

## 02. Selecting a Pick

This article is focused on the “flat pick” used by 4-string banjoists not the “finger picks” used by 5-string bluegrass banjo players. Selecting the “right” pick for yourself can be a daunting experience of trial and error. Picks come in a wide variety of materials, thickness and shape and finding the right one for your use can be very frustrating. It happens that asking others for advice isn't always helpful. Everyone has their own opinion on the best one to use but it's really an individual personal preference. Over the years I have used a variety of picks and have settled on one style and 2 different thicknesses that work well for me - thin for soft playing and thick for loud playing.

Up into the early 1960's the pick of choice by professional banjo players was made of real tortoise shell. Besides being somewhat expensive they were subject to breakage and were discontinued when synthetic material picks became available. Unlike plastic picks nylon and teflon picks can last for years of playing. I bought a triangular teflon pick in the mid 1960's and used it for over 40 years. It was slightly worn but over time it developed a curve which made it difficult to tremolo. So I then started the trial and error process selecting a new pick of choice for me. I didn't even consider using plastic picks because they easily break and it always happens at the wrong place and time.

The most common style of flat pick shape used these days is a “pointed oval” used by both guitar and banjo players. At I first thought that a stiff rigid pick would be best because the tortoise shell picks were also very stiff as was the teflon pick I had used. I found that to tremolo with the stiff pick I had to loosen my grip on the pick because when holding it tight it was not easy to strum up and down or tremolo (the sweeping of the pick continuously and smoothly up and down across all of the strings is called a tremolo). I then tried a thin flexible pick and found that it was difficult to selectively pick notes with any volume no matter how hard I held the pick but it did glide nicely across the strings for tremolos. My final choice became both 2 picks, a medium pick that I found was good for both picking and playing lead and a softer pick for playing softer when needed. Once you find the pick of your choice be sure to buy a few spares in case of loss. Also, you should always have a spare pick stored somewhere on the instrument so if you drop your pick while playing and you can quickly grab the spare pick to continue playing. Pick holders are available for holding a spare pick on the instrument.

The thickness of picks is measured in millimeters and I found the thicker Dunlop Maxi-Grip 0.73mm and the thinner 0.63mm picks best for me. These are inexpensive nylon picks that come in packs of 12 for very little cost. These picks are available in other thicknesses but thinner or thicker didn't work for me as I previously described.

Picks are easy to drop while playing especially if it is loosely held so some picks will have slight ridges, bumps or holes to help you grip them. The Dunlop Maxi-Grip picks have little bumps to help you hold them.

If you need to experiment in finding the right pick for you buy a few with various thicknesses to try and when you have determined which thickness is the best for you buy a few more. Picks are available at music stores and online at [Sweetwater.com](http://Sweetwater.com) or on [ebay.com](http://ebay.com).

Selecting a pick is an individual preference and you really have to experiment until you find the right one(s) for you.