

Letters

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARY JANE FAVORITE

If Your Benchtop Saw isn't Making You Happy, Then it's Time to Move On

I am looking to upgrade my current benchtop table saw and would appreciate any recommendations you might be able to give. I have a small Craftsman 10" benchtop saw, which has served me well up to this point. But I am beginning to realize its limitations. The size of the Craftsman saw works well because I house my tools and machines in my garage, and I don't have a lot of room for large woodworking equipment.

I have been looking at larger benchtop models with more and better features, as well as entry-level contractor saws, but I need to be mindful of the space they will take up.

Tony Vierra
San Jose, California

Tony,
If you're recognizing the limitations of your saw, a new benchtop model isn't going to make you happy. There's a significant difference, and once you switch you'll never look back. My recommendation is to look at a few models and factor in a good-quality mobile base. My favorite mobile base right now is from Jet. It's affordable, adjustable, stable and easy to assemble. To maximize your space further, put a router table in the left wing of the table saw. It may not actually give you more space, but it makes it easier to justify the saw taking up as much space. The table saw is the most important machine in your shop. It deserves a little extra room.

— David Thiel, senior editor

Ambrosia Beetle Gives us Ambrosia Maple, a Popular Secondary Wood

My wood supplier has wormy (ambrosia) maple kiln-dried for sale for \$1.15 a board foot. My question is: How does this species machine? And what sort of finish would be best used on it? Is it even worth considering for use?

Bob Porter
Celestine, Indiana

Bob,
"Ambrosia" maple has become popular during the past couple of years because it's cheap and plentiful. This type of maple features small

worm holes that were made by the ambrosia beetle (hence the name "ambrosia maple"). It has been used for years as a secondary wood for cabinet interiors and the like—somewhat similar to poplar but not quite as stable.

Ambrosia maple should machine OK, but I suspect it will blotch if it is stained, just like regular hard maple, birch, pine, cherry, etc. You can get around this by using gel stains or washcoats before staining. I'd suggest you test any stain on sample boards before planning a project you think you might want to stain later.

— Steve Shanesy, editor & publisher

A Home Remedy for Removing Saw-blade Gunk

Is there a suitable household substitute for removing the gum from saw blades? I know kits are sold in woodworking stores, but I have a sneaking suspicion that they may consist of something very common and less expensive.



Bob Graham
Olathe, Kansas

Bob,
Any brand of oven cleaner is very effective for cleaning gunk off saw blades. But don't get it on your skin for long, as it's a caustic substance. Apply, let it penetrate for a few minutes, wash it off and dry the blade. You may need an old toothbrush to scrub the worst areas.

Scraper & Sandpaper are Key to Making Knots Look Good

I've been woodworking for about one year. I like the appearance of some knots in my wood projects. However, I've yet to find an easy, effective way to smooth the knots out. I mainly use oak and poplar for my projects. Does anyone on your staff have any suggestions?

Edward Relyea
Marion, North Carolina

Edward,
Hand-planing knots often results in tear-out. Your best bet is to smooth the surface with a sharp card scraper and then sandpaper. Start with #100-grit and finish with #220.

— Kara Gebhart, associate editor

Butcher Block Needs a Little TLC

I have an oak butcher-block countertop that I've neglected. Because of the heavy use, I can see some of the raw wood surface. I was going to sand it with a belt sander and I'm not sure what to finish it with. Do you have a better method?

Julie Jiaccoppo
Massapequa, New York

Julie,
A belt sander can be used but I would caution that it can be very aggressive and might damage the surface if you aren't careful. A safer way would be to use a random-orbit sander. Start with #80-grit. Once the finish is removed, move to #100, #120, #150 and then #180.

The finish you choose depends primarily on how you intend to use the countertop. If you want a film-building finish that can take some abuse (but won't allow you to cut on it directly), use polyurethane. If you will be cutting on it and getting it wet, I'd suggest mineral oil. You can reapply the oil once or twice a year to replenish the finish and the look. However, the oil finish will not give you the luster or shine that the film finish will. The oil finish will always look dull, so it's ultimately up to you.

— Steve Shanesy, editor & publisher

Finish the Backs of Drawer Fronts; the Rest is Up to You

This is the age-old question of whether you should finish (apply stain, varnish, etc.) to a drawer. Presently I am finishing a dresser for my wife. I will apply finish to the fronts of the drawers, but I'm not sure if I should apply finish to the insides and remaining outside of the drawers. Also, if you were to apply finish to your drawers, what type of finish would you use?

Bruce MacEachern
Ottawa, Ontario

Bruce,
I finish my drawers. No stain, just finish. But it's a personal preference. At the very least you must finish the backside of the drawer front; otherwise, your drawer front will warp because of uneven humidity absorption inside and out.

I finish my drawers because it looks better and offers some protection if anything is ever spilled in there. But I won't argue with anyone who opts to leave the drawers bare.

As far as what type of finish to use, any film finish is fine. Oil will take forever to dry, especially in an enclosed space. Plus, it can smell like oil inside the drawer for years. Shellac, varnish, lacquer and polyurethane all will cure quickly and none of them will leave a smell for long.

— Christopher Schwarz, executive editor



Help for a Crooked, Old Saw

I recently dug out an old Disston #4 backsaw that was my grandfather's. I went to vintagesaws.com and got some great information on sharpening. I got a saw vise, some files and a saw set. I have one problem, though. The saw needs to be straightened, too. I would rather have this done professionally. Can you recommend someone who specializes in this area?

Roderick Jensen
Brimfield, Massachusetts

Roderick,

You can send it to Tom Law of Smithburg, Md., (301-824-5223). Give him a call and explain your situation. He's also an excellent sharpener.

I've straightened a few myself; it's actually straightforward work. Put the handsaw or backsaw on an anvil and push the blade so it's flat against the striking surface. Then tap the bent area a couple of times with a hammer. It's a good idea to practice on a saw you don't care about, but it's not very tough to do.

— Christopher Schwarz, executive editor

Are Japanese Chisels Worth It?

After years of using off-the-shelf "junky" tools, I now own a few quality products such as Lie-Nielsen planes. I would like to buy high-quality chisels and have considered something from the

Japan Woodworker catalog. Are these largely handmade chisels really worth the money or would I be better off with something from the usual suspects, such as Marples, Two Cherries, etc.?

Don Rader
Huntington Beach, California

Don,

Chisels are strange animals. You definitely can spend far too much money if your goal is merely to get a tough, useable tool. For the Japanese tools, you are paying as much for the beauty, history and provenance behind the tool as you are for its edge-holding ability. I've had the honor of handling a good number of Japanese chisels from private collections and they are indeed spectacular. Are they 10 times as durable as Western chisels? Of course not.

Buy the Japanese chisels if they will make you happy. If you want a chisel that will hold an edge long enough for you to chop out the dovetails for some drawers, I can recommend chisels that we have tested: Ashley Iles, Two Cherries and Matsumura Blue Steels. Marples and Stanleys also are good bargain options.

If you want the ultimate chisel set, I recommend the Lie-Nielsen chisels, which are due out sometime this year. I've been testing preproduction models and find them to be as good as any exotic chisel with a price only slightly higher than the fancy European ones.

— Christopher Schwarz, executive editor

Two Tricks for a Warped Table

I need some advice. My mom has a very old Queen Anne dining table. A couple of the leaves have warped, and she has asked me to fix them.

The only idea I have is to put them on the concrete floor with a lot of weight on them and hope the moisture from the floor will remove the warp. Hopefully someone has more experience with this and can come up with a better solution, as I don't think my idea would really work.

Mike Grawvunder
Oshkosh, Wisconsin

Mike,

Your solution might actually work, for a period of time. The problem is that wood is hygroscopic and the leaves will try to reach the same moisture content and state they are in now.

Has the table ever been refinished? If so, did the finisher actually finish the underside of the parts – not just apply a stain, but a protective topcoat? If not, that is likely causing the warp. The underside is absorbing moisture more rapidly than the top. You can remove warp by putting the top on sawhorses out in the sun (to reduce moisture) and then adding weights. Once the top is flat, you can finish the top and bottom.

If that's not the problem, add a couple of bat-tens across the grain of the wood that straighten

out the warp. These usually are 2"-wide lengths of a stout hardwood (such as maple) installed in a sliding dovetail housing on the underside. They aren't glued in, just built to have a tight press-fit. A professional furniture restorer will have more ideas for fixing your leaves.

— Christopher Schwarz, executive editor



Get the Smoothing Plane and Spend \$8 on a Card Scraper

I am interested in buying a smoothing plane, but have noticed all the scraper planes offered as well. I can't seem to figure out why you would use one over another as they both appear to be for final surface preparation, in lieu of sandpaper. Can you offer a little insight?

Brian Dickerson
Mound, Minnesota

Brian,

Smoothing planes do a lot of other chores that a scraper plane can't do, such as leveling joints, cleaning up edges of boards, fitting drawers and doors, and the like. A scraper plane is good for one thing only: preparing a surface for finishing. Scraper planes also require considerably more effort to push than smoothing planes.

Smoothing planes and scraper planes are both good tools to have and well-equipped shops have at least one of each. If I had to buy only one, it would be the smoothing plane. You can come back and clean up any errant tear-out from a smoother with a card scraper, an \$8 item.

— Christopher Schwarz, executive editor

Where to Begin My Woodworking?

I never went to technical school to learn about all the basic things you need to know before you pick up a hammer and begin your project. Is there a book for sale with all the basic principles of measuring so I can begin to work on projects?

Sherwin Croes
Fort Lauderdale, Florida

Sherwin,

I'd like to tell you there is one all-encompassing book that has all the answers, but no one has managed to publish it. I can suggest a few books that, when used in combination, will have many of

the answers you seek. In fact, think of these books as a woodworker's essential library.

n "Encyclopedia of Furniture Making" by Ernest Joyce (Sterling): A daunting title, but one great reference book about woodworking. It covers terminology, materials, joinery, tools, design, fasteners and even finishing. It's indispensable.

n "Illustrated Cabinetmaking" by Bill Hylton (Reader's Digest): This book, which is about furniture styles and design, covers standard furniture dimension and Western joinery – not how to cut or assemble joints, but what to use and where.

n "The Complete Illustrated Guide to Joinery" by Gary Rogowski (Taunton): This fills in where Hylton's book leaves off. Learn how to cut and assemble joints using power tools and hand tools.

n "Measure Twice, Cut Once" by Jim Tolpin (Popular Woodworking Books): Primarily about design, this will help you understand why a chair is comfortable and how deep drawers need to be – important ideas for any woodworker.

n "Seven Essentials of Woodworking" by Anthony Guidice (Sterling): These skills include measuring, marking a line, sharpening, sawing to a line, planing and mastering one finish process. All will make you better at what you do.

n "Understanding Wood Finishing" by Bob Flexner (Reader's Digest): This book covers everything you need to know about finishing in a no-nonsense manner. It takes the mystery out of one of the most important project steps.

"The expectations of life depend upon diligence; the mechanic that would perfect his work must first sharpen his tools."

– Confucius (551 B.C. - 479 B.C.)
philosopher

Where to Find Replacement Parts for Old Hand Planes

Last year I read an article on hand planes and have since purchased two old Stanley planes off eBay – a No. 4 smoothing plane and a Type 11 jack plane. Both planes are in pretty good condition, but both needed extensive tuning.

My problem is this: I can't find parts for either of them. I have contacted several antique dealers and tool companies to no avail. For the sake of the integrity of the planes, I would like to purchase the original parts. But, if that's impossible, I'll be using these planes for real work in my small workshop so I can use new parts instead.

Donald Mitchem
Deltona, Florida

Donald,
Have you tried Bob Kaune at antique-used-tools.com? Drop him a line. He has saved my pants with parts several times. After that, your next best bet is to buy a new replacement part for the planes by contacting Highland Hardware (tools-for-woodworking.com). Or, buy a "donor" plane on eBay that has the missing parts you need.

– Christopher Schwarz, executive editor



Can I Use My Kitchen Knife Sharpener on My Scraper?

I just purchased some hand scrapers after I saw some in use on the "DIY Woodworks" show. My question is this: Is the burnishing tool basically the same as a steel used to sharpen kitchen knives, or do I have to buy the smooth burnishing tool itself? I would like to start using scrapers instead of the sander all the time.

Doug Duncan
Roy, Utah

Doug,
The steels used for sharpening knives won't work. These are designed to put a slightly jagged edge on a tool, which is ideal for slicing through soft foods found in the kitchen.

You really need some sort of smooth burnisher in your shop. Some people salvage an old valve rod from an engine, which is hardened and smooth. Other people cough up the \$10 to \$15 for a proper tool. Either works.

– Christopher Schwarz, executive editor

A Hand Plane Shopping List

I'm looking to get a couple of hand planes for the shop, including a low-angle block plane. Can you recommend other models that are used most often, such as a smoothing plane, shoulder plane, jack plane, jointer plane, scraper, etc.? I have a powered planer and jointer, but want to incorporate hand planes in my work, too.

Todd Marshall
Ashburn, Virginia

Todd,
Ah, the first steps into a larger world. When buying planes, deciding which ones you need really depends on your work and the joinery you use. For almost every woodworker, a smoothing plane

should come first. It sees more work than any other kind of plane. It handles the final surface preparations of any board and general planing chores, and it can trim edges of boards.

Second, I'd buy either a card scraper or a card scraper plus a scraping plane – especially if you work with difficult figured woods. These tools clean up any tear-out left over from your smoother. You can get by easily with a card scraper and get the scraping plane (Veritas makes an excellent version) later on down the line.

Next, get a good block plane. The Lie-Nielsen 60½ can't be beat. This trims joinery flush after it's assembled and is fantastic for removing saw blade and jointer marks from edges. It also has about 10 million other uses.

If you cut a lot of tenons, a shoulder plane should be next. No tool makes fitting tenons easier or more straightforward. Get a big one so you can trim long face cheeks.

After that, I'd buy some kind of jack plane for rough work. This doesn't have to be a premium brand. I use mine for flattening tabletops, removing material quickly and fitting drawers.

Then it's personal preference. If you want to shoot long edges for gluing, you'll need a No. 7.

– Christopher Schwarz, executive editor

Sealing Off Pet Urine on a Hardwood Floor

Can I use shellac under polyurethane? I am trying to seal off animal urine on a hardwood floor. I will sand it, but I also need to seal this floor.

J.A. Kutscher
via the internet

J.A.,

Yes, you can use dewaxed shellac under polyurethane without any bonding problems. It should be dewaxed – that is, having had its natural wax removed. You can dissolve your own dewaxed shellac or buy it already dissolved, made by Zinsser and sold under the brand name SealCoat. It should be available everywhere in paint stores and home centers. For a large area, I would suggest the SealCoat. WM

– Bob Flexner, author of
"Understanding Wood Finishing"

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