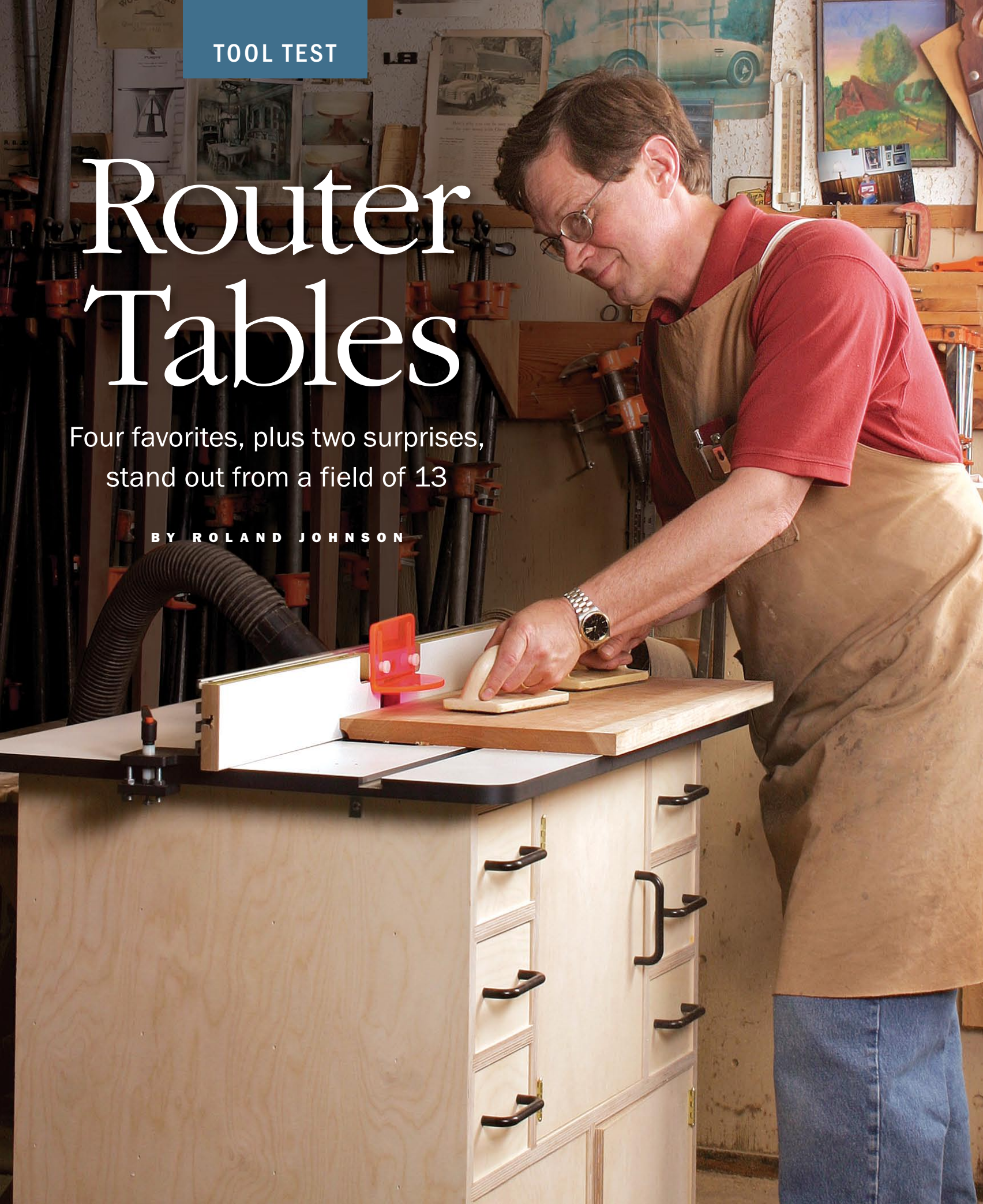


TOOL TEST

Router Tables

Four favorites, plus two surprises,
stand out from a field of 13

BY ROLAND JOHNSON



Routers have become one of the most useful power tools in the woodshop. Mounted in a table, the router becomes a mini-shaper that easily can make small moldings and joints, work with short stock, safely raise panels for doors, and pattern rout (shape wood using a template that rides along a bearing-guided bit). Most bit manufacturers recommend using large panel-raising bits or molding bits only in a table-mounted router because the bite a large bit takes makes it dangerous to use in a handheld router.

I evaluated 13 router tables for the sturdiness of their tables and fences, dust collection, and ease of operation and setup. All will do the jobs listed. Six stood out as exceptional, and are discussed in greater depth.

Tabletops must be flat and strong

The tops of router tables should be rigid enough to stay flat, strong enough to anchor the fence, and large enough to support panels and wide stock. Three materials are commonly used for tops, and two are very reliable. Phenolic-plastic tops can be relatively thin yet extremely rigid. Steel or cast iron make stout tabletops.

Medium-density fiberboard (MDF) can make a good top, especially when covered with a plastic laminate. But the MDF should be at least an inch thick, or reinforced with steel or aluminum, to resist sagging. I checked all of the tabletops for flatness, and the only tops that sagged were made of MDF. Covering both sides with plastic laminate reduces the chance of warping. Check any MDF top before purchasing or immediately upon delivery to verify that the top is flat.

How flat is flat enough? It depends. If you use your router table to make smaller, flexible moldings, hold-downs will make the stock conform to the table and all will be well. If you do rigid work, such as raised-panel doors, the routed profile will reflect the table's sag. As a practical matter, I think a sag of greater than 0.030 in. is a problem.

In most cases, the router is fitted to the table via a removable plate that rests in the tabletop. The plate adjusts flush to the top with screws or shims. The screws were easier to use, but since you level the plate with the top at the initial setup only, I didn't give much weight to this detail. Unless you have a very odd router, all of these tables will work with your existing router. I tried them out with my Porter-Cable 890, which adjusts up and down with a T-wrench inserted through the base.

Fences guide work, collect dust, and mount accessories

The best of the fences adjust easily, hold position, lock in place quickly, and can accommodate sacrificial faces. Most incorporate T-tracks, making possible the use of track-mounted accessories such as hold-downs, featherboards, stops, or shopmade jigs.

Many of the fences have separate infeed and outfeed faces, so the opening can be adjusted for any size router bit. Most of the faces are replaced easily, so they can be run into a spinning bit to create a zero-clearance fence that minimizes chipping of the workpiece.



Three things count with router tables: tables, fences, and bases. The table must be flat, the base stout, and the fence sturdy and able to support jigs and hold-downs.

The Freud and Grizzly have infeed and outfeed fences that can be adjusted independently with a thumbwheel to provide an offset for jointing. All of the fences provide for dust collection.





Cabinet bases provide storage and dust collection

Above all, a router-table base must offer stability. An enclosed cabinet is a real plus. The base not only provides storage, but helps reduce the noise level and offers superior dust collection. Routers are messy machines that create volumes of fine and coarse shavings. Fine dust is pretty easy to collect with a basic fence-mounted dust collector. Some heavy chips fall below the fence but are collected easily from an enclosed base.

Open bases, in turn, don't do much to control dust and debris. If chips aren't captured by the fence-mounted dust collector, they will end up on the floor.

Roland Johnson is a contributing editor.

Router tables at a glance

MODEL AND SOURCE	PRICE	FENCE	TOP	COMMENTS
OPEN-BASE TABLES				
Bosch RA1200 www.boschtools.com	\$350	Cast-aluminum construction accommodates dust collection, guard, and hold-down; MDF infeed and outfeed faces; no T-tracks	1 $\frac{3}{16}$ -in. MDF; plastic laminate, both sides	Convenient paddle switch; folding base affords mobility but lacks the rigidity of fixed bases
Freud PKG0026 www.freud-tools.com	\$400	Cast-aluminum construction with separately adjustable plastic-laminated MDF infeed and outfeed fences; no T-tracks	1-in. MDF; plastic laminate, one side; raw MDF edges	Price includes Freud FT2000E router; base flexes during use; table sagged 0.025 in.
Grizzly G0528 www.grizzly.com	\$335	Two-piece aluminum; infeed and outfeed fences adjust independently; T-track, front; functional hold-downs	$\frac{3}{4}$ -in. cast iron and aluminum; forward table slides	Only sliding table in the survey; router mounts with difficulty
 Hart Design 46603C w/Vortex cabinet www.hartvilletool.com	\$330	One-piece aluminum; T-tracks, front, back, and top	1 $\frac{1}{16}$ -in. MDF; plastic laminate, both sides	Scales allow easy fence positioning; Vortex cabinet offers good dust collection; sturdy base; T-tracks running side to side and front to back; table sagged 0.028 in.
Hawk 940-0050 RouterShop www.rbiwoodtools.com	\$900	Two-piece aluminum, fixed (see comments); T-track, front only	$\frac{1}{4}$ -in. steel	Back of table (and router) tilts to 90°; router adjusts to fence or lower table with screw-driven carriage
 JessEm 03140 www.jessem.com	\$530	One-piece aluminum with phenolic faces; T-tracks, front, back, and center	$\frac{3}{4}$ -in. phenolic	Well-designed and -executed table; sturdy, open base
MLCS 9593 www.mlcswoodworking.com	\$350	Cast iron with aluminum faces; T-tracks, front and back; simple, effective hold-downs	$\frac{3}{4}$ -in. cast iron	Router mounts with difficulty; 4-in. port allows full-scale dust collection
Rockler 22344 table with 68834 stand www.rockler.com	\$245	One-piece aluminum with adjustable MDF faces	1 $\frac{1}{16}$ -in. MDF; plastic laminate, both sides	An entry-level table with a sturdy steel base; table sagged 0.050 in.
Rousseau Model 3550 www.rousseauco.com	\$360	Three-piece cast base with birch-plywood infeed and outfeed faces; no T-track	1 $\frac{3}{16}$ -in. MDF; plastic laminate, both sides	Good table with a useful, spring-loaded hold-down
CABINET-BASE TABLES				
 Bench Dog 40-037 ProTop Complete www.benchdog.com	\$380	One-piece aluminum; replaceable MDF face; toolless adjustment; T-tracks, front and back	1 $\frac{1}{16}$ -in. MDF; plastic laminate, both sides	Aluminum table edge with miter-gauge slot and T-track; easy-to-assemble cabinet helps with dust, but storage is limited
CMT Industrio Routing System www.cmtusa.com	\$500	One-piece aluminum; high-density plastic faces; T-tracks, front, back, and top; replaceable zero-clearance insert	$\frac{3}{4}$ -in. phenolic	Scales hard to read and their screws impede fence movement; aluminum table edge with miter-gauge track and T-track; open cabinet no help with dust collection
Eagle America Model RT4000 www.eagle-america.com	\$500	Two-piece aluminum with plastic face; T-tracks, top, front, and back; fence moved under load	1 $\frac{1}{16}$ -in. MDF; plastic laminate, both sides	Easy-to-assemble cabinet; upper doors help dust collection; router compartment has limited storage; table sagged 0.040 in.
 Woodhaven 8244K www.woodhaven.com	\$740	One-piece aluminum with sliding plastic-laminate-covered MDF faces; T-tracks, top and back	$\frac{3}{4}$ -in. phenolic	Sturdy birch-plywood base; small router compartment helps dust collection without impeding storage

The best open-base tables

AUTHOR'S
BEST OVERALL
CHOICE



JessEm has a top-notch fence and insert

Model 03140 Rout-R-Table Price: \$530; Mite-R-Slide: \$300

The JessEm is my favorite. The quality is top notch. The anodized aluminum base is exceptionally sturdy and fits together with a welcome precision.

The fence, one of the two best in the survey, is mounted securely with brackets at both edges of the table. Large, easy-to-reach knobs lock it to the brackets. Scales on the brackets make it a breeze to place the fence precisely. The fence also has a scale to provide accurate jig, stop, or hold-down placement. The optional Mite-R-Slide miter gauge provides for accurate crosscuts without requiring the fence to be mounted perfectly parallel to the miter slot.

Optional miter gauge slides on bearings. Its replaceable face is ideal for making tearout-free cope-and-stick joints.



Scale helps with setups. Identical scales on both sides of the table are easy to read from above.



AUTHOR'S
BEST VALUE
CHOICE



Hart Design features effective dust collection

Model 46603C Deluxe router-table system and Vortex cabinet Price: \$330

I found the Hart Design router table to be the value leader of the open-base tables.

The fence can be locked securely and easily with a pair of over-center levers.

Sacrificial fence faces can be added easily. The fence travels in a pair of T-track aluminum extrusions located in the plastic-laminated MDF tabletop with scales that zero at the front miter slot, providing a means of accurately locating the fence during repeat setups.

The Vortex cabinet does a very good job of dust collection, and the large paddle power switch offers ease and safety for the operator. A sturdy steel base rounds out the package. The Hart table did sag 0.028 in. in the month I had it (less than $\frac{1}{32}$ in.). While that was disappointing, I liked the table well enough to overlook this defect.

A well-designed, sturdy fence. A highly visible scale and a quick, solid fence lock help make the Hart table a good choice.



The best cabinet-base tables



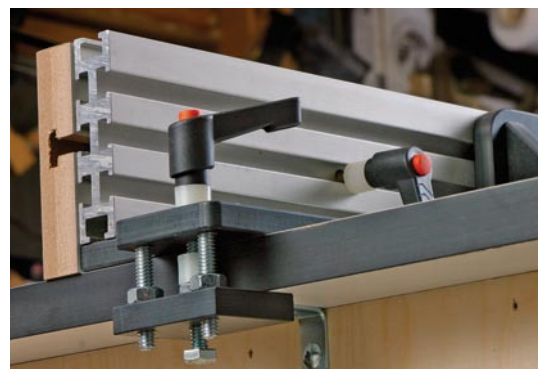
Woodhaven's cabinet makes the difference

Model 8244K Price: \$740



Woodhaven's router cabinet is a paragon of versatility. The two stacks of drawers that flank the centered router cabinet provide great storage for bits, wrenches, and the myriad pieces related to router operation. The lower divided cabinet offers great router storage and helps make the cabinet very sturdy. The easy-to-operate and versatile fence (three rows of T-tracks on the aluminum-back fence) and a phenolic top add up to a great package that gets my vote for best cabinet-style router table.

The small cupboard housing the router motor aids in dust collection without wasting storage space. Base parts come precut and are accurate, but it takes several hours to glue and fasten together all the drawers and cabinet pieces, hang the doors, and install the hardware and top.



T-tracks make for a versatile fence. Commonly available T-track hardware can secure jigs to the Woodhaven fence in a number of spots.



Bench Dog's cabinet base is a bargain

Model 40-037 ProTop Complete

Base price: \$380, plus \$70 for 40-008 Cab-Loc levelers and \$75 for drawers



Bench Dog combines an easy-to-assemble cabinet with a versatile fence to create a first-class router table. Bench Dog's fence ties with JessEm for ease of use and versatility. The $\frac{3}{4}$ -in.-thick sacrificial faces can be replaced easily with commonly available MDF or shop lumber, and the fence operation is toolless. Rocker-arm clamps hold the fence securely, and T-tracks at the top front and top back of the aluminum fence provide for jigs and featherboards.

An aluminum extrusion extends the length of the plastic-laminated-MDF table's front edge. It features both a T-track and a miter-gauge slot, providing a versatile location for jigs, featherboards, or a miter gauge. The miter slot can be fine-tuned for accurate fitting of miter-gauge bars.

Solid lockdown. Rocker-arm clamps and ridges along the base keep the Bench Dog fence from drifting during use. The front of the table is a combination miter-gauge slot and T-track.



Two tables with innovative features

Both of these tables function well as standard router tables. What sets them apart are particular features that no other table offers.

Hawk's tilting table adds versatility

Model 940-0050 Routershop Price: \$900



The only router table in the test with a tilt top, the Routershop, in essence, turns your router into a small tilt-arbor shaper. With the router tilted, common bits can cut a wide variety of shapes. Set it at 90° to the steel table, and you've got a mortiser. A threaded rod-and-crank handle moves the router up and down when the table is tilted, or front to back when the table is flat. The stationary fence mounts to the front of the table with T-handled screws. A T-track located at the top of the fairly short fence sections allows use of jigs or hold-downs.

A sturdy steel base supports the whole assembly—an interesting concept, but expensive for an open-base router table. For a woodworker who wants to increase the variety of molding profiles he can produce, or wants the basis for a horizontal mortiser, this table might be worth the money.



Tilting table adds options. This router table can become a slot mortiser, or standard bits can be used at various angles to produce unique moldings. A crank moves a carriage and the router up or down, and when the table is horizontal, front to back.

Grizzly's sliding table is useful for raised panels

Model G0528 Price: \$335



The Grizzly is the only router table with a sliding top. The front portion of the table slides, with its edge 5½ in. from the center of the bit. This could be a useful feature when machining larger raised panels. The individually adjustable aluminum infeed and outfeed fences allow jointing operations, and have a single T-track on the fence and miter-gauge faces. T-tracks on the table and the included crosscut fence provide mounts for jigs. Simple and effective hold-downs are located on the regular fence and crosscut fence.

Although this table has a lot going for it, I found the bracket mounts for the router difficult to use. If I owned this table, I'd buy a dedicated router base and leave it attached. The cast-iron top tilts up and locks for access when mounting the router base, but its weight calls for caution.

It could be a finger-pincher if the user were to drop the top.



Sliding table carries the workpiece. Clamped by the miter gauge, this panel can be fed at an even rate for smoother cuts.