze's blade on the left. The "funny stuff" on the handles is a gripping material that forms to hand-fit by using a hot air gun. (Sorry, source was lost years ago.) Handles were carved on a shaving horse, with the steel heads held in place using epoxy and a carriage bolt, on the left one, and a wedge and epoxy on the right one. Figure 3 shows the heads.



Figure 3. This photo shows the heads of the two adzes of Figure 2.

I tape-wrapped the one handle near the head to cushion against striking wood when sculpting.

In 22 years of use, these tools have stood up perfectly well. While these heads were forged, you can make a very functional adze head with most any piece of flat steel that is about 1/4" thick by 1 1/2" wide, and 4 to 5 inches long. Just drill a good-sized hole in the center and sharpened the edges "lopsided" with the cutting edge at bottom. See Figure 4 to get the idea.



Figure 4. Side view of the head on one of the adzes.

The angle of attack at the cutting edge can be adjusted by grinding, to where the adze functions comfortably within your normal chopping stroke.

Another point concerns the handle. Naturally, a woodturner will be tempted to turn the handle. HOWEVER, it is important that the adze NOT twist when striking wood! This is more likely to happen when your arm is tired, like when you have bucked some logs, split them, and are in a hurry to mount a half-log for green bowl turning. Twisting can result in dangerous glancing blows which may not be appreciated by near body parts! SO, turn the handle off center so it is oblong. Wrapping it with tape that provides extra friction between hand and handle is also a good idea. Ash or hickory are ideal woods.

An adze may not normally be considered a woodturning tool, but if one fells one's own trees, bucks the logs, paints the ends to ward off checking, and splits the logs lengthwise for bowl blanks, THEN the hand adze becomes as, or more important than, a chain saw.

By the way, sometimes a log will have some loose bark that can fly off dangerously. The hand adze is a fast and ideal way to remove some or all the bark. Since dust, sand, and grit get trapped in rough bark, and will erode the edges of your gouges more quickly, removing all bark first is often a good idea. Besides, guys never have all the tools they need. Make yourself a hand adze. You will be glad you did.