How Many Routers Does Your Shop Need?

For most people, the answer is three

BY JEFF MILLER

Doing a quick inventory of my shop recently, I discovered that over the years I have accumulated nine routers. Nine! How did that happen? Does the average woodworker really need that many routers?

The short answer, happily, is no. Still, the argument for having more than one router is powerful. You can leave one in your router table and have another for handheld work. Second, adding a router with particular strengths can make certain tasks much more convenient, whether you're cutting edge profiles with large, heavy bits or routing shallow hinge mortises on narrow stock.

There are many router types available, but which ones do you really need? I'll suggest two approaches. Either one will tackle a wide range of work, but the first is kinder to your wallet.

For good value, start with a combo kit

A combination router kit (we reviewed them in "Router Combo Kits," *FWW* #173), is a very cost-effective way of setting up your shop for both table and handheld routing. The kit comes with one router motor and two bases—one fixed, one plunge. This lets you mount the fixed base in a table and keep the other for topside use.

I recommend putting the fixed base in the table, mainly because the plunge base is so much more versatile for topside use. Second, when the router is mounted in the table, it's often easier to adjust bit height with the fixed base than it is with

1 One in a router table

Whenever possible, you should do your routing on a table. Moving the workpiece against a solid fence and table is simply more accurate than moving the router.

2 One that can plunge

There are lots of tasks that can't be done on a router table, such as most stopped cuts, and cuts in the middle of large surfaces. For those jobs you'll need a handheld router, and a powerful plunge router will handle them all.

3 And one in the hand

While you can live without a small "trim" router, the truth is that many routing tasks are light ones, and this compact tool acts like an extension of your arm.

Kill two birds with one combo kit

A combination kit will handle both table and topside routing and costs much less than two separate routers. So you'll have plenty of money left over for a good-quality trim router. Also called laminate trimmers, these small, simple, one-handed routers are easy to set up and even easier to use.

One in the table

The fixed base lives in the table. *Attach the base to the router-table insert (left). Look for a combination kit that offers through-the-table height adjustment (center). The table's flat surface and square fence simplify dozens of tasks, like routing precisely along a narrow edge (right).*

Photos, except where noted: Steve Scott; product shots: Michael Pekovich

One that can plunge

The plunge base is best for handheld routing. *The motor switches quickly between the two bases for topside use (above). The plunge function lets you lower the bit safely into the work while the tool is running. This allows you to make stopped cuts like the dadoes at right, and do them in several passes.*

the plunge. This makes for an economical choice—you can find a good combination kit for around $200, saving $50 to $100 or more compared with the purchase of two individual routers of a similar size and power.

To the combo kit, add a trim router. Although its limited horsepower confines it to lighter-duty tasks, it is much easier to control than a larger router. It is also limited to working with ¼-in.-shank bits, but its lower torque and one-handed size are perfect for hinge mortising, inlay, and small edge profiles like chamfers and roundovers. It's great for any task that doesn't call for large bits, deep cuts, or lots of horsepower.

With this package of routers, you can tackle almost everything.

Stepping up

The combination kit is a great value, but it does force a few compromises. For one, switching one motor between table and topside is much less convenient than having two individual routers. Second, in most combination kits, the motor is limited to 2 hp or 2¼ hp. If you cut deep mortises with your router or work with large shaping or panel-raising bits, you should consider investing in more horsepower. A heavy-

And one in the hand

Hinge mortises and much more. *The easily balanced trim router is perfect for this application, which requires delicate control and good visibility. You'll also love it for flush-trimming face frames, inlay work, and when you need to chamfer or round over all the edges on a project.*

Stand-alone routers are a heavy-duty upgrade

A router combo kit will cover your table- and heldheld routing needs, but not as well as two separate routers will. A router designed for table use makes above-the-table bit changes and height adjustments easier, and also collects dust efficiently. A dedicated plunge router offers better height and plunge adjustments. And both offer bigger motors for smoother cuts.

Large router designed for router tables

Trim router
for detail work

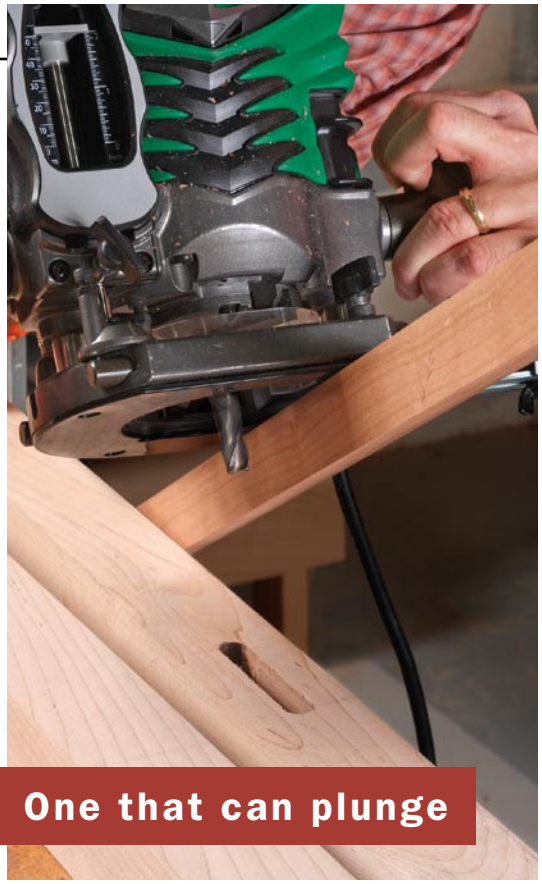
Large plunge router
for handheld routing

One job to do. *A dedicated table router stays put, ready for action at a moment's notice.*

One in the table

Easy adjustments. *This Triton router (TRC001) was a favorite in past reviews of table-mounted routers. It includes an automatic spindle lock that makes above-the-table bit changes a breeze.*

Bigger bits. *In addition to more convenient features, a heavy-duty table router easily removes a lot of stock safely in one pass, as with this panel-raising bit.*



One that can plunge

Serious power. *These maple bed posts require a mortise ½ in. wide and 1¼ in. deep. Tasks like this call for serious routing power, and extra heft helps too.*

duty plunge router like those reviewed in *FWW* #214 ("Heavy-Duty Plunge Routers") will typically come with better features than the plunge base in a combo kit. You'll get height adjustment that is easier and more accurate, a smoother plunge mechanism, and a handle-mounted power switch. Also, the 3¼ hp motor will provide smooth, effortless action on the heaviest cuts.

As another step up from the combination-kit approach, I'd recommend getting a router built to be installed in a table. Routers of this type—all of which come with a through-the-table lift—were reviewed in *FWW* #189 ("Routers for Router Tables"). This lets your router table become a dedicated shop tool with excellent controls, like a tablesaw, instead of something you have to fuss with for 15 minutes just so you can spend 30 seconds cutting an edge.

Again, add a trim router to this combination and you're set to tackle the full range of routing tasks. □

Jeff Miller (furnituremaking.com) builds furniture and teaches woodworking in Chicago.

Still not satisfied? There's always room for more

Even with three versatile routers in your shop, there are some situations when it can be nice to have another router or two dedicated to specific tasks. Many woodworkers, especially pros, settle into patterns of work, and do certain jobs over and over.

A fixed-base router makes a great fourth router because it's less expensive and very simple to operate. The assembly typically has a low center of gravity and handles easily. The motor also slides into the base in a way that makes depth adjustment simple.

Add a fixed-base router. *An extra router can be dedicated to a single task. Miller keeps an offset base on one of his routers for better balance when molding edges.*

In my case, I often cut edge profiles with larger bits. So I keep a fixed-base router set up with an extrawide base that has a handle to help prevent tipping. I don't use it for anything else.

Or suppose that you regularly cut dovetails with a jig or cut sliding dovetails with an edge guide. You might want to have a router set up with a straight bit to clear the waste and another one set up with the dovetail bit to cut the socket.

A router for every router bit? Now that's excessive.

If one is good, two are better. *You will simplify tasks that require two bits, like sliding dovetails, by using a pair of routers. In this setup, with the router base riding a fence, the routers should be identical.*