

Stop Suffering for Your Craft



A veteran's tool choices make woodworking easier on the body

BY ART LIEBESKIND

I have been woodworking for more than three decades, since I was a comparative stripling of 42 years. Now I'm an old oak, and when I work in my shop for any length of time, muscles shriek and nerves buzz. My body tells me that certain tasks have grown more difficult.

If you want to work wood for decades to come, you'll need to find ways that are gentler on sinew and bone. Fortunately, the market these days is brimming with ergonomically friendly tools and accessories. This article highlights some of my favorites—tools that have helped keep woodworking fun and relatively pain-free.

Don't wait until you're old and sore to take advantage of these innovations. Make woodworking easier right now by eliminating many of the small, sometimes hidden, struggles in the workshop. You'll find sources for the tools on p. 83.

Art Liebeskind is a logistics consultant and woodworker in Baltimore, Md.

Get a better grip

Some woodworking tasks are just plain hard on your hands. I'm thinking especially of turning, as in driving screws; twisting, as in tightening clamps; and holding during assembly or while gripping a plane. Common aches and pains can magnify these difficulties, turning a simple task like driving a nail or planing a surface into an endurance test.

Recently I've been asking my wife to open beverage bottle caps. My wrist strength is not what it was and I am not even embarrassed. What did humble me, however, was the pliers marks on several of my parallel-jaw clamps. I just could not crank them tight enough by hand alone. Then I began



using foam-rubber grips that slip over the clamp handles. The grips let me tighten the jaws without pain or mechanical leverage. Some clamp makers now offer bigger, "grippier" handles.

Chisels also can be difficult to handle, especially those with slender, rounded grips. If you find a square or octagonal handle on a good chisel, buy it. If not, refit your chisels with larger handles that are well shaped for your grip.

For a better grip in all kinds of applications, some woodworkers like to use cotton gloves with a latex coating on the palms.

Saw on the pull stroke

The Japanese-type pullsaw was an exciting discovery for me even when I had lots of strength. The saw rewards a gentle grip and action with a cut that's smoother and more precise than a Western backsaw. The saws are relatively inexpensive, and there are a variety of blade types. The flexible blade with zero set is great alternative for cutting plugs and pegs flush to a surface, reducing time spent planing or sanding.



Gentler on the wrist. A Japanese-style saw cuts on the pull stroke and requires less force.

Sharpen by machine

Sharpening chisels and plane irons using a stone or sandpaper can be an exercise in suffering. The strokes are tiring and the grip—even with a honing guide—can be painful. This pain becomes a reason to postpone sharpening, which in turn causes more pain and danger from using dull tools. A dry-abrasive horizontal sharpener, which I purchased a year or so ago, rescued me from all of that. Its slow speed and controlled angles let me sharpen and hone a chisel or a plane blade in less than three minutes.



The quick way to a keen edge. Sharpening can wear out the muscles and joints in your hand with repeated strokes that call for firm pressure and an awkward grip. A horizontal sharpening machine eases the process dramatically.

Scrape with less effort

A sharp card scraper removes wood smoothly and quickly with great control. But I came late to hand-scraping and frankly too late to comfortably hold and flex a scraper by hand enough to get good shavings. The Lee Valley card-scraper holder (bottom) makes it simple and painless to scrape a wood surface. Another real arm-saver is the heavy scraping plane (not shown), versions of which are made by Lie-Nielsen and Lee Valley. Properly sharpened and tuned, it saves hours of hand- or random-orbit sanding.



HARD

Two thumbs down. Scraping takes a toll. The process puts pressure on thumbs and fingers to flex the scraper for a decent cut.



EASY

Better than just scraping by. A scraper holder maintains a constant bow in the tool so your fingers don't have to, allowing for a much more relaxed grip.



Power tools can prevent pain

Cordless power drivers are a godsend to the woodworker with arthritis in the hands and wrists. Their use as a drill is obvious, but their real gift is allowing you to drive screws without pain. With current advances in batteries and ergonomics, a lightweight 12-volt model can handle almost any drilling task.

Even more powerful are the cordless impact drivers that effortlessly “melt” large screws into hardwood. I recently used one to install a new deck surface, a job in which driving the screws by hand would have been impossible.

A small but powerful trim router that can be held with one hand is much easier to use than a full-size router in roundover or hinge-setting operations, for example. The Bosch Colt router has become a mainstay in my shop for profiling the edges of already assembled cases and drawers. It is not only quite powerful, but it's also ergonomically designed for one-handed use. Fitted with a flush-trimming bit, it saves much hand-scraping and planing when trimming edge-banding on plywood.



One for drilling, one for driving. The combination of a cordless drill and an impact driver can save you lots of grief.



One-handed routing. For light-duty tasks such as mortising for a hinge, a lightweight router is much easier on hands and wrists.

Make the work easier on your eyes

Little numbers are hard to see. A dial caliper is an excellent tool, but even the best gauges have tiny numerals that can be hard to read. A caliper with a large digital readout makes measuring easier on the eyes.

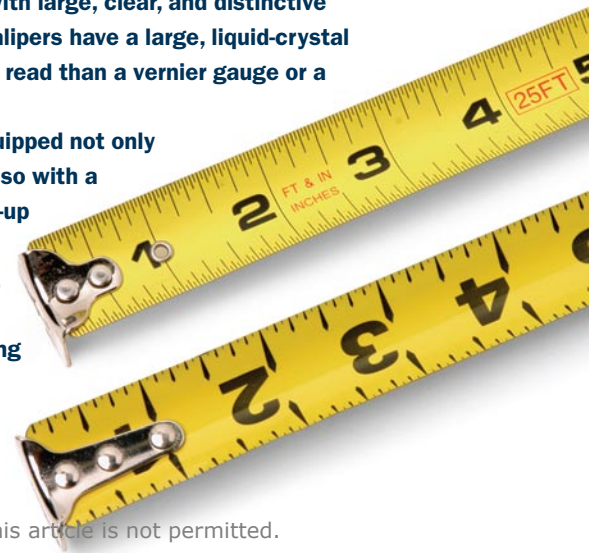
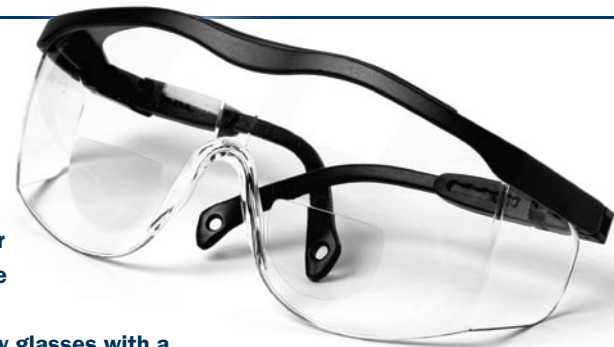


As we grow older, many of us need corrective lenses to read a ruler or see a layout line. There are other tools that can help you see what you're doing.

Safety goggles or safety glasses with a magnifying insert act as tiny bifocals that allow you to read the fractional increments on a ruler or place a drill hole accurately. At the same time, of course, they protect your eyes from flying particles.

Look for measuring tapes with large, clear, and distinctive markings. Electronic digital calipers have a large, liquid-crystal readout that is much easier to read than a vernier gauge or a $\frac{1}{64}$ -in. increment on a ruler.

Use a desk lamp that is equipped not only with an articulated light but also with a magnifying lens for easy close-up work. These lamps, as well as the magnifying safety glasses, are useful for inspecting the progress made while sharpening edge tools.



Save your back

I won't belabor back braces and proper lifting procedures to avoid damaging your back. Let's focus on the stuff that is just too heavy to lift, even if you once could bench-press 250 lb. A good friend, partner, or strong spouse is the best tool ever invented to save your back. Get one and treat him or her well. Remember, this helper plays a dual role: He or she can also be blamed for any errors in judgment.

A small scissor-lift hydraulic table (prices start at \$220) can lift equipment or cabinet assemblies from 5 in. off the floor to bench or machine-table height. It's also great for loading or unloading a pickup truck. This device makes a superb assembly table: It can position the work at proper height to minimize stretching and awkward reaches.

An anti-fatigue floor mat is great. Your feet and back will be even more grateful if you keep a padded stool near the bench. Many tasks, such as chopping dovetail waste or wiping finish on small parts, lend themselves well to working from a seated position. Look for a stool that's adjustable so you can set it at your optimum working height.



A little pick-me-up. A scissor-lift cart lifts heavy materials to bench height, and makes a multilevel work surface.

Try an upright shop vacuum

For the last several years, the shop cleanup routine involved tedious broom action and a loud call to my beloved spouse to come hold the dust pan. A canister-type shop vacuum can reduce that nuisance, particularly if it has a long enough wand to allow an upright stance. Better still for me was a "Shop Sweep" from Shop-Vac. This machine is kind of a super upright vacuum with a huge bag. It sweeps up chips, nails, coins, and small careless children—all without my bending down. My wife has not been called to help with cleanup since we bought the Shop Sweep. (Some of you will not consider this progress, but your significant other will.)



Clean floors without stooping. For Liebeskind, a heavy-duty upright vacuum is much easier to use than a canister vacuum or a broom and dustpan.

SOURCES OF SUPPLY

CLAMP-HANDLE GRIPS
www.rockler.com

BIFOCAL SAFETY GLASSES
www.woodcraft.com

JAPANESE PULLSAWS
www.japanwoodworker.com

**CARD-SCRAPER HOLDER,
HORIZONTAL SHARPENING SYSTEM**
www.leevalley.com

DIGITAL CALIPER
www.woodworker.com

SCISSOR-LIFT TABLE
www.jettools.com
(click on "material handling")

Other items available at home centers.