

# Wood Clarinet Care and Preservation

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## Understanding Wood

Grenadilla wood is one of the most beautiful, durable and stable products of nature—hard, dense and extremely close-grained, capable of being worked to very close tolerances. Acoustically, it is an ideal material, imparting its flexibility to the tonal characteristics of the clarinet that sensitive musicians consider essential to artistic expression.

## Manufacturing process

Even a wood as stable as grenadilla “breathes,” absorbing and releasing moisture for decades, even centuries. In stabilizing grenadilla, it is allowed to “settle” and lose its moisture slowly, under the most carefully controlled conditions.

The first step is the reduction of the log into “billets”. For the most expensive woodwinds, these billets are obtained by splitting the log by hand so that each billet follows the natural grain of the wood. These are then sawed into rectangular shape, drilled and turned on a lathe into rough form.

At this point, Leblanc artisans allow time to take over—often a period of five or more years. When the wood has achieved exactly the right moisture content, Leblanc craftsmen resume the manufacturing processes that lead to the completion of your wood bodied clarinet.

## Cracking and checking

Perhaps the most generally misunderstood problem in connection with wood clarinets is that of cracking or checking. It is impossible to guarantee that wood will not crack. Despite its great density, grenadilla, like any other wood, absorbs and releases moisture. It is hygroscopic. Moisture may be absorbed from the player’s breath and from the resulting condensation in the tube as well as from the atmosphere itself. When moisture is absorbed or released too rapidly or unevenly, internal stresses are set up within the wood. If these stresses are too great, cracking or checking can occur.

There is evidence to suggest that body acidity from the player’s touch may weaken wood fibers, allowing for more rapid water absorption, which in turn can cause a crack. Some performers may use a dozen or more wood clarinets without a single instance of cracking over the lengthy period of time. No one has devised a method of preventing wood from cracking without at the same time destroying the acoustical properties that make wood desirable as a material for making fine clarinets.

When properly seasoned wood is given proper care, the occurrence of cracks and checks is statistically very low—generally well under 1% during the first year with negligible risk thereafter. Even when cracking does occur, only if the crack extends through the bore (which is very seldom) is the playing quality of the clarinet in any way affected. It is generally advisable to pin and fill a crack so that the chance of the crack spreading are minimized.

## Care and Preservation

## Break-In Procedure

Breaking in your new clarinet can be the most important step you take in the prevention of developing wood problems over the life of your instrument. I recommend following the below procedure to ensure the best chance of a “slow change” that your clarinet will need to maintain optimum performance and lesson the chances of checking or cracks.

1. Play the instrument for only 15 minutes a day for the first week.
2. Play for 15 minutes twice a day the second week.
3. Add 5 minutes to each playing session until you have reached your regular session length.
4. If you take a day off during the first few weeks, start the process over again from the beginning.
5. **Swab Often!** I recommend swabbing every 5 minutes for the first two weeks of the process and then periodically through out the session thereafter. For the best results, use a micro fiber or silk swab. When finished playing, wipe out the sockets with a clean, lint free cloth. (As the sockets usually contain cork grease, do not use your swab for this task).

## General Care & Maintenance

1. Always swab, disassemble and return your clarinet to its case when not in use.
2. Avoid extreme and rapid changes in temperature. The optimal temperature for a wood clarinet is 65° to 75°. Never play a clarinet that is cold to the touch.
3. Maintain a consistent relative humidity in between playing sessions. The ideal humidity for wood clarinets is 45% to 55%. There are several methods for this ranging from in room humidifiers to in case systems.
4. Occasionally, wipe down the keys after playing with a micro-fiber or other lint free cloth. This removes the acids and oils left on the keys by your fingers and will help prevent premature wear or tarnishing.
5. Oil the bore of the clarinet as prescribed by a local teacher or repair professional.

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