Specialty handplanes

SEVEN FAVORITE TOOLS FROM A LIFETIME COLLECTION

BY ALLAN BREED

When I was in my teens, while many of my contemporaries were buying and fixing up cars, I was busy buying and fixing up antique furniture. I was also fascinated by the tools used to make the pieces I bought. One of the first planes I acquired was given to me by a man in town who repaired old furniture. He called it a bridge-builder's plane. (I didn't try too hard to figure out exactly which part of a bridge you might plane with this 32-in.-long, 9½-lb. wooden monster.) I took it home and attempted to plane the side of an ash log I had hewn with another of my early finds, a broadaxe. Of course the plane did not work. Given my inexperience at the time and the number of factors needed to make a plane work, it would have been a miracle if it had. I did finally manage to get the bridge-builder's plane to function, and I still have it; it works beautifully to flatten my workbenches (and it's pictured above).

I think planes are the most complex hand tools in the shop, there being numerous gremlins in each one that can prevent them from working as they should. Once these are exorcised, though, the handplane is also the most rewarding of tools to use, and over the decades I've amassed quite a few. I'll describe a handful of the less common ones here. I have certain favorites that I've used so often that I would truly mourn their loss.

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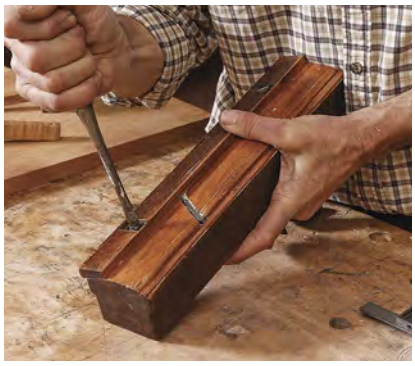
PANEL-RAISING PLANE

Early in my career I worked at Carter's antique shop in Portsmouth, N.H., which specialized in old tools. I traded a bronze router plane to Scotty Carter, the shop owner, for this early panel-raising plane, which creates a concave border and makes a really beautiful fielded panel. I've used this plane, made by John Taber in the late 18th or early 19th century, to make lots of paneled walls, window shutters, and doors. The fence allows for borders of different widths, up to about 1½ in. The blade holds a good edge and doesn't clog up. Some will advocate for using both left and right models, but I clean up any tearout with a modified hollowing plane. I also have a scraper I ground to the same profile, and I can use that to clean up tearout as well. This may be the most valuable plane I own, but I would never sell it because it just works so well and makes such a pretty panel.



Preparing for the panel. *The fence on Breed's antique panel-raising plane, set with two screws, controls the width of the border the plane cuts around a panel. Before cutting cross-grain, Breed scribes the edge of the border with a cutting gauge.*

Plow around the field. *Breed's plane cuts a slightly concave border to create a handsome fielded panel.*

Photos, except where noted: Jonathan Binzen; this page (top): Allan Breed

SHOPMADE PLANES

Of necessity, I have had to make quite a few planes over the years. When I have, it's usually because I need to reproduce some molding while repairing or reproducing early furniture. I start by making the body of the plane. I'll use other planes and/or scrapers to shape the sole. The slot for the blade and wedge I will either drill and chisel out or create by sandwiching outside pieces around a central core.

For blades in these planes I have often modified old Stanley 45 or 55 blades or used irons from old bench planes. I'll slide the blade blank into the new plane, wedge it tight, and trace the profile of the plane's sole onto the blade. Then I remove the blade and grind it to shape. It can be a long process, but once the plane is working, the molding I need can be made quickly. I leave most of these planes pretty rough, just concentrating on getting them to work. But I've spent the extra time on a few to make them more presentable. I usually write the date on them and what the molding was for. I've made planes for two different sizes of Chippendale table legs, including the plane shown here, made to reproduce a Portsmouth tea table. I will admit to having once spent more than a day making a plane in order to produce a 7-in. length of molding; then again, the missing molding on that 350-year-old piece of furniture had been made with a plane, so for a good restoration it had to be done!

Online Extra

To see Al Breed using his favorite specialty planes, go to **FineWoodworking.com/270.**

Leg maker. *Breed built this plane to re-create the legs of a Chippendale table. To shape the contours on the plane's sole, he roughed out the shape on the tablesaw, then refined it with a scratch stock he ground from an old sawblade.*

Outrigger coving. *Another plane Breed made himself, this one with an outrigger fence, allowed him to plow channels into the stiles of a reproduction 17th-century chest.*

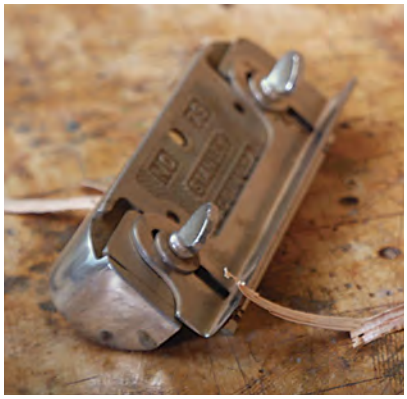
STANLEY 45

I was about 17 when I bought this early version of the Stanley 45 along with a boxwood plough plane from an old cabinetmaker in Troy, N.H. I got them for $7.50 each. This plane went through a fire in the seller's shop, but escaped with only some damage to the wooden knobs. I never restored them, because they feel fine and I like the story they tell. The plane runs well and has a depth stop and nickers which I use from time to time. It also has a floral design in the casting that I love. The 45 was designed as a multi-purpose plane, of course, but I use it almost exclusively for making grooves in drawer sides. I usually have it set up with a 3/16-in.-wide blade, though I have a number of other straight blades for cutting wider grooves.

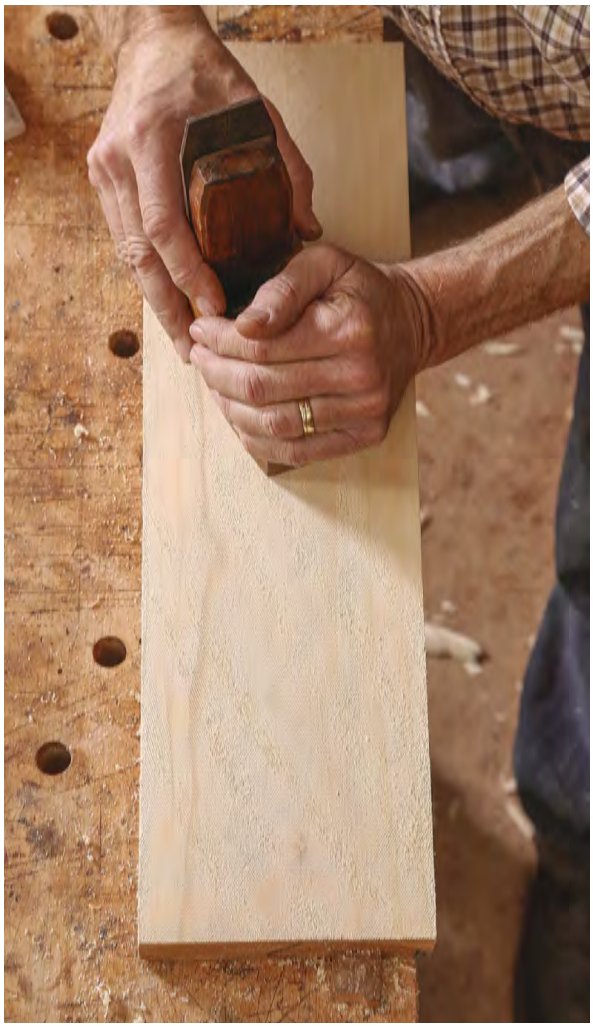
One-trick pony? *The Stanley 45 combination plane, with its slew of different cutters, was famously intended to take the place of a whole rack of specialty planes. Ironically, Breed uses his for just one task: plowing grooves for drawer bottoms.*

STANLEY 79 SIDE RABBET PLANE

I don't use this plane often, but when I need it, I need it: It's the only thing that expands the width of a groove or dado with ease. Once in a while, when I dry-fit a frame-and-panel door or cabinet, I'll find that the panel grooves don't meet perfectly. In that case I pull out the side rabbet plane and widen one groove to enable the panel to slide into place. Having a blade at each end, this plane can be run in either direction, which is essential, because due to its wide throat it only really works when cutting with the grain. The depth stop is handy, making sure you don't dig into the bottom of the groove. I bought this plane from the estate of my early mentor, Vincent Cerbone, who restored furniture at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

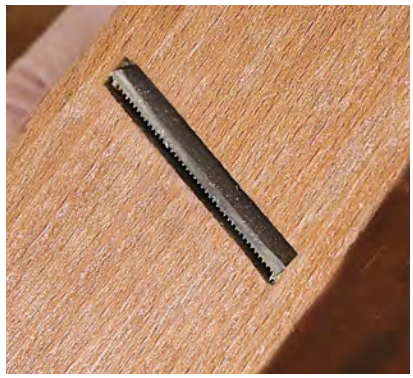


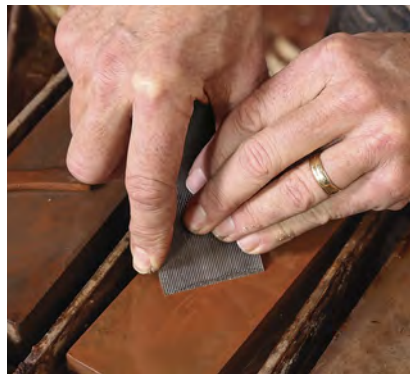
Groove improver. *The Stanley 79 side rabbet plane comes in handy for fixing misaligned grooves. The plane, which cuts just the cheek of the rabbet, has two blades so it can be used in either direction.*



TOOTHING PLANE

I probably bought this plane at Carter's Antiques too. Carter's had lots of tools imported from England, and part of my job when I worked there was to unpack the boxes of tools when the shipments arrived—quite a thrill for a woodworker! Lots of wonderful stuff passed through my hands, even if I only possessed it for a few minutes. I bought some tools that I still use every day, and lots of others that enthralled me at the time but that I later traded for something more useful. I use this plane, with its serrated iron and almost vertical bedding, to prepare a solid-wood substrate to receive veneer. You tooth on one diagonal and then the other. Toothing the ground creates more glue surface, keeps the veneer from sliding, and provides pathways for excess glue to escape when you are hammer veneering. I size the toothed ground with hide glue. If you can't find a toothing plane you can use an old worn Japanese sawblade and drag it across the substrate in a crisscross pattern and get the same result.

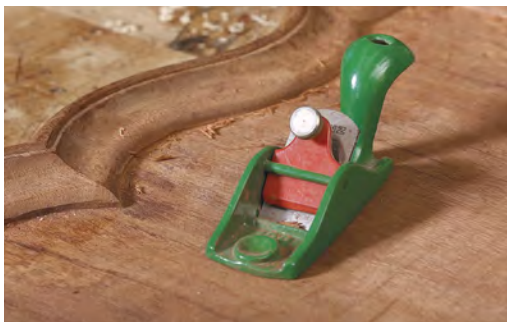


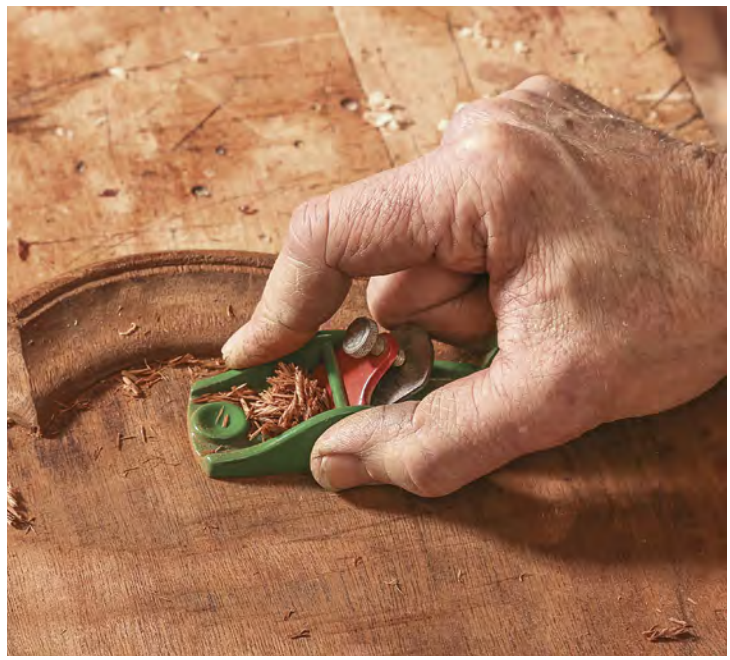


Crisscrossed contours. *The toothing plane is used to texture a solid-wood substrate to prepare it for hammer veneering. After making a series of passes on one diagonal axis, Breed does another series skewed the other way. With its nearly vertical bedding angle, the toothing plane produces more of a scraping than a slicing action. The toothed iron is sharpened like a normal one on the stone.*

KUNZ SKUNK PLANE

Except for the cast skunk-tail handle at the back, which allows for an easier grip, this is really no different from any small plane. I tend to use it to level hard-to-reach areas on tabletops, especially ones where the perimeter molding is worked from the solid like on piecrust or tea tables. I'll get as close as I can with the skunk plane and then scrape what the plane won't reach.





Edgework with a skunk plane. *Breed uses his Kunz skunk plane for flattening areas hard to reach with a larger plane. The skunk-tail handle makes it a bit easier to maneuver.*