

Is a Sliding Tablesaw Right for You?

These premium machines are loaded with features that add precision and versatility

BY DANIEL CHAFFIN

Sliding tablesaws have long been a fixture in production cabinet shops, where they're invaluable because they handle sheet goods so exceedingly well. But sliders aren't just for sheet goods; they handle solid wood excellently too. On a slider, the workpiece rests on the sliding table and cutting the stock is simply a matter of pushing the sliding table through the cut. There's no wrestling with the workpiece during the cut regardless of its size or the condition of its edges, and accuracy is not influenced by technique; rather, accuracy is a product of the precision built into the saw. You can also lock the sliding table in place and push boards by hand, if you prefer.

In spite of their versatility, efficiency, precision, and safety, sliding tablesaws have often been considered out of the question for smaller shops because of their high price and large footprint. But with more manufacturers offering them, there are now several entry-level models that can be had for around the cost of a high-end cabinet saw, and sliders are increasingly finding their way into smaller pro shops and some home shops as well.

For years, a sliding tablesaw was the heart of my pro shop, and I got pretty familiar with the advantages and disadvantages of this machine. So while I can't decide if a slider's right for you, I'll try to make your choice a little clearer.



Handle plywood easily

Sliders—even small ones—handle sheet goods much more efficiently than cabinet saws. The sliding table bears the entire weight of the workpiece, so pushing it through the cut is as easy as pushing the table. With the crosscut fence in the front position, Chaffin quickly cleans up a board's long edge (opposite) before squaring an end (below). He can also use the crosscut fence and rip fence together in a cut called a Euro Rip (bottom), in which the rip fence serves as a width stop.



Most are beautifully built

Although there are exceptions, sliders are typically built to very high standards. They are large, heavy machines, and for their sliding components to work properly, the design and manufacture must be spot on. As a result, these machines tend to deliver incredible precision, smooth action, and dependable repeatability. Heavy, durable fences and stops ensure that settings and adjustments do not drift over time.

There's also a staggering list of options available with some sliding saws, allowing you to customize the machine to your space and intended use. One example is a scoring blade, a tiny blade

spinning ahead of the main blade to lightly score the underside of the panel, helping eliminate tearout, particularly on plywood. Some manufacturers offer the option of combining multiple machines—jointer, planer, shaper, saw—into one cabinet, somewhat offsetting the slider's enormous footprint.

Other options include digital scales, alternate locations for on/off switches, motorized adjustments, crosscut fence length, sliding table length, motor size, and even the size of the arbor. You'll pay for these, but they can customize the tool to a specific shop and user.

Solid stock, too

Sliding tablesaws aren't one-trick ponies stuck breaking down sheet goods. The fences and sliding table are just as effective for handling solid wood.

Straight-line rips. Pushing against a removable wedge, called a shoe, at the leading end of the slider, Chaffin rips the edge of rough stock straight, reducing his time at the jointer.



Upper-class undercut. An otherwise unwieldy and dangerous task, beveling the bottom of a tabletop, is quick and clean on a sliding tablesaw. Just angle the blade and push.



edges as it does for plywood, greatly speeding up milling. How many passes—not to mention how much effort—does it take to straighten the edge of an 8-ft. board on your jointer? With a slider, your only limit is the length of the sliding table's stroke.

On the fences—A slider has two fences, a rip fence and a crosscut fence. The rip fence is the same as on a cabinet saw, but with a couple of perks that you may not find on that machine. For one, on many sliding tablesaws you can slide the rip fence toward you, ahead of the blade, and use it as a crosscut stop. The fence can also be flipped facedown, making its top edge the bearing edge. This is helpful because the top is much narrower than the face, allowing you to use a push stick close to the fence when ripping thin stock without jamming your knuckles.

Because the crosscut fence attaches to the sliding table, it benefits from that mechanism's accuracy and smoothness, making crosscuts a snap on pieces large and small, whether the fence is set to make a 90° crosscut or a mitered one.

Design contributes to safer use

In terms of safety, sliding tablesaws have a number of advantages over ordinary tablesaws. For rips using the sliding table, the risk

Efficiency and ease of use

This high quality of machining directly translates to a machine that's efficient and, for many tasks, a breeze to use.

Big boards a small concern—Take, for instance, sheet goods, which can be a handful on a cabinet saw. Imagine cutting a 4x8 sheet down to 4x7 on a cabinet saw; it would be difficult if not dangerous. With sliders, all you do is put the sheet in place and push. The sliding table guides the work past the blade in a perfectly straight path. The slider is also great for cleaning up unreliable factory edges, even the long ones, before breaking down the rest of a sheet.

Cutting a long edge straight with the sliding table is called a straight-line rip, and it works just as well for lumber with waney

of kickback is smaller compared with just pushing the board by hand. And whenever the sliding table is being used for a cut, the saw's design encourages the user to be in a safe position well to the left of the sawblade.

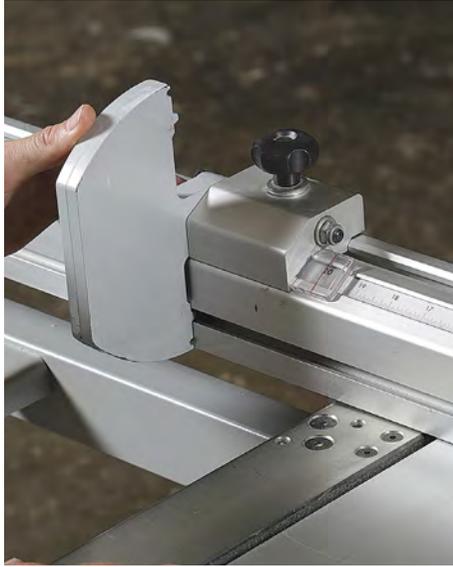
Additionally, I've been thankful for the automatic blade brake on sliders a number of times. The brake ensures that when the machine is switched off, the blade quickly stops. This significantly reduces the chance of the user coming in contact with a spinning blade when reaching for a freshly cut workpiece.

Sliding tablesaws also come equipped with riving knives (which are also standard issue on the newer cabinet saws), an important safety feature that helps eliminate dangerous kickback.

Versatile crosscuts

The slider's crosscut fence works like a crosscut sled on steroids.

Flip stop and a reliable scale. With its built-in flip stop, the crosscut fence operates like a smooth-sliding sled on a cabinet saw when cutting boards to length. Chaffin also finds the included scale very reliable, using it instead of a tape measure.



Stack 'em high. The slider's smooth and easy action lets you gang-cut pieces effortlessly. Here, Chaffin has the crosscut fence in the front position and is using the flip stop to register his pieces.



Big miters. The crosscut fence pivots, letting you make safe angled cuts on wide workpieces. For this cut Chaffin adjusted the fence to support the full length of the workpiece and again used the flip stop.

Some caveats before you buy

Buying such a high-tech saw is a big investment, not just in money but in space, too. While entry-level models are a little over \$3,000, comparable in price to high-end cabinet saws, that gulf can quickly widen with higher-end sliders, some of which cost north of \$20,000.

Space is a consideration, too. Sliding saws have an enormous footprint. Including the stroke of the sliding table, they can take up about four times more space than a cabinet saw with both a standard outfeed and side-feed support. Plus, if you get a slider with a long enough stroke to rip a full sheet of plywood, you will spend a fair amount of your shop time walking around the table to get to your perfectly dimensioned boards.

Although a slider's size, mass, and sliding capacity are ideal for big parts, some folks may find it a bit difficult to use for small parts. While a cabinet saw fitted with a shopmade crosscut sled

will handle a stack of small pieces with grace and efficiency, the slider when faced with the same task is precise but not terribly nimble. A well-made sliding table can be quite heavy, and despite the ultrasmooth sliding action, there's a lot of inertia. And you have to pull the table back to you after each cut.

If you decide that a slider will fit in your shop and your budget, there are still a few other issues to consider. Moving such a saw is a major operation requiring a battle plan and special equipment. While cabinet saws are heavy, sliding saws are on a completely different scale. The one in this shop weighs over a ton and to move it in we had to use a combination of an engine hoist, ramps, and some extensive dismantling. Smaller models can come in around 700 lb. For a cabinet saw, if you want to move it often, you just invest in a mobile base—not always an option with a slider. Initial setup and calibration of a slider can also be quite involved. They're complex machines that need to be set up

Fancy features

Little perks, including some custom choices, add up to big benefits.



MOVABLE RIP FENCE

Unlike most tablesaw fences, this slider's rip fence can slide back and lock, allowing Chaffin to use it as a stop for crosscuts.



CLEANER CUTS

This saw has a scoring blade, which is a small blade ahead of the main blade that lightly scores the underside of the panel, eliminating tearout. The scoring blade spins in the opposite direction from the main blade.



OPEN ACCESS

Blade changes are easier and access to the inside of the cabinet is greater because the sliding table can be moved out of the way, revealing a large opening into the machine.

for precision. Also, the instructions for many sliders are translated into English and can sometimes be unclear. And last, while sliding tablesaws are very easy to use once you're familiar with them, there is a learning curve.

Does it fit your work?

So let's say you can afford a slider, get it into your shop, and still have room to move. It's also important to consider the type of work you do. If you work with large boards and sheet goods and often work with production in mind, a sliding tablesaw could very well improve your workflow. It did for me. When I was producing built-ins and other large, standalone pieces, my slider was integral to the way I worked wood. So if you ever mull over buying one, don't just consider whether it will fit into your budget or shop; also think about whether it will fit the way you work. □

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DIGITAL POWER

Some sliders can be customized with digital gauges and motorized movements, including for blade height and angle. Here, the scale is measuring the distance from the rip fence to the blade.

Add a slider to your saw?

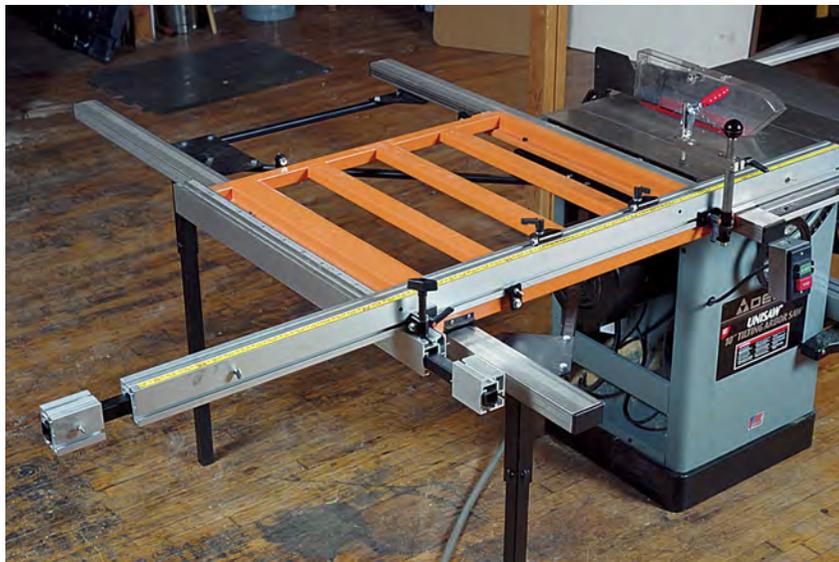
To get the benefits of a slider at a more modest cost in space and cash, you might consider adding an aftermarket sliding table to your current tablesaw. Add-on sliding-table attachments for cabinet saws are available from a number of manufacturers, including Exaktor, Grizzly, King Industrial, SawStop, and Shop Fox. Expect to spend about \$700 to \$1,500 for one.

These aftermarket units share a number of benefits found on traditional sliding saws. For one, there are two levels of safety. First, they keep you well to the left of the blade. Second, they help support long, heavy, and wide pieces, meaning you can focus more on the cut than on keeping a large board stable. Additionally, these accessories are capable of handling miters and crosscuts even on sizable stock—almost all can handle 4x8 sheets—aided by included stops. The add-on tables won't be able to handle ripping the 96-in. length of a sheet, however. And don't expect some of the bells and whistles that are available on true sliding tablesaws, like digital readouts. Still, if you get one of these aftermarket sliding tables your miter gauge and crosscut sled may end up collecting dust.

Aftermarket attachments all require meticulous installation and setup. For some you'll need to remove your saw's left extension wing before installing the sliding table. All involve bolting the slider to the saw. You'll almost certainly have to shorten the saw's rail, and possibly adjust the rip fence. Then there's alignment. To make these add-on sliding units perform as they should, you'll need to make sure they are level, coplanar, parallel, and square to your saw's table, blade, and fence.

Lastly, if you're in the market for one of these, consider your shop and the work you do. They all require more space than a traditional cabinet saw setup, so you need to account for that when buying one.

—Barry NM Dima



Suit it to your work. Some aftermarket sliding tables are larger than others. If you mostly work with sheet goods, consider a large table for more workpiece support.



Capable crosscutting. Paired with a stop, an aftermarket slider can handle crosscuts at any angle, including on larger panels.



Check compatibility. While most add-ons say they'll work with the bulk of cabinet saws, SawStop's Sliding Crosscut Table is designed only for SawStop saws. (It fits their cabinet and contractor's saws.)