

# Why I Use Handsaws



*From punishment to pleasure.*

When I was a kid, I felt like handsaws were a punishment – and it was a sentence that lasted about 20 years.

When I was about 11, my dad had a table saw and a radial-arm saw in our shop in town, but I wasn't allowed to touch them. So I had a plastic blue-handled panel saw (that wouldn't even bruise mustard, much less cut it) and a coping saw that I had purchased myself from Sears.

So my first projects were built with a coping saw only. I used it for crosscuts, rips and even miters. Try it sometime, and I think you'll be amazed that I stuck with woodworking.

Later on, my dad taught me how to use a full-size handsaw while building decking and fencing on our farm, which hadn't yet been electrified. The saw was too big for me and the teeth were fairly dull, so all I really wanted for Christmas was a Skil saw and a 3-mile extension cord.

After college, I started taking courses in woodworking at the University of Kentucky. The first thing we did was to cut all manner of joints with Western backsaws. All of them were dull – it was like trying to cut wood with a barber's comb.

At that point in my life, I was done with hand-powered saws. I spent my tool money on table saws, band saws, scroll saws and jigsaws – any saw that didn't have the word "hand" in front of it.

But then I met Tish from SharkSaw Corp. He had come to visit *Popular Woodworking Magazine* with his line of Japanese saws, which sported black plastic handles and reasonable prices. I had never used a Japanese saw – I'd only seen them in books and in other woodworking magazines.

Suddenly, we had about 20 of them in our shop.

I took one cut with a dozuki and was completely hooked. I was so thrilled to use a saw that cut – really, really cut – that I made my first hand-dovetailed project that week. Despite the fact that



all the saws I'd used at the university were dull, the instructor had drilled into our heads how to cut dovetails (or how to hack them out with crappy saws). So being able to actually cut dovetails as I'd been taught was a small miracle.

After that first project, I don't think I ever looked back. I finally understood what a sharp saw was capable of, and I started to read every book I could on the tools, starting with Toshio Odate's book "Japanese Tools: Their Spirit, Tradition and Use."

I built a pair of the sawing trestles from Odate's book. I accumulated three or four more Japanese saws and used them every chance I got.

It's an understatement to say they changed my work. When I had a machine heart, all my love went to the 90° angle. Anything off of that required test cuts, which wasted material. Every curve involved templates, which wasted time and material. And any compound angle made my frontal lobe explode.



Saws come in many shapes and sizes – and while I have more than I probably need, they all see a lot of use in my shop.

But once I learned to use a handsaw, all cuts became the same. As long as I could see the line, I could cut the line. It didn't matter if the line was 90°, 82° or something wackier. Compound angles? Same rule applies: If you can see the line you can cut it. Curves? Ditto.

Suddenly 90° is just another angle, and perhaps the most boring one as well.

As my work began to change, I began to look for new sources of information on saws, planes, chisels and the like. I don't speak or read Japanese, so all the sources I encountered were in English and were about Western saws.

The old books said that Western saws were capable of great finesse. I didn't believe it at first. My experience was that Western saws were clumsy, dull, slow and heavy.

But my curiosity got the best of me. One day I tried an Independence backsaw made by Pete Taran and Patrick Leach – it was a handmade saw that had been hand-filed to a wicked sharpness. And, again, my frontal lobe exploded.

And that's the path I continue on today.

All saws – Western or Japanese – are incredible instruments that can perform amazing feats in the right hands. They require more skill than any other hand tool I've encountered – yes, that includes chisels, carving tools and rasps. Most hand tools have a gradual cutting action. You chip or plane away at the work until it is complete.

No so with saws. No other tool divides the work with such rapidity and decisiveness. With handsaws



ANDREW LUNN'S ECCENTRIC TOOLWORKS DOVETAIL saw is among my favorite saws that I own – and it's one of only a few of my saws that I rarely let anyone else use.

you are either on the line or off it. And there is no going back. Corrections are difficult at best.

If you are willing to risk failure, then you can move rapidly through a project, making cuts in minutes that would take hours to jig up with a power saw.

And no matter how good you are, you are always one stroke away from complete failure.

That simple fact right there – being one stroke away from disaster – ensures that this hobby, profession and obsession will never become boring for me.

And that, friends, is why I use handsaws.

— Christopher Schwarz, July 2013

A FULL-SIZED HANDSAW IS ESSENTIAL *when breaking down stock.*

