

Get serious about getting sharp

MAKE IT QUICK AND CONVENIENT AND YOU WON'T HESITATE

BY MATT KENNEY

DEDICATED SPACE

Make your sharpening area large enough to ensure that sharpening equipment and other accessories can fit on top, and remain there permanently.



FLATTENING AND GRINDING AREA

WORK AND STORAGE AREA

HONING AREA

I have used hand tools for as long as I've made furniture, and I quickly learned the importance of keeping them sharp—nothing is more frustrating and unproductive than a dull tool. But I faced a major difficulty because I lacked a convenient space for sharpening.

I dreaded the hassle of gathering my sharpening gear, heading into the house—so I could be near the sink—and setting up the kitchen island as a sharpening station. Packing up my stuff afterward and cleaning up the mess were also frustrating and time-consuming.

As a result, many of my tools stayed dull and nearly unusable.

That changed when I decided to give sharpening its rightful place in my shop. By creating a dedicated space where everything is set up and ready to use, I am always just minutes from finely sharpened tools.

Consider the four key sharpening steps

Before designing a permanent sharpening station, I took some time to think about my sharpening technique, how I could improve it, and what equipment I would need.

There are three basic procedures to sharpen edge tools like plane blades and chisels: honing and polishing the backs, grinding primary bevels, and honing secondary bevels. And for woodworkers like myself, who use waterstones, there's a fourth—flattening the stones, which requires water.

Although I don't perform each task every time I sharpen, I knew I wanted a station that would allow me to move quickly between all four steps, and

Build a suitable surface...

Countertop laminate is smooth, waterproof, and durable and makes an ideal surface for laying out sharpening stones and other gear.

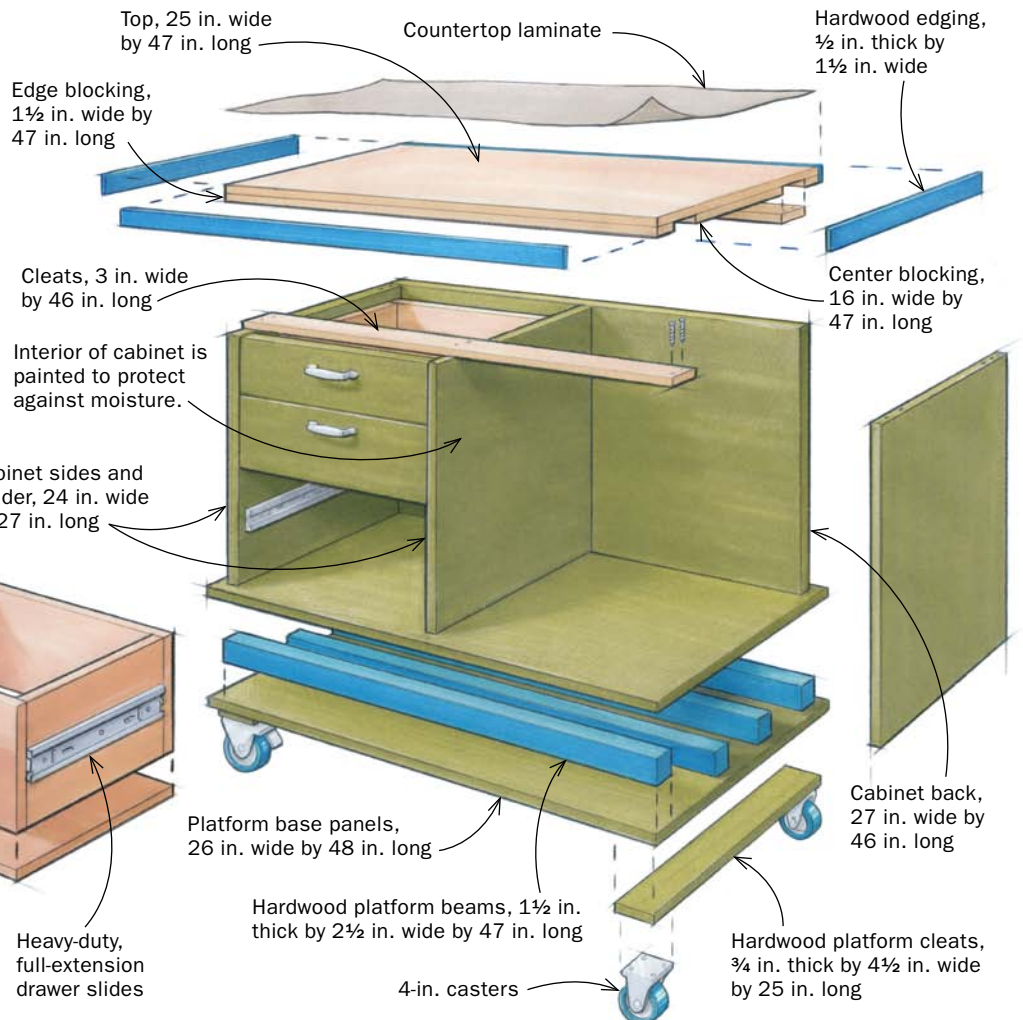


Laminate is an excellent choice. Use dowels to line up the laminate before affixing it in place with contact cement.



... or an entire workstation

Kenney recently built this mobile cabinet with a sturdy surface and plenty of storage.



Note: All cabinet parts are made from 3/4-in.-thick ultra-lightweight MDF, except the top and bottom panels of the platform base, which are 1/2 in. thick.

Apply shellac to drawer box to protect against moisture.

False drawer front

Drawers are glued and screwed together.

Heavy-duty, full-extension drawer slides

Just add water

To flatten waterstones, keep water close by. It comes in handy for other shop tasks, too.



Think small. Plastic containers offer easy access to water, and can be kept on a benchtop or stored in a cabinet.



Or go big. If you have access to a water supply and waste pipes, install a utility sink.

No grinder? No problem

A granite slab can replace a grinder for sharpening bevels, and also works for flattening and polishing.

Size your slab properly. Grinding will be quicker on a stone that holds at least three different grits of sandpaper simultaneously.



A grinder can't do this. The slab is an ideal spot to flatten the backs of plane blades or other edge tools.



Add a guide for angle grinding. A honing guide paired with sandpaper and granite makes it easy to grind new primary bevels.

that would have places store all my sharpening gear.

I managed to kill three birds with one stone by building a mobile sharpening station with a flat and durable work surface and a convenient place to store all of my gear. And, since water is essential for me, I installed a utility sink next to the cabinet. Of course, not everyone is lucky enough to have easily accessible water sources in their shop. Those without a sink can store water in a Tupperware bin or empty jug (for another take on ways to store and use water, see *Methods of Work*, p. 16).

The sharpening station has plenty of room on top to spread out my gear, and six drawers below to store everything. It sits on a heavy-duty, mobile platform—similar to the torsion-box design for shop furniture built by John White (See “Choosing and Using Casters,” *FWW* #190)—designed to handle the daily rigors of shop abuse. Together, the unit is waterproof, mess-proof, and solid.

Setup enhances technique

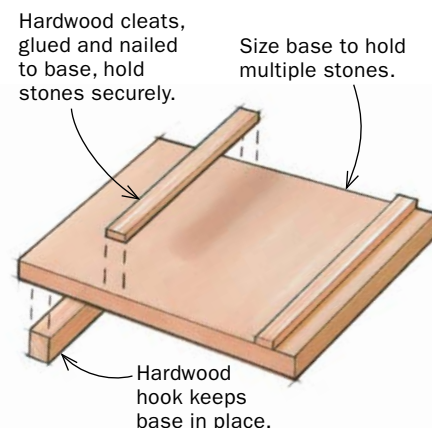
Having a dedicated station allowed me to refine my sharpening technique.

Grinding bevels is one example. When I started woodworking, I never reground them because I lacked a bench grinder. Then I learned to regrind bevels using a honing jig and sandpaper that I stuck to my tablesaw—a workable but messy

Build a honing hook



Repurpose a few cutoffs. Thin strips of hardwood attached to a piece of MDF hold sharpening stones securely. A piece of shelf liner keeps the jig from sliding.



system. Now, with a large and dedicated work surface at my disposal, I purchased a slab of granite at a local stone yard. It sits prominently on the right side of the cabinet, with a rubber mat beneath it to hold it in place. At roughly 12 in. wide by 20 in. long, the granite is wide enough to accommodate three separate grits of sandpaper at once—a quick and simple way of grinding that is easy to clean up. Of course, if you prefer to use a bench grinder, you can just as easily clamp one to the cabinet's top instead.

My sharpening technique has also benefitted from having a source of water next to the cabinet. I need it to flatten my 4,000- and 8,000-grit waterstones, which I use to hone secondary bevels. It's a messy task I used to avoid. Not any more—now I do it every time I use them, so my stones are always ready and require less time to flatten.

To hold my waterstones in place, I built a small bench hook out of the MDF cutoffs and added a few solid-wood cleats on its surface. It sits on my station permanently, always ready for touching up my plane blades and chisels.

And when it's time to clean up, the drawers store all of my sharpening gear—making it easy to find what I need, whether it's a honing guide, paper towels, or a bit of oil to prevent rust. □

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A separate spot for honing. Leave space on the top for polishing secondary bevels—one of the most frequent tasks in keeping hand tools sharp.

Be smart about storage



At the ready. Organize sharpening equipment to quickly move between different tasks.