Pocket-hole joinery is fast and strong

LEARN HOW TO HIDE THE HOLES, AND THE REST IS EASY

BY MARK EDMUNDSON

ocket-hole joinery provides real advantages for beginning woodworkers and veterans alike. The first benefit is the relatively low cost of the tools, with the most basic jig and clamp set priced under \$75. Second, pocket-hole joinery is easy to learn. If you can place a clamp and pull the trigger on a drill, you can start joining wood with pocket screws. The third advantage is speed. Pieces go together so quickly with this joint that it will redefine what you're able to build within a limited time. Last, if the joint is to be glued, there is no need to wait for the glue to dry to keep going with assembly.

None of this would matter if the joints weren't also strong. Luckily, pocket-hole joinery has that covered, too. The joint won't come

apart without a good

A special excerpt from Pocket Hole Joinery by Mark Edmundson (The Taunton Press, 2014). For more tips and techniques, plus eight complete furniture projects, buy the book at Taunton.com.

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GET A GOOD JIG

Edmundson recommends the Kreg Jig K4 Master System, at roughly \$140 online. It includes the jig, the drill and driver bits, and a good face clamp.

For more tips on pocket-hole joinery, watch the video at

FineWoodworking.com/extras.

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Getting started

USE A PLATFORM TO SUPPORT LONG WORKPIECES





Build a base for the jig. To support long workpieces, build a platform from layers of plywood—a base below and two support tables on top. The support tables are equal to the thickness of the jig itself. The whole assembly can be quickly and easily clamped to a benchtop.



Drilling is fast and easy. Just make sure the jig and stop collar are set properly for your stock thickness.



Self-tapping threads drill through plug.



Notice how the stepped drill bit leaves a small plug of wood at the bottom of the smaller hole (left). That is critical, as it stops the screw from creeping sideways when it enters the mating piece of wood. The screw's self-tapping tip will drill its own pilot hole in most woods, and the pan-type head seats firmly in the stepped hole (right).

deal of force ... and without taking a fair amount of wood with it. Of course, the pocket hole itself is not pretty. So this joinery method is not appropriate for everything you make. Even if you can hide the holes, you might not want them lurking under an edge where hands might find them. I avoid situations where the screw cannot be hidden from view and the pocket hole has to be plugged. Gluing and trimming the plugs is more difficult and time-consuming than you'd imagine. They don't pare very well and the fit is not exactly tight. In the end, they don't look good.

Fortunately, I can almost always hide the holes: on the back or underside of pieces, on the wall side of a cabinet, behind an end cap, or inside a drawer opening, for example.

The basics

Like a toenail in carpentry, a pocket screw goes into the side of one board at an angle and then down into the board below. But the screw threads make these joints many times stronger than their nailed counterparts.

Before getting started, you have to buy a few pieces of equipment. First, you need a jig, which guides a stepped drill into the workpiece. The drill bit creates a "pocket" that lets the screw seat firmly in the top piece, and includes a stop collar that bumps against the jig to control drilling depth. Pocket screws have a self-tapping auger point that eliminates the need for a pilot hole in the lower workpiece. Occasionally, if the

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Where to use pocket screws



Clamp them flush. To keep the joints level, use a face clamp to align the frame parts when driving screws.

bottom piece is especially knotty or narrow, and thus prone to splitting, you will need to drill a pilot hole.

Last, you need some way to immobilize the pieces when you are screwing them together. A face clamp handles the situations where both pieces are lying flat, as when building a face frame (see photo, left). For right-angle joints I make a simple clamping jig (see photos, below).

If you're buying your first pocket-hole jig, my advice is to go with the Kreg Jig K4 Master System, at roughly \$140 online. This jig can be mounted both to the bench, for speed, and directly onto the workpiece, which is essential on big panels. It comes with everything you need to get started.

Don't let the workpiece move

Other than the look of the pocket holes themselves, the complaint most often heard with pocket-hole joinery is that pieces shift as they are joined. This occurs because the screw pulls the wood in the direction that it is driven.

The first key to preventing shift is clamping the workpieces firmly in place as you screw them together, either with the face clamp or bar clamps. The second key is to have the stop collar on the



How to clamp big panels. When building a cabinet, use a simple right-angle jig to support the big plywood pieces (above) while you attach lightweight bar clamps. Place a clamp at each screw hole to keep the parts from shifting (right).



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Use spacers to locate them. To keep vertical partitions from shifting as he screws them in, Edmundson uses horizontal drawer partitions as spacers at the top and bottom (left). He makes other spacers to locate the horizontal partitions (above).



Hide the holes. In this area, the drawer will hide the pocket holes. Apply the first vertical piece (stile), then the next row of rails, then another vertical, and so on.

drill bit set up properly. Notice in the drawing on p. 79 that the pocket hole does not go all the way through the top piece, but stops about 1/16 in. from the bottom edge. This last little piece of wood is important. It serves as a plug around the tip of the screw to keep it from wandering as the tip transfers from the vertical piece into the mating piece.

If all else fails, try pre-shifting the workpieces as you clamp them, offsetting them slightly away from the direction of the shift. The screw action will then pull them into alignment.

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DRAWERS, TOO

Easy drawer boxes with false fronts. Edmundson uses his right-angle clamping jig to hold the drawer parts for assembly (right). Then he attaches a false front to hide the screw holes at the front of the drawer box (below).



