



Tune Up Your Belt Sander

Tips on improving the performance of this versatile shop tool

by Sven Hanson

Re-energize the drive wheel

To make the rubber grab the belt better, the author uses a tire-traction compound.

File it flat

You may be surprised to discover that your platen isn't flat.

Get a new one

Manufacturers sell replacement cork pads that are cut to size.

Throw it out

The author recommends replacing steel backing plates with graphite pads.

Give it a lube job

Front rollers should turn freely and sit parallel to the platen.

Remove the cover, and check the belt

Drive belts last a long time, but they do wear out.

To get the best, or even adequate performance, from a belt sander, it must have a flat platen, a straight-tracking belt and the proper abrasive. It will perform even better with an effective vacuum system.

When the pad area on the bottom of the sander has a twist or a high spot, one or two corners do all the work, leaving visible valleys in sanded areas. To check a used sander, or a new one before I buy it, I remove the metal friction plate and the soft pad beneath it, which is usually made of cork. I sight down the bottom as if I were sighting the sole of a handplane. The front and rear wheels should lie parallel to the platen, and the platen must be flat. I confirm this by checking the bottom with a straightedge (see the photo at right). I pay special attention to the diagonals and look for hollows or hills on the platen, which I level with a file.

Add a graphite pad

Graphite pads are far superior to the old steel-over-cork system that comes as a stock item on many sanders. The graphite pads replace the hard surface of the steel backer with a slick, spongy cloth. Graphite evens out the pressure against the workpiece and reduces friction. A graphite pad helps the sander run cooler and gives both the tool and the belt a longer life.

Klingspor (800-228-0000) and some woodworking suppliers sell graphite pads in a variety of sizes to fit different machines. They come with and without self-adhesive strips. For the best bargain, I cut pads for my belt sander from a roll of graphite made for a larger machine. I clamp a piece of graphite (without adhesive on the back) under the retainer bar and over the stock cork pad (see the top right photo). If the cork pad is worn down,



***Is it flat?** The author checks the platen of a belt sander with a straightedge. High spots should be filed off.*



***Graphite is cool.** This self-lubricating product reduces friction and makes the belt run more smoothly, reducing stress on the machine.*

it should also be replaced. The thicker the cork the better.

Enhance vacuum system

The belt sander cuts wood so effectively that it's often sanding loose sawdust instead of the work surface. Basic maintenance should include blowing the dust out of the motor housing and exhaust ports to keep the vacuum system clear of debris. Sometimes rougher grits create clogs of dust that I break loose with a soda straw or with two or three long pipe

cleaners twisted together.

When working in living spaces, I reduce dust output by attaching a vacuum cleaner to the sander with duct tape. I use naphtha later to remove the excess adhesive left by the tape.

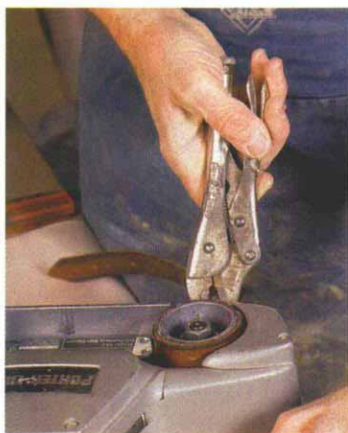
Big wheels keep on turnin'

Periodically, I remove the drive wheel and paint it with a tire-traction compound sold by hobby shops for model car racing (see the bottom photos). This stuff is a rubber re-plasti-

cizer that gives the drive wheel a better grip on the belt. A slipping drive wheel causes poor tracking, making the belt more likely to fill up with resin, overheating and burn the wood.

I regularly make sure the front wheel rolls freely and lubricate it according to the manufacturer's instructions. I also check the drive belt and the brushes periodically and replace them when necessary. □

Sven Hanson works wood in Albuquerque, N.M.



***Hold still.** An old leather belt and a pair of Vise-Grips hold the rubber drive wheel as the author backs off the axle nut (above). Tire-traction compound improves the grip (right).*

