



# Shapton Stones

**T**here are probably at least a dozen different ways to sharpen woodworking tools. And most of them will give you reasonably good results. But no matter how sharp I manage to get an edge, I'm always looking for a way to make it a *little bit* sharper, and do it in less time. That's why I was so curious when I first heard about a "new" type of sharpening stone.

The stones I'm talking about are called *Shapton* stones, and they're creating a real sensation among woodworkers who have tried them. Shapton stones were originally developed in Japan about twenty years ago for sharpening cooking knives. Eventually, they caught on with carpenters and woodworkers. But it's only in the last year or so that they've become available in this country.

Shapton stones are sold as "ceramic whetstones." At first glance, they don't look a whole lot different than the waterstones that I've used in the past. But they are.

The first time I used the Shapton ceramic stones, I was amazed at how fast they cut. You can actually feel the stone biting into the metal as you start sharpening.

**Ceramic Abrasive** – The secret behind the Shapton stones is in the way they are manufactured. To begin with, they're made with a hard ceramic abrasive. The abrasive particles are suspended in a special binder. Then the stones are formed under pressure, rather than being

fired in an oven. The result is a dense, hard stone that cuts quickly.

The other big benefit of using Shapton stones is that they don't wear away as fast as waterstones. So you don't have to re-surface your Shapton stones as often to keep them flat. (More on that later.)

**Grits** – Shapton stones are available in a range of ten different grits, starting at 120 and going up to 30,000 (the different grit designations are comparable to those used



with waterstones). Each grit comes in a different color to help with identification. But you certainly don't need all ten grits.

For most sharpening jobs, I find that I really only need three stones — the 1000, 5000, and 8000-grit stones. The 1000-grit stone works great to quickly shape the edge of the tool and remove any small nicks. Then I move on to the 5000-grit stone to hone the edge until it's sharp. For plane irons, I like to go one step further and finish up with the 8000-grit stone for the ultimate edge. (Planes generally take thinner shavings than chisels, so they need to be razor sharp.)

**Using the Stones** – Aside from how fast they cut, sharpening with the Shapton stones is really not much different than sharpening on waterstones. But because the Shapton stones are less porous than waterstones, you don't need to soak

them before using them. Just a quick spritz of water on the surface of the stone and you are ready to go.

And since Shapton stones are denser and harder, you don't have to press the tool down as hard on the surface of the stone when you are sharpening. In fact, I found that I got better results when I used a lighter touch and let the stone do the work.


**Packaging** – It might sound like a small matter, but one other thing I really like about the Shapton stones is the packaging. Each stone comes in a plastic case which doubles as a base for holding the stone, see main photo on opposite page. (A paper towel helps to anchor the stone.)

The cases have vents that allow the stones to dry out when you're done sharpening. And an interlocking design allows you to stack the cases up for storage.

**Flattening** – If you've used waterstones before, you know that they

tend to “dish out” rather quickly. In other words, they develop hollow spots from rubbing the tool back and forth across the surface of the stone.

Although Shapton ceramic stones don't dish out nearly as fast as waterstones, they still need to be flattened periodically. You can do this using silicon carbide sandpaper on a flat surface (like a piece of plate glass). But I had better results when I used a special lapping plate that is sold specifically for use with the Shapton stones (see box below).

**Cost** – By this point, you're probably wondering how much it will cost to be on the “cutting edge” of sharpening. I purchased a set of three stones (1000, 5000, and 8000-grit) for \$200, which really isn't a whole lot more than you might pay for a good set of waterstones. Or you can purchase the stones individually for \$50 to \$95, depending on the grit. For sources, see the box at right. 

Sources

Woodsmith Store  
woodsmithstore.com  
800-835-5084

Tools for Working Wood  
toolsforworkingwood.com  
800-426-4613

HMS Enterprises, Inc.  
shaptonstones.com  
877-MY-BENCH  
(877-692-3624)

Lapping Plate

In addition to the sharpening stones, Shapton also sells a special lapping plate and abrasive powders that can be used to quickly flatten the stones. The heavy plate is made out of hardened cast iron, and it has a series of cross-hatches in the surface to hold the abrasive powder.

To use the plate, all you have to do is remove the rubber boot that serves as a cover and pour a little water on the surface. Then sprinkle some of the abrasive powder on the plate and start rubbing the stone across the surface, see lower left photo. Work the stone back and forth over the entire surface of the plate until it's flat and smooth.

**Double-Purpose** – When you've finished flattening the stone, you can wash off the abrasive slurry and replace the rubber boot. The lapping plate can then be used as a heavy-duty base to hold the stone while you do your sharpening, see lower right photo.

