Making Cultivar Field Signs

CHUCK & CAROL STIFF

Bald Butte Lavender Farm

Bald Butte Lavender Farm is in Whitman County on the Palouse Prairie of southeastern Washington. Our mission is to provide sustainably, locally grown lavender products, plants, and hand-made crafts with friendly personal service and excellent follow-up support.

We wanted affordable field signs for our lavender cultivars that were attractive, weatherproof, durable, and fade-resistant We tried several commercially available signage systems without success. The following presentation describes how we make signs for identifying the cultivars growing in our lavender fields.

Carving Supplies

Carving Work Bench

Bosch GKF125CE Router

We set up a well-lit work bench for carving wood signs in our shop. The bench has a smooth flat laminate top with a non-slip shelf liner for securing signs while carving. We use a swivel chair which has a lever for adjusting working height.

Wood signs are carved using a Bosch 1.25 HP, 7.0 Amp variable-speed router which has LED lighting to illuminate the working area. We replaced the Bosch base plate with an acrylic base plate which enhances our control when freehand carving wood signs (see makeawoodsign.com). We practiced carving letters using different sizes and fonts before starting our field sign making project.

Carving Supplies

Headlamp/Reading Glasses

Router Carving Bits

Carving wood signs with a router requires close-up vision (reading glasses) and well-focused LED lighting (a headlamp with adjustable light modes).

Four router bits are most often used for carving wood signs depending on the desired letter size and required details: (1) a 60^o V-groove bit for small and medium sized inset lettering; (2) a 90^o V-groove bit for backgrounds of outset lettering; (3) a profile bit for detail and inset lettering; and (4) a carving liner for fine detail.

Carving Supplies

Wooden Layout Letters

Tack-It Adhesive

We transfer lettering onto the sign's wood surface using unfinished wooden layout letters, which are available in numerous fonts and sizes.

When transferring lettering onto wood we use a small amount of Aleene's Tack-It, a repositionable and removable adhesive, behind each letter. The adhesive temporarily holds the letters in place while spraying on the flat black primer.

Carving Supplies

Variable-Speed Table Fan

Compressed Air Spray

Using a router to carve wood signs is a messy job. Therefore, we position a variable-speed table fan near the router to blow away carving dust and keep the work area clean.

In addition, while carving we periodically clean debris out of the carved letters using a spray can of compressed air.

Carving Supplies

Flat Black Primer Paint

Helmsman Urethane

We transfer a copy of the layout lettering onto the wood surface using flat black spray-on primer. We also use the primer to fill in the carved letters. The flat primer does not penetrate or bleed into the wood, and therefore, is more easily removed with a light sanding.

The carved sign is sealed on all sides using five coats of Minwax Indoor/Outdoor Clear Gloss Helmsman Spar Urethane. The urethane provides a protective clear finish for exterior or interior wood exposed to sunlight, water, or temperature changes.

Carving Supplies

Bosch Palm Sander

120 Grit Sandpaper

We use our Bosch Palm Sander with 60-grit sandpaper to smooth the surface and remove imperfections in western redcedar fencing used for making carved signs.

The Bosch sander is also used to remove the flat black primer from the carved signs. We use 80-grit sandpaper for rough sanding, and 120-grit for finish sanding.

Carving Cultivar Signs

Line for Letter Placement

Attach Layout Letters

For making field signs, we use 5/8-inch thick x 5½-inch wide x 6-foot long western redcedar fencing. Each fence picket is cut into six equal 1-foot pieces, which are then sanded until smooth.

We carve our cultivar field signs in six steps:

Step 1. We draw a line on the 1-foot sign board for letter placement, and then attach the sufficiently spaced 1.3-inch high x 0.5-inch wide x 0.1-inch thick layout letters using Tack-It adhesive.

Carving Cultivar Signs

Paint Over Layout Letters

Remove Layout Letters

Step 2. We lightly spray the attached layout letters on the sign board using short spurts of the flat black primer. After the primer has dried, we carefully remove the layout letters. The primer should have transferred a sharp unpainted copy of the letters onto the sign board.

Carving Cultivar Signs

Freehand Letter Carving

Profile Router Bit

Step 3. We chose the profile router bit to carve the smaller 1.3-inch inset letters. We set the router bit depth at between 1/8 and 3/16-inch. We slowly freehand carved the unpainted border of each letter, followed by the inside of each letter. Carving is stopped periodically to check completed work and clear out debris using a brush and/or compressed air. To prevent breakage, we take extra care when carving more complex letters, such as “M” and “B”.

Carving Cultivar Signs

Carved Sign Letters

Painting Carved Letters

Step 4. After re-checking and fine tuning the carved letters, we lightly spray the carved letters with flat black primer. We let the primer dry completely before proceeding to the next step.

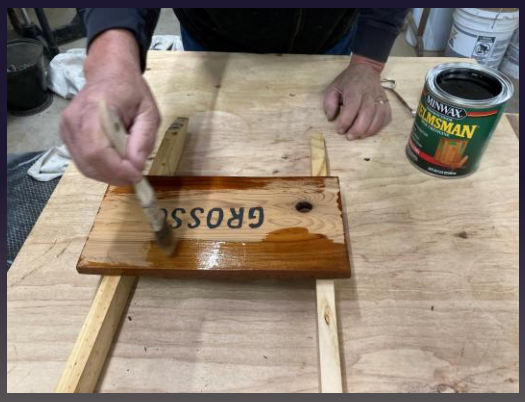
Carving Cultivar Signs

Sanding to Remove Paint

Sanded Carved Sign

Step 5. After the primer has dried, we carefully sand the sign to remove all the primer not present in the inset letters. We are careful to lightly hold the sander flat against the sign board to avoid chipping corners off the carved letters.

Carving Cultivar Signs



Applying Urethane to Sign

First Urethane Coat

Step 6. The final step is sealing the carved sign on all sides using five coats of Minwax Clear Gloss Helmsman Spar Urethane. We let the sign dry completely before applying each coat. The urethane seal provides the wood sign a hard clear finish for protection from sunlight, water, or temperature changes.