



Studio Craft: Instructions for Preparing Damar Crystals (Five Pound Cut Varnish)



Damar Varnish is a traditional component of painting mediums and coating for finished art. In mediums, damar imparts a "candy" gloss, enhances tack between layers, isolates incompatible pigments and speeds initial set-up of wet oil paint. Damar Varnish can be easily prepared in-studio in a few easy steps, either from bulk crystals or in a ready-to-use kit.

Damar is a sustainable tree resin that can be harvested from a single, living tree each season for decades. Damar production is an important non-timber forest product for developing economies.



Because damar gum is a raw natural tree exudate, it contains small particles of plant material that should be filtered during the process of preparing varnish. Large chunks can be cracked with a hammer to speed dissolution.





Place damar crystals in cheesecloth or other thin cotton fabric. The cloth must be thin and permeable to allow the crystals to dissolve, but tightly woven enough to catch inclusions.



Gather and tie tightly to form a bag.

Use only Pure Gum Spirits of Turpentine to make damar varnish. The raw gum will not dissolve in mineral spirits.

The improved packaging of Utrecht Pure Gum Spirits of Turpentine ensures freshness by blocking light as well as providing a shatterproof travel container. Fresh turpentine that has been protected from light works best in oil painting and helps support drying.



To open, pull back tab on cap and pull ring to remove inner seal.

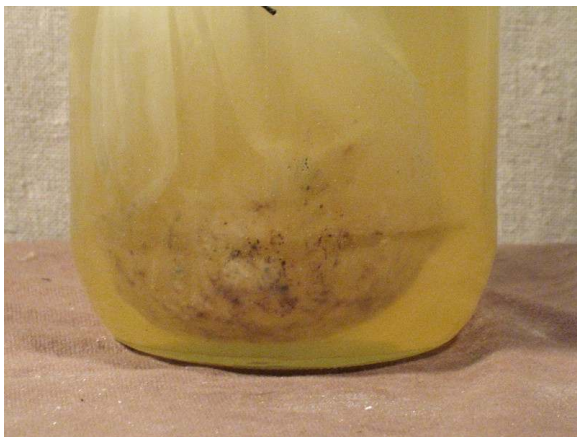


Fresh turpentine should be water-clear with a very slight yellow cast.

Place 1lb. crystals (1 bag) in a wide-mouthed glass jar or metal can with tight-fitting lid. Add 25 oz turpentine. This produces "5 pound cut" varnish, the optimal strength for oil painting. The name derives from the strength of 5 pounds crystals to 1 gallon turpentine.



Suspend bag to allow space completely around crystals. Once daily, lightly agitate jar.



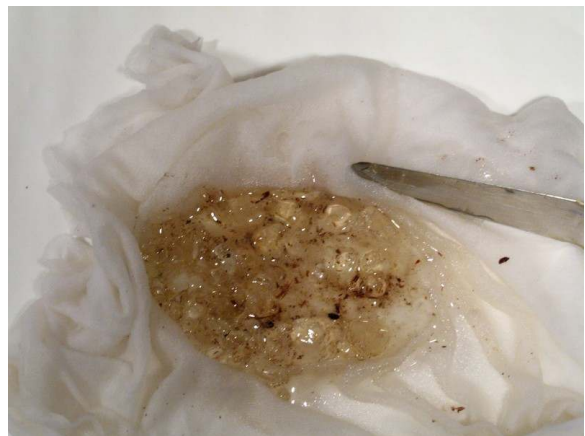
After soaking, most of the damar gum has dissolved. This may happen as soon as 24 hours but may take several days.



When preparing to remove the pouch, place the jar in a trash bag to control drips and spills.



Lift the pouch and twist gently to squeeze out remaining varnish. Wrap loose string around the bag for extra pressure. Allow to drain until almost all liquid is collected.



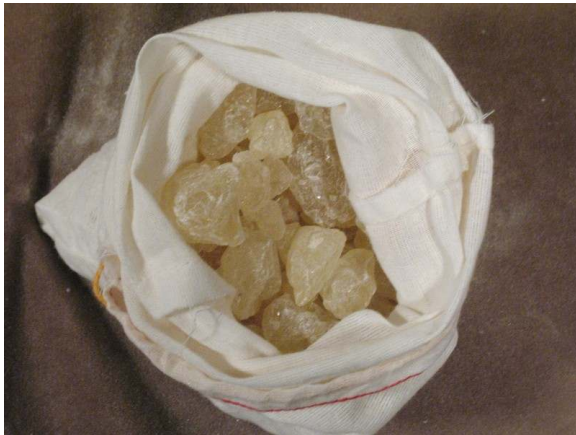
Once the turpentine is fully saturated with gum, some undissolved damar remains in the pouch along with plant residue (bits of bark, leaves,

etc.) - this is normal. Since it's not possible to accurately measure the remaining gum for further use, it should be discarded with the pouch. Cap jar tightly and clean up any drips with a small amount of turpentine.

Preparing Damar from a Kit:



Utrecht damar varnish is available in a pre-measured kit which includes crystals, a cloth pouch and re-sealable can.



The drawstring pouch contains a measured amount of damar crystals, enough for 1 pint of turpentine.



Pull drawstring to snugly close. Place crystals back in can. Add 16oz pure gum spirits of turpentine; seal securely and allow crystals to dissolve.

When using the kit it's a little harder to keep the pouch from touching the bottom of the container due to the width of the can. If the pouch should stick slightly to the container bottom, a light tug should suffice to release.



Suspend pouch to allow residual varnish to drain.

With the pouch removed, our five pound cut varnish is ready to seal and store.



Homemade damar varnish will be naturally cloudy in the jar. This is due to the presence of waxes in the gum that are not completely soluble in turpentine. These waxes are always present in damar varnish and do not affect performance in mediums or on finished art.

If a clearer appearance on the shelf is desired, a few drops of denatured alcohol or acetone will clarify the liquid. (This also works with factory-prepared varnish that has become cloudy in the jar. Make sure to use alcohol from the hardware store rather than rubbing alcohol which contains water.)



The finished varnish can be used as a traditional picture varnish for completely dry oil paintings or thinned with additional turpentine to half strength for use as retouch varnish. Damar can be blended with pure gum spirits of turpentine and stand oil (1 part each) to make a general-purpose oil painting medium.



In mediums, damar imparts gloss and luster to colors, prevents "sinking in" and improves initial tack between layers. It also helps paint set up quickly on the canvas, reduces beading and isolates incompatible pigments. As paint dries, damar helps maintain lustrous color and deep darks.

Questions? [Ask the Expert](#)

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