



Editors get a feel for each bench

Fine Woodworking's editors evaluated a bench's appearance and how well the vises worked. They also brought in their tools and gave each bench a good workout. As they planed, sawed, and chopped, they noted the sturdiness and rigidity of each bench, and how comfortable they found the working height.



Ready-Made Workbenches

The best are rock solid, dead flat, and a joy to use

BY MARK SCHOFIELD

At the heart of any woodworking shop is a solid workbench, but there has long been a debate over whether it's better to build your bench or buy it. Then there is the conundrum that you need a bench in order to build a bench. And if you think you can make a bench for a fraction of the cost of buying one, you may want to rerun the numbers: Remember that you can't buy 12/4 maple in bulk like a manufacturer can, and even if you hand-pick your boards, you'll have to cut away some knots, swirly grain, or checking. Add in the cost of some high-quality hardware and you'll find the savings melting away fast.

However, buying a workbench is rather like shopping for shoes: A single brand can have numerous models; the pros and cons of different features are not obvious without trying them out; and one size definitely doesn't fit all.

To help simplify the process of buying a bench, *Fine Woodworking* decided to test some models head-to-head. Because personal preference plays such a large role when selecting a workbench, rather than use a single author, we decided to let all the editors have their say. Sure enough, opinions varied widely on some benches, but overall there was a consensus on the winners. If you are in the market for a workbench, this survey should help you pick one that suits you.

How the benches were selected and tested

We chose benches approximately 6 ft. long by 2 ft. wide, with both a front and a tail vise, that were robust enough to stand up to the rigors of planing, chopping, and sawing by hand.

Eight manufacturers or retailers supplied benches that met these criteria. Nearly all of them make or sell benches of different sizes and with other features than the ones we tested, so if you like the brand but not the bench, check their Web sites for alternatives.

For the more subjective part of the test, the editors recorded how stable the bench felt, how well the vises worked, and how easy the dogs were to use. They also noted the general appearance of each bench; the quality of the finish; and the utility of any storage shelves, cabinets, or tool trays.

When we were done, John White, our shop manager, moved in with his straightedge, feeler gauges, combination square, and scales to objectively measure each bench.

Workbenches vary enormously. You really do have a wide choice when it comes to price, quality, and configuration. More than any other tool in your shop, a good workbench should last you a lifetime, so choose wisely. □

Mark Schofield is the managing editor.





Lie-Nielsen CUSTOM MADE

www.lie-nielsen.com

Price: \$1,800
Length: 84 in.
Width: 24 in.
Height: 38 in.
Weight: 281 lb.
Wood: Maple

Editors' score: 8.5

Oder one of these benches and you're unlikely to see its identical twin: Like a bespoke suit from Savile Row, each product is custom built to fit the owner's needs and desires. The owner can specify a top up to 8 ft. 4 in. long and 24 in. wide, with or without a tool tray, and any height. The tail vise can be positioned at either end, or you can

specify a twin-screw tail vise at one or both ends with a double row of dog holes.

We ordered a traditional style of bench that was higher than most. Not surprisingly, 6-ft. 3-in. Rodney Diaz, an associate art director, loved the height, but a surprising number of sub-6-ft. editors also found this height more relaxing to work at. Both vises earned high marks for their German hardware and their beautiful handles, which come complete with rubber O-rings to stop the turned cherry knobs from banging against the metal. The 50/50 boiled linseed oil and turpentine satin finish achieved the right balance of protecting the wood and being renewable.

This bench felt like it had been designed and built by a woodworker, and I think we'd all love to be able to boast that we'd made it ourselves. I suspect that this reason as well as the quality and the features made it our choice as best overall.

One nice vise. The tail vise's stiffness can be adjusted using a pair of bolts. The vise handles, with their black rubber O-rings to protect the turned cherry knobs from hitting the metal, earned unanimous praise.



Hoffman & Hammer 114102

www.highlandwoodworking.com

Price: \$800
Length: 71 in.
Width: 22 in.
Height: 34 in.
Weight: 162 lb.
Wood: European beech

Editors' score: 5.6

The smallest, lightest, and cheapest of the benches we looked at, Hoffman & Hammer's medium bench could have been overshadowed by the heavyweight competition, but it stood its ground and earned the best-value award. The front vise in particular had very little racking. The main criticism was the lightness of the bench, particularly the base,

which made the bench unstable when pushed from front to back (end-to-end planing pressure was no problem). A solution would be to install a tool cabinet in the base, although the elevated stretch-

ers don't leave much room. The dogs and vises were small but worked smoothly, although the tail vise gradually increased in height as it was extended. This would be an ideal choice for someone looking for an economical, well-made workbench but without the physical mass.



Solid vise. The front vise displayed almost no racking when the workpiece was clamped at one end.

Dog vs. drawer. When a dog is deployed in the central holes of the bench, it prevents the drawer from opening.





Diefenbach

GB 16-43 V/3S/4R

www.workbenches.com

Price: \$1,600
Length: 63 in.
Width: 24 $\frac{3}{8}$ in.
Height: 35 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.
Weight: 271.5 lb.
Wood: European beech
Editors' score: 7.6

Like Mercedes-Benz cars, Diefenbach benches have long been symbols of German engineering prowess. A few years ago, however, Mercedes cars began being recalled for design faults and the marque slipped down the rankings in customer satisfaction. Based on the bench we looked at, Diefenbach's halo may also have slipped. There were several

examples of poor quality control: Only two of the four screw holes for attaching the top to the base were aligned properly, and the threaded rod on the front vise had to be bent slightly to fit into its hole in the bench. The spring clips on all four metal dogs were so poorly riveted that they wouldn't fit into the holes, although after being pounded on an anvil and then filed, they worked fine.

Examples of poor design include the protrusion of the finger-jointed end into the front vise area. Because the dog holes were spaced wider than the end vise's travel, there was a $\frac{3}{4}$ -in. dead zone when clamping certain length workpieces (the Laguna bench also had this problem; see p. 62).

In other respects, this was a great workbench with stout legs

and a thick top, giving a very solid feel. The vises were, as associate art director Kelly Dunton put it, "nicely massive," and the anti-racking wheels on both vises were a standout feature.



Vise stays parallel. By spinning the metal wheel until the distance between it and the vise jaw is slightly smaller than the thickness of the workpiece, the piece can be clamped securely without racking or twisting.



Garrett Wade

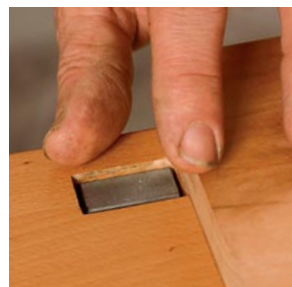
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www.garrettwade.com

Price: \$1,100
Length: 74 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.
Width: 24 in.
Height: 33 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.
Weight: 242 lb.
Wood: European beech
Editors' score: 6.1

Editor Matt Berger's comment, "When I think of a workbench this is it," was typical of the initial favorable views of this workbench. The shelves and lockable cupboard under the bench were welcome, as was the nonmarring felt on the jaws of the tail vise. When planing and sawing, the bench was rigid and stable, but extended use exposed

some problems. Most editors found the low 33 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. height back-breaking, and the dog holes were too close to the front of the bench to grip wide boards securely. When combined with the loose dogs and the poorly aligned top of the front vise, this bench left editors disappointed, a reaction reflected in its sixth-place ranking.



Dog gone. Because the dogs were too loose, they slipped down when positioned about $\frac{1}{2}$ in. or less above the surface.



Front vise too low. The top of the front vise is about $\frac{1}{8}$ in. below the benchtop.



Grizzly

H7725

www.grizzly.com

Price: \$850

Length: 84 in.

Width: 24¾ in.

Height: 34¼ in.

Weight: 299.5 lb.

Wood: Birch

Editors' score: 4.4

This bench certainly looked different from all the rest. Instead of being made from large chunks of beech or maple, Grizzly's bench is made from thousands of strips of birch, most no larger than ¾ in. sq., laminated together. The top was relatively flat, and this method of construction should, in theory, make it the most stable of all the benches.

That's where the good news ends: Despite being the heaviest bench, when given a jolt it wobbled several times from end to end, probably due to the small stretchers and the undersize nuts and bolts that attach them to the legs. The front vise racked alarmingly, while the tail vise climbed ¼ in. when tightened. When combined with the fact that the dogs leaned backward under pressure in their oversize holes, the effect was to raise the workpiece into the air.

The other trouble spot is the massive drawer in the base. Heavy even when empty, it is difficult to open when storing anything but bulky, light objects.



Unsteady workpieces. A combination of slop in the tail vise and dogs that angle backward under pressure causes the workpiece to rise off the bench when clamped.



Laguna

7-FT. WORKBENCH

www.lagunatools.com

Price: \$1,365

Length: 89½ in.

Width: 26½ in.

Height: 33 in.

Weight: 242.5 lb.

Wood: European beech

Editors' score: 6.5

The largest of the benches we tested, the Laguna also was the shortest. The overall appearance was pleasing and the bench had good stability, but on closer inspection the construction and the vises left something to be desired. The top was visibly wavy and dished 0.030 in. in several places including the critical right-front corner near the tail vise, suggesting the top had been poorly wide-belt sanded.

Also, the top of the trestle base protrudes beyond the front of the top, interfering when edge-planing a long board.

The dogs and dog holes got mixed reviews. Some editors described the fit as just right, while others found the dogs' flat spot too small to locate without a second glance. With some modest redesign and better quality control, this could become a much better bench.



Good and bad dogs. The Laguna dogs slid in and out of the holes with the right amount of resistance, but editors disliked the small flat spot.



Sjoberg ELITE 2000

www.woodcraft.com

Price: \$1,500
Length: 76½ in.
Width: 23⅝ in.
Height: 35½ in.
Weight: 279 lb.
Wood: European beech
Editors' score: 8.3

The Sjoberg only just missed the best-overall award. Initial comments were “handsome,” “beautiful,” “massive,” and “well made,” and closer inspection revealed a number of unique and useful features: The front vise can be switched to the opposite side of the bench and the bench rotated 180° for left-handed use; square vise runners almost

eliminated racking despite the nearly 2-ft. width of each vise; the legs are flush with the top and fitted with dog holes to allow wide boards to be supported when edge-planing. A heavy bench, the top is 3 in. thick with a 4-in.-thick apron, giving it a very sturdy feel. Uniquely, the front vise was also fitted with a pair of dog holes, which, combined with the holes running the length of the front and back sides, gives great clamping flexibility.

The dogs were round with a large, flat clamping spot, but a

little stiff and hard to remove when low in the hole. The only other complaint was the slightly rough and low-luster oil-finished surface, a minor blemish on an otherwise excellent bench.



Edge-plane wide pieces. The legs are flush with the sides of the benchtop and contain dog holes so they can support long boards.



Veritas 05A01.01

www.leevalley.com

Price: \$995
Length: 72¾ in.
Width: 26 in.
Height: 35 in.
Weight: 187 lb.
Wood: Maple
Editors' score: 6.8

Opinions differed sharply on this bench, with nearly half the editors picking it as best value while others considered it overpriced. The most debated feature was the twin-screw tail vise—a Veritas exclusive. Proponents cited its lack of racking and ability to clamp a 15½-in.-wide board between the guides, and proclaimed it the best end vise on any

bench. Skeptics called it weird, stiff, and jerky. The vise arrived unable to turn using one handle. Shop manager John White spent a few hours trying to tune it up and eventually reached a compromise between operating and not being too slack. The troubleshooting details in the manual suggest that our experience is not unique.

The center tool tray impressed some editors, but the design may be responsible for the bench being dished by 0.016 in. around the center. The dogs come with slip-on plastic tool protectors, but these prevented the dogs from being lowered less than an inch above the bench and must be removed when planing thinner

stock. Finally, the shiny wipe-clean finish attracted some editors, but others wondered how it would look after a few years of use with no easy way to renew it. More than any other bench, this is probably one to try before you buy; you'll love it or leave it.



Wide clamping ability. The large distance between the guides in the tail vise allow wide boards to be clamped securely.