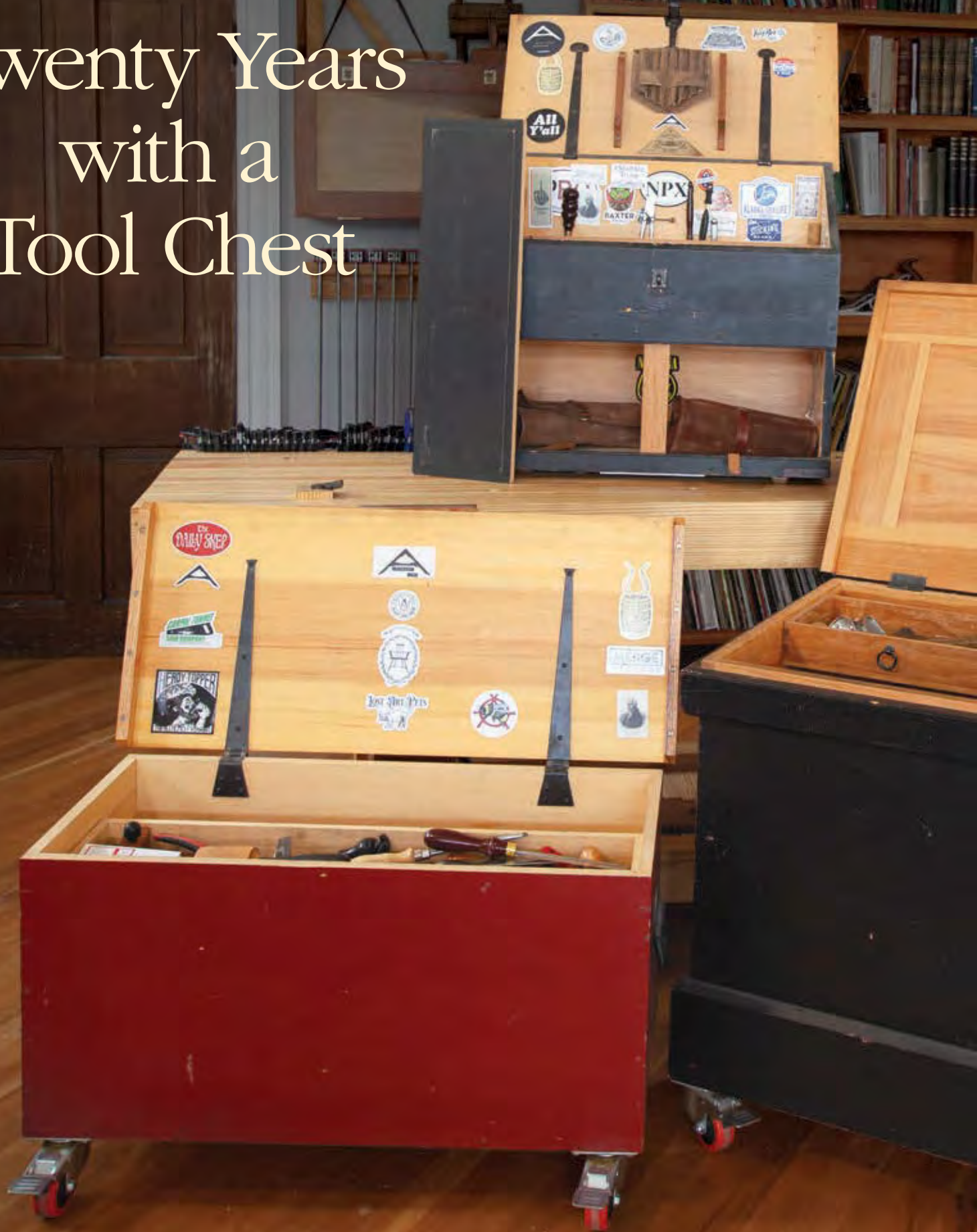



# Twenty Years with a Tool Chest





# A good tool chest can be a flexible way to store and protect hand tools

BY CHRISTOPHER SCHWARZ

While many woodworkers regard tool chests as antiquated or quaint, I have found that they can offer the perfect combination of protection, access, and flexibility for storing hand tools.

Fortunately, the simple and common forms of chests are far more useful than their fancy, inlaid cousins with French-fitted compartments. My chests are tools themselves, and I design them to be used for the long term. From its size to its mode of storage, a tool chest should aid your work, not hinder it, even when your work inevitably evolves. After decades using them, I've learned many of the advantages, and a handful of the disadvantages, of working out of tool chests. I've also learned how to stack the odds in my favor.

## Two main designs

I mostly work out of either a full-size floor chest or a Dutch tool chest. The former is time-consuming to build but holds more tools. It is also stronger. The floor chest's shell is typically dovetailed together and wrapped by skirt boards, which are also dovetailed. The bottom boards are nailed in place. Skids attached to the bottom let the chest slide easily if it has no casters. The lid has a dust seal. Inside, there are usually two or three dovetailed tool trays that slide forward and back. Sometimes there are tills for saws and molding planes.

The Dutch chest, being smaller and simpler, is easier to travel with and quicker to build. The chest sides are dovetailed at the bottom corners. The shelf is captured in a dado. The rest of the parts are nailed or screwed in place. The chest has a sliding lock on its fall-front. Historically, these chests didn't have many dividers or tool holders. Most had only one divider in the top compartment. Some had a drawer, either below the top compartment or attached at the base of the chest. Some chests are a little taller and have two lower compartments.

Despite their differences, the pros and cons of each, as well as my strategies for working out of them, are largely the same.

## Portability

If you take woodworking classes (or teach them), a tool chest is ideal for travel.

Whenever possible, I take the entire floor chest with me. This ensures I won't forget an essential tool. With heavy-duty locking

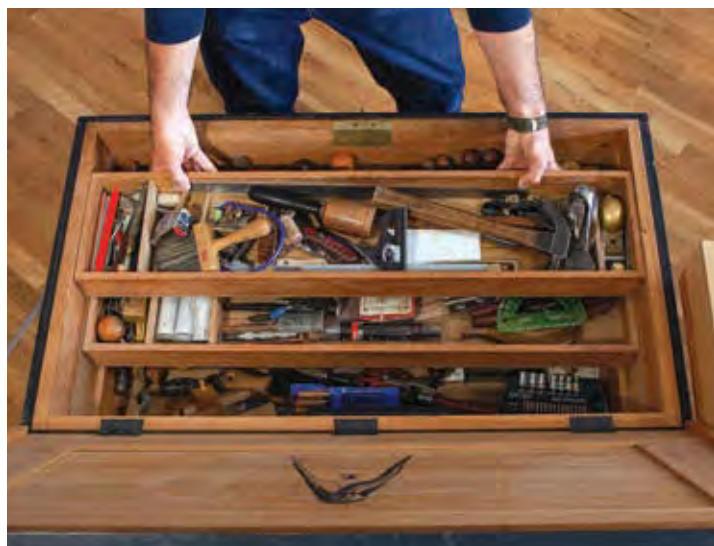


## Traditional floor chest

These chests are sized to fit a complete array of hand tools, from saws to chisels to molding planes, and are designed to keep storage flexible.



**Ready to roll.** A chest puts all your hand tools in one place, not spread out across a wall. And when the chest is on casters, you can roll it to the work, ensuring your tools are always close at hand. Schwarz relies on the flat frame-and-panel lid as a place to glue up panels (inset photo), knowing the surface won't introduce twist.



**Open trays that slide.** These tills allow you to store lots of tools in a small space, and because they slide it's easy to access any tool in the chest in one or two moves.



**Plenty of open storage below.** The standard size of a floor chest provides enough space for a good set of bench, joinery, and molding planes, plus plenty of the saws and other tools you'll need for furniture work.



## BIG AND STRONG

Overall dimensions, 24 in. wide  
by 24 in. tall by 40 in. long





# Dutch tool chest

Quick to build and great for travel, this chest holds the necessities, and then some.



**Built for travel.** A Dutch chest fits a surprising number of tools but still can be carried by one person, making it an excellent option for use in small shops, and for taking to woodworking classes and job sites. Just grab the handles, put the backboards against your chest, and go.

casters screwed to the bottom of the chest, it's a one-person job to roll the chest up a ramp into the back of my pickup truck. In fact, at about 40 in. long, it fits nicely between the wheel wells of any car.

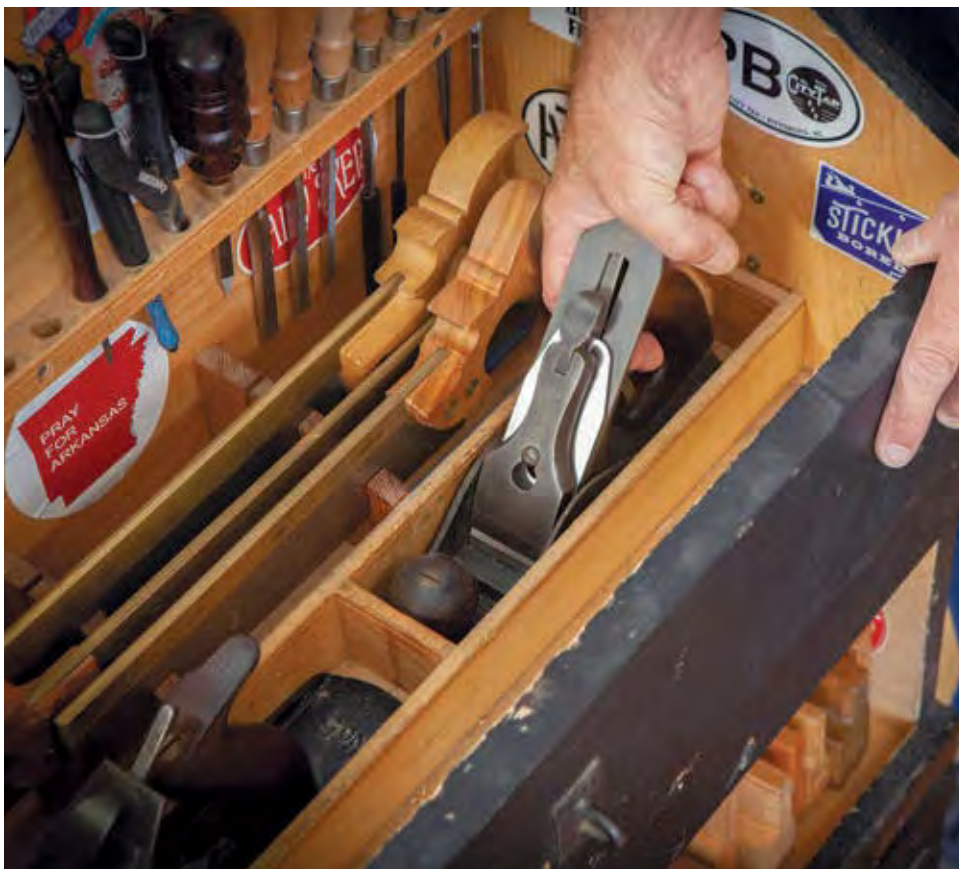
Even if I am just rolling it across the shop, the chest keeps my tools in one place, so I wander around less looking for them. Besides, the flat top of a chest is great for gluing up panels. I've used mine like this for years. I know the top is flat, so it won't twist a glue-up. Flat-top chests were also frequently used for handsawing.

When I don't need my entire tool kit, I take my Dutch chest, which still holds a surprising number of tools. It's so light-weight I can carry it alone even when it's fully loaded, jointer plane included.

Still, portability has downsides. If you can easily move your chest, so can thieves. In my neighborhood, however, a burglar is more likely to walk past a chest filled with hand tools to steal the cordless drill next to it. Regardless, I still lock up my tools, which leads to my next point.

## Physical protection

One big advantage of tool chests compared with open racks or pegboard is that a chest protects your tools from rust, rain, and casual borrowing. Tools that are protected by a chest can look like new after 100 years.

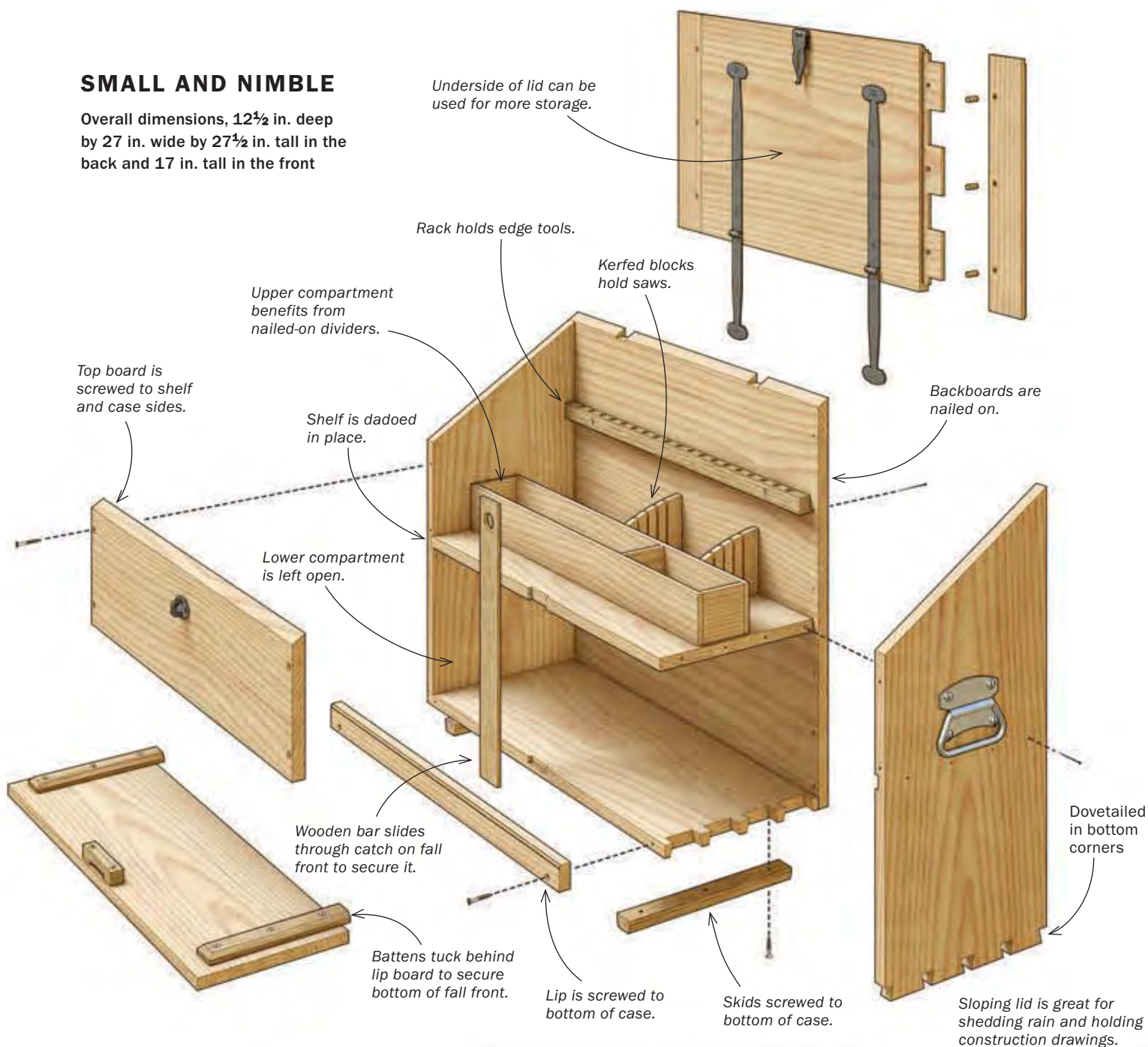


**Sized for storage.** With its removable front, the lower compartment of a standard Dutch tool chest allows you to store molding planes and other joinery planes so you can see their profiles (top), and even the underside of the lid makes for good storage space. The upper compartment is easily modified with simple racks and compartments.



## SMALL AND NIMBLE

Overall dimensions, 12½ in. deep by 27 in. wide by 27½ in. tall in the back and 17 in. tall in the front



Chests are ideal if your shop lacks HVAC; I've found the sealed environment protects tools from humidity in most climates. Unless you're in a high-humidity place like Hawaii or Florida, you probably won't need to go to extra lengths to ward off ambient moisture. Also, tools stored in a chest need a lot less dusting or vacuuming than those on open racks.

And though you hope it never happens, if your shop is damaged in a storm, a chest will protect your tools from the rain. In fact, the Dutch chest's slanted lid is designed to shed rain (among other things). A side benefit of that slanted lid is that it's great for displaying construction drawings.



FRONT VIEW



SIDE VIEW



# Straightforward storage

No matter the chest, keep tool spaces simple so your chest can evolve with your tools and interests.



**Nailed-in dividers for everyday tools.** To guarantee space for his most frequently used tools, like his block plane, Schwarz nails dividers into place. This makes them quick to install and a breeze to remove.



**Racks with holes and spacers.** A simple rack with holes holds and protects a variety of narrow tools. The tools are easy to move around and reorganize, too. Adding spacers between the rack and the chest carcass allows you to store wide tools, such as chisels and saws.

**Protect delicate edges.** With open trays and compartments, your tools can jostle around. To shield sharp edges from dings, Schwarz covers them. For example, he keeps his marking knife in a wine cork. Tool rolls also work.



**Safe as a kangaroo's pouch.** Like the racks, shopmade leather pouches offer durability and fast access. This one, sewn and riveted together using leather scraps, takes advantage of the open wall space on a Dutch tool chest.



If you work in a group shop, a closed chest lid—particularly one that's locked—reduces tool borrowing. Lastly, a chest's finite capacity also limits my tool greed. Most woodworkers don't need three jack planes, and a chest helps keep those urges in check.

## Versatile storage

On the whole, I prefer open storage, like trays and spacious compartments, so I rarely make a specialized holder for an individual tool. The fact that the tools touch one another horrifies some woodworkers, but open storage allows you to fit lots of tools in a small space. And they let you easily reorganize based on which tools are the most important at that moment. Just move them to the top tray, like in a traditional English chest, or to the front of the compartment, like in a Dutch tool chest with its open area below. Plus, with traditional trays, your tools are never hidden. No more opening 10 drawers to find the nail set.

Still, I don't want sharp, delicate edges getting dinged in these open trays. I protect these types of tools using tool rolls or wine cork, or I store them in a rack.

I use two types of racks, one with holes and one with spacers. A simple rack with  $\frac{1}{2}$ -in. holes drilled  $1\frac{1}{8}$  in. apart holds and protects awls, screwdrivers, cutting gauges,



and dividers without making it hard to reorganize them. A rack set away from the case side with spacers, also called a French rack, works great in a tool chest, allowing you to store tools such as chisels and saws.

For storing handplanes, most tool chests have an open well. A traditional floor chest is sized so there's enough space for a good set of bench, joinery, and molding planes. The lower compartment of a standard Dutch tool chest lets you store your molding and joinery planes so you can see their profiles. Note, though, that these areas don't have dividers or specially fitted compartments. Again, this allows you to reconfigure your tool set without ripping out a bunch of precisely made wooden walls that you constructed right before you bought that new shoulder plane.

Molding planes are usually stored vertically against the back wall of a floor chest with the help of a single divider, which is simply nailed to cleats, making it easily removable. Or the molding planes are stored in a compartment with the toe of the tool facing forward. Either configuration allows you to see the tool's profile with ease.

For storing larger saws, most people go overboard with custom-fitted holders for the handles. While some saws were stored that way in old chests, I prefer using blocks of wood on the floor of the chest that are kerfed to hold the sawblades.

## Divide with discretion

Admittedly, there are times when I do prefer dividers and dedicated tool holders. I make these for tools that I'll need no matter how my work changes in the future. In my Dutch tool chest, I have built dividers sized for a jack, a jointer, and a smoothing plane—core planes it's difficult to imagine working without. Still, these dividers are pine scraps pinned together without glue. That makes them easy to pry out and reconfigure should I take up knitting.

Also, sometimes it's easier to make tool holders out of leather than wood. If you own a utility knife, nail snips, and a hammer you have all the tools you need to rivet together simple leather tool holders. For example, I made a leather pouch for my block plane using scraps from a chair commission and copper rivets from a local store. □

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## Other forms

### FARMER'S TOOL CHEST

This simple chest is a nailed-together pine box with a lid. The bottom boards are nailed or screwed on. Casters are attached to the bottom of the chest to make it move easily. The interior can be completely open, though some chests have one or two sliding trays. The only seals against dust or rust are simple battens on the ends of the lid. A typical size is 15 in. deep by 36 in. wide by 17 in. high.



### GENT'S CHEST

These chests were designed to hold a few tools for home repair or hobby woodworking. They come in many configurations, from an inlaid and dovetailed box down to a nailed-together crate. Their common characteristic is they are too small to hold a full kit of hand tools for a furniture maker. A typical size is 12 in. deep by 15 in. wide by 12 in. high.



### SITE BOX

Commonly used for carpentry, briefcase-like tool chests were adopted by some woodworkers in the 20th century. This box held a couple saws, a couple planes, a brace and bits, and the other tools you might need to install cabinets in a customer's house. A typical size is 5½ in. deep by 26 in. wide by 15 in. high.