

Initial Shaping

From a lump of wood to something that resembles a didgeridoo.

The UK is not blessed with termites that eat the centre of the wood thus creating the hollow log we know so well. Therefore other methods need to be employed from the very beginning to facilitate this.



**How to Make a Wooden Didgeridoo
Part 3 - Initial Shaping**

Before starting with any digge, from right at the point of selection I have a picture in my mind of what the finished digge will look like. When first starting out, I used any piece of wood I could lay my hands on. Some were successful and some were substantial flops. I learnt quickly about the shape of didgeridoos, at least how I like them to look.

To obtain the right shape, some trimming and shaping will invariably be needed. When selecting a piece of wood, as stated I can see the finished didgeridoo in my mind. I have an idea as to the diameter of the bore, the thickness of the walls, the amount of flare at the bottom end, and so on.

Regardless of what I think the didgeridoo should look like, the first step is to remove the bark. This enables me to conduct a closer, visual inspection of the wood as the bark may obscure imperfections or defects. If I intend to keep some of the bark I am careful not to damage it. I quite often wrap an old rag or towel over the area to protect it while I am working. The only exception to this is when the timber is very thick and I use the bad saw to slice pieces off.

For trimming the bark off I use the drawknife, and spoke shave. The drawknife in the first instance and for long strips of bark, and the spoke shave for the more delicate areas. If there is a feature I want to retain with removing more than just the bark I may also use an electric detail hand sander. If the area is over a knotty area I occasionally use a rough sanding disc (36, or 40 grit), attached to my angle grinder.



If, as in the case of didgeridoo with large or flared bells, the timber that starts out (unless you are very lucky) will need a lot of excess wood removed. Using a band saw this can be done quickly and easily, leaving a very rough shaped but significantly lighter didgeridoo shape, and ready for smoothing down. Always allow for errors and going a bit off line, otherwise, like me, you will lose a few didgeridoos by cutting it in half the wrong way!

When trimming I mark each end with the the circumference I want to obtain then cut strips off at 90° to each other. Once four sides have been trimmed, it is square. I rotate the wood 45° and repeat the process, and then continue rotating with ever finer cuts making the wood more and more cylindrical.

Throughout this process I am forever stopping and starting making sure I have the right line. Once I am reasonably happy I am near the shape I want, I stop.



I also check the ends for splits. If all is ok then what is left, is an oversized didgeridoo shape. I trim the top or bottom end to suit the picture in my mind, however there will still be a few inches/ cm's excess overall to allow for mishaps.

I do not like knots immediately by the mouthpiece as it could hinder any fine tuning later on i.e. if I need to cut the length shorter. The same applies for the bell end. The digge will receive extra wear and tear at the point it rests on the ground so the fewer defects on this part the better. Having said all this, nothing detracts from features of the wood. If there is a knot or other blemish where I don't want it, I still use the wood - just be more careful not to make it worse (sometimes it ends up being the best bit of the instrument!). One

didgeridoo I worked on, I started to sand down what I thought were chainsaw marks in the wood and ended up throwing it away because by the time I realised it was some knots in the wood I had taken to much wood off. Its sister piece ended up being my daughter, Alice's 10th birthday present.

Once the bark has been removed, and if necessary the wood trimmed down I then use a combination of tools. Both power and hands tools are used depending on the part of the didgeridoo I am working on.

If some areas are flat with ridges, (like an octagonal shape), then I use a 36, 40, 60, or 80 grit disc on my angle grinder. The same is also used on awkward, or enclosed knots, and where there is a dramatic change in grain direction. In all cases I use it to give the stick a quick once over at the end of the shaping, prior to cutting and hollowing, as this unifies the grain and shows the overall form of the wood in its truest light.

If I want to shave down a substantial depth and width of part of the circumference, then I use the drawknife. This will remove wood quickly, and once used to it, the depth of cut can be very fine. I try to avoid using it in areas around knots as the grain direction changes and often the drawknife will dig in.



For more delicate and controlled work, in tighter parts of the wood, I use the spoke shave. The spoke shave has more control as the depth of cut can be set. I find that when nearing the right shape, I set a fine cut and can trim the wood effectively because the cutting motion can be quick. As with the drawknife, I avoid using the spoke shave around areas with knots as the grain direction changes.

Often I find that there are bumps in the wood from where I have been a tad other enthusiastic with the other tools, or a curve isn't quite right I use the Japanese rasp saw and the surform. Both have a flat underside so can even out a surface and make the curves smooth. These are the vertical curves going up and down the instrument, not around the circumference.

Whatever tools I use, I look at the didgeridoo shape from all angles, hold it in my hand as if playing, see where it naturally rests on the ground, and consider the dimensions of the bore.

A few things to note:

Different woods work very differently, both in their hardness, moisture content, tightness of grain etc.

Hardwoods will frequently 'feather' when sanded or cut. This could be the cells of the wood being broken or the wood may be stressed.

The grain changes around knots, as you work in one direction i.e. towards the knot; the grain does the same from the other side, so tools will dig into the wood if not careful.

Don't rush, it's better to take time to get that perfect shape, than to rush and get it wrong.

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