



# 'Sealing is Believing

*A Maui company offers durable, thin shell veneers that complement wood, solid surface material and more.*

**By Lisa Whitcomb**

**W**hile working with sea shells themselves is not a new artistic medium, working with thin shell veneers and wood is.

Aqua Blue Maui located in Maui, HI, has been offering thin, raw and laminated shell veneers since 1997 for a variety of applications, such as custom woodworking, flooring, solid surface countertops, fishing lures and more. "That is when we developed a method for cutting shells into thin veneer sheets. We are going into our eighth year now and have become experts at it," says co-owner Scott Ventura. "Veneer laminate is ideal for inlaying into wood and other hard surfaces like tile and solid surface materials."

## **Trend-setting waves in a sea of color**

Shell veneer can be purchased raw in natural colors, or as Thinlam. Thinlam sheets have a urethane coating and are available natural, or they can be "flavored" one of 65 different stock colors, as well as custom colors.

"We can do unique blends and work with a client to achieve the desired color that he is looking for," Ventura says. There are currently 14 species of shell offered (see sidebar/chart page 69) and other varieties can be ordered. Ventura notes that each shell, like a tree, has its own unique grain pattern. All colors must be ordered in lots of five sheets minimum. However,



Applications for shell veneer are limited only to one's imagination. It adds an intense variation of color to any project.

*Top photos courtesy of Peggy Geddis.*



Since laser cutting is so precise, it allows for intricate patterns and designs to be inlaid with the shell veneer.

each one of the five sheets may be a different shell species.

Depending on the species ordered, Aqua Blue Maui offers shell veneer sheets in 8-inch by 8-inch, 5½-inch by 11-inch, and 12-inch by 12-inch sizes. Raw veneer is 0.007 to 0.009mm thick depending on species, and Thinlam is 0.012 to 0.014mm thick. The company likes a four- to six-week lead time on orders, although, if the veneer is needed sooner and it is in stock, it can be delivered around the world in three to five business days. Price for the veneer depends on the quantity ordered.

### Working with shell

While Aqua Blue Maui does not install the veneer itself, it works with its customers providing installation suggestions and tooling and finishing specifications. As a rule of thumb, Ventura recommends that the thin shell veneer be adhered to a backer or substrate like Plexiglas, or a carbon fiber sheeting using an epoxy resin or special two-sided, high-pressure tape from 3M. "Then a ¼-inch layer of resin (about four coats) should be applied to the shell to increase its strength

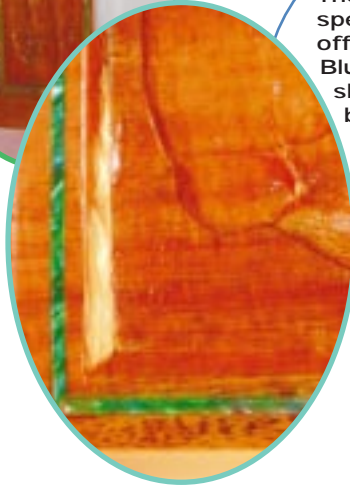
### Seafarer Notes:

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There are 14 species of shell offered by Aqua Blue Maui. The shell veneer can be "flavored" in one of 70 colors or it can be custom colored.



Using an epoxy resin can increase a shell veneer's durability in applications like this floor border.

and durability for cutting. This can be done with a high-quality spray urethane or an epoxy that the company recommends," Ventura adds.

When the coating is dry, the veneer can be cut. Shell veneer is best cut with a laser because of the preciseness it allows, but it can also be wet cut on a tile cutting saw or on a bandsaw. For those shops that do not own their own laser cutting equipment, Ventura says the company can make a recommendation where the equipment can be bought or

suggests that clients look to the telephone directory for laser-engraving plaque and trophy companies.

Shell veneer can also be used as a complement on high-end radius work like cabinetry. "Whether using a hot- or cold-mix epoxy, the color remains constant and does not lift off or fade," Ventura says. When an epoxy is added to Thinlam and the sheet is warmed up with water, the veneer becomes pliable and bends easily for radius applications.




"Using an epoxy [that we recommend] under warm water makes the veneer flexible and allows a user to bend it without cracking it," Ventura says.

"The shell veneer is easy to work with and each sheet is a work of art. Pictures of the final product don't do it justice, because the essence of a shell's beauty cannot be captured on film. It must be seen in person to be appreciated," Ventura says. **FX**

## Shell De-lites

There are 14 species of shell veneer offered by Aqua Blue Maui. Co-owner Scott Ventura says the company buys its shell either from shell farms as a by-product from meat harvesting, or it buys wild shells from authorized dealers who follow strict fishing regulations. Aqua Blue Maui does not buy endangered shell species or those with low natural populations in the wild because it is against company policy, Ventura says.

### Key:

-  - Easy to get, because they are common shell varieties.
-  - Harder to get, because the species is more exotic.
-  - Hardest to get, because of fishing regulation limits.

Abalone Paua  
Donkey Mother of Pearl (MOP)  
Silver Lip  
Tahitian Light  
Tahitian Dark

Sea Snail  
Awabi MOP  
Mosaic MOP  
Gold Lip  
Rippled Abalone

Green Heart Abalone  
Brown Lip  
Red Abalone  
Green Abalone

\* In addition to the shells offered, the company says it can order other species for a client.