



Three ways to clamp a drawer

SUPPORT THE SIDES WELL, AND YOU CAN PLANE THEM TO FIT WITHOUT WORRY

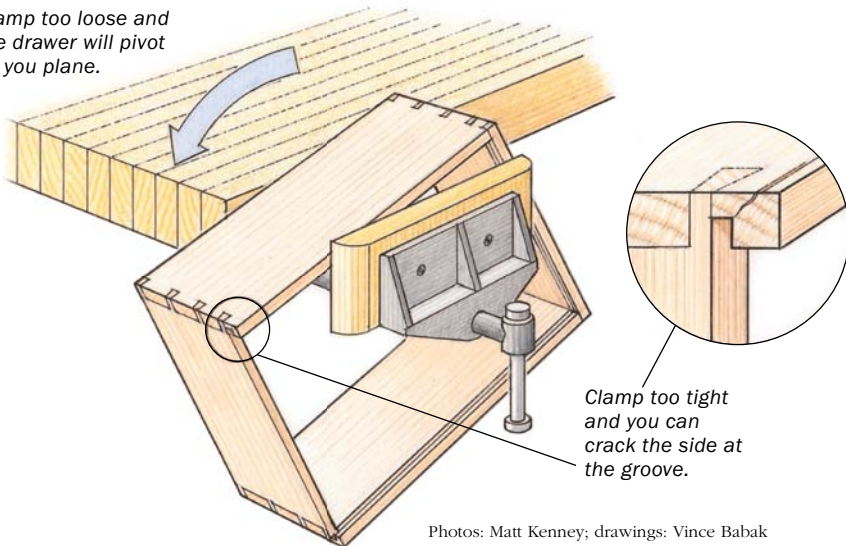
BY MATT KENNEY



PROBLEM Why it's hard to plane a drawer

If you clamp the side tightly between the vise jaw and the benchtop, you risk cracking the side at the drawer-bottom groove. But if you don't clamp it tightly enough, the drawer won't hold still.

Clamp too loose and the drawer will pivot as you plane.

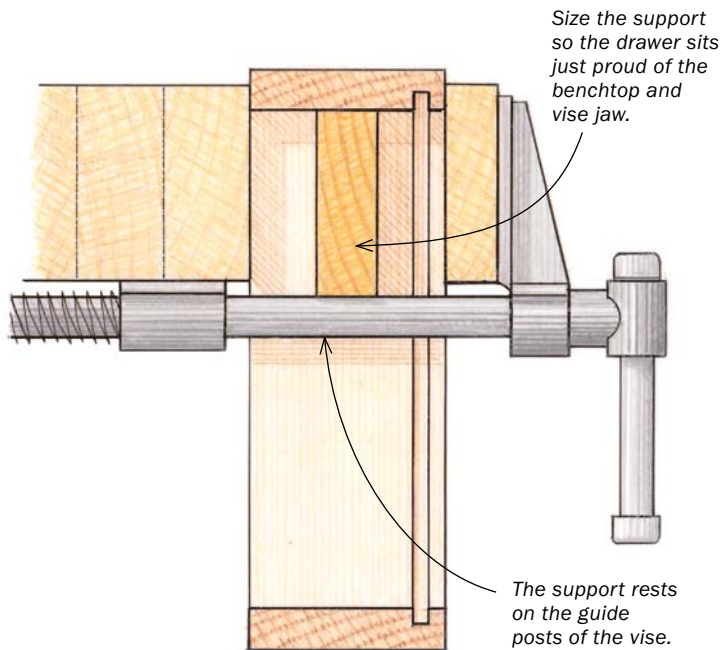


Clamp too tight and you can crack the side at the groove.

Solution 1

Cast-iron vise: Use the guide posts

To hold a drawer in a cast-iron vise, place a scrap board on the guide posts. The board supports the drawer from underneath, allowing you to use less clamping pressure.



One support is enough. Make it $\frac{3}{4}$ in. to 1 in. thick, and short enough to fit inside the drawer. It should also be wide enough to project the drawer side slightly above the top of the jaw and benchtop but still low enough for clamping.



Fitting a drawer to its pocket is a precision operation, which is why the handplane is the go-to tool for the job. With it you can remove material from the sides methodically to achieve a perfect fit. However, to take whisper-thin shavings from a drawer side, you need to secure the drawer in a bench vise. With traditional drawers, where the back is narrower than the front, that task can be tricky.

If the vise clamps only on the drawer front, the drawer really isn't stable enough to plane. If you clamp the drawer side between the vise jaw and benchtop, you'll need a lot of pressure to hold the drawer steady enough for planing, and you run the risk of cracking the side at the bottom groove. However, if you back off on the clamping pressure, the drawer won't be supported enough and will pivot down as you plane it.

Fortunately, there are some simple ways to improve your vise's ability to clamp a drawer for planing, no matter what type of vise you have. The trick is to support the drawer from below. Doing so prevents it from pivoting down and allows you to grip the work with no danger of snapping the side.

A cast-iron vise attached to the front of the bench has a single screw and two guide posts to help control racking. Chris Gochnour uses those posts



Clamp the drawer. Push down on the drawer as you tighten the vise (above). With solid contact between the drawer side and support board, the drawer won't give way under planing pressure (left). You can take confident and quick passes, fitting the drawer more quickly.

Solution 2

Twin-screw vise: Use two sticks

A twin-screw vise doesn't have guide posts, but you can use its thick jaw to your advantage. Place a pair of boards across the benchtop and vise jaw to provide a solid foundation for planing.



as a foundation for supporting the drawer. I use a twin-screw vise on my bench, and it doesn't have guide posts. To support the drawer from beneath, I pass two narrow pieces of hardwood under the drawer side. On one end the sticks rest on the benchtop, and on the other end they rest on the vise jaw.

Gochmour also has a great technique for a planing a drawer without a vise. Why would you want to do that? Well, if you have several drawers to fit—such as for a chest of drawers or



Span the gap. The sticks run from the benchtop through the drawer, and onto the vise jaw (above). For big drawers, angle the sticks to get support under a larger area of the drawer side (left).

Online Extra

To learn a step-by-step method for getting drawers to fit perfectly, go to FineWoodworking.com/extras.

jewelry cabinet—you can quickly move from one drawer to the next with this technique. It's just a matter of locking and unlocking a wedge between two supports. Using a vise, you would need to adjust the jaw when you switched between drawers of different height. □

Matt Kenney is a senior editor at Fine Woodworking.

Solution 3

You don't even need a vise

Use this trick when you need to plane graduated drawers in a case piece—they're the same depth but different heights. Rather than adjust a vise in and out to accommodate the height, use wedged supports to clamp the drawers.



Clamp supports to the top. Align one support with the end of the bench. Place the second on the bench and slide the drawer over both. Push the second support against the back of the drawer and clamp one end to the bench.



Wedge the supports against the drawer. Slightly longer than the distance between the supports, the wedge forces them against the inside of the drawer.

