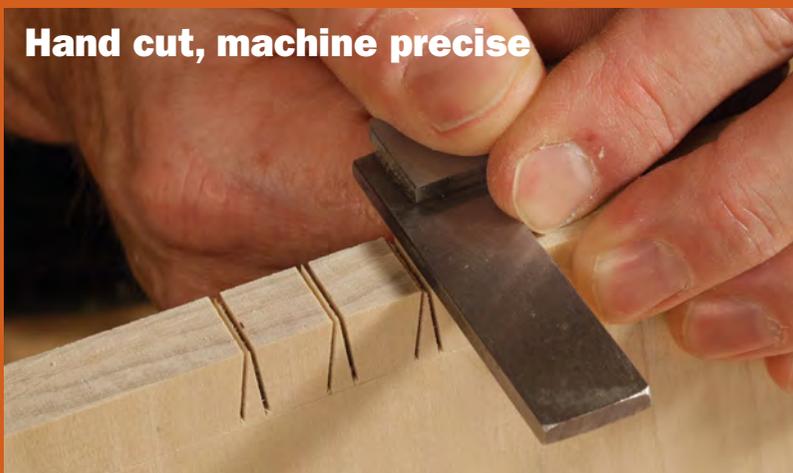




## Hand cut, machine precise



**Always cut tails square to the face.** The exact slope of the tail matters much less than cutting square to the face of the board. The guides use magnets or slots to hold your saw 90° to the workpiece, yielding reliable results that won't need paring. You can move right to removing the waste between tails.



# Saw Guides for Dovetails

A helping hand is worthwhile for novices and pros alike

BY MIKE FARRINGTON



Dovetail sawing guides may be single-task devices that people have worked without for centuries, but I wouldn't want to run my professional furniture shop without one. The idea behind them is simple: They hold your handsaw at a fixed angle—the slope of the dovetail—for both the tails and pins. They also hold the saw square for each cut—square to the face for the tails, and square to the end for the pins. As a result, they take much of the stress out of dovetailing. Far from being a solution without a problem, these guides can benefit everyone except the absolute dovetail expert in several ways.

First and probably foremost is confidence. As with anything, believing you can do something is critical to success. When a novice dovetailer cuts a corner joint, taps it together, and it seats nicely without gaps, they're hooked. I know that was the case for me. After stumbling through a few joints without a guide, I had started to think adding dovetails to my work wasn't going to happen.



**Plumb pins too.** Each guide comes with matching sawing surfaces, one for tails and one for pins, and yields a uniform slope for each cut. Just as the tail side cuts 90° to the face, the pin side cuts 90° to the board's end. If you saw close enough to your line, the only chisel work will be chopping to the baseline.

**The hand-cut look without the hand-cut time.** Whether you cut dovetails daily or yearly, sawing guides allow for clean joints without much fuss.

# Katz-Moses

\$36

**T**he Katz-Moses guide has a few unique features. First is its material: clear urethane, a durable product that's still soft enough to do little to no damage to the sawteeth. Additionally, the guide's post is inset from the head, meaning your saw will likely never hit it. Your saw's teeth will occasionally hit any of the guides, and while it's no big deal, it never feels good. The Katz-Moses, with its urethane and inset post, goes further than others to avoid that feeling.

The guide is clear, giving you a good view of your workpiece and layout lines. Two magnets hold the saw very strongly against the guide. It's the only guide with a face for cutting 90°.

Like many other guides, the Katz-Moses has a short bearing surface for the saw, allowing for a good depth of cut even if you are using a saw with a spine.



**Sticky-back sandpaper helps with grip.** This guide, made from tough polyurethane, can be a little slick. To help, Farrington adheres sandpaper to the stem.

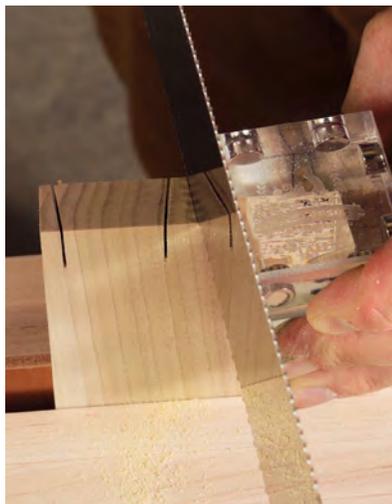


**Two magnets keep saw in line.** This is the only guide with two magnets. They do a great job of keeping your saw tight to the guide even if your mechanics are off.

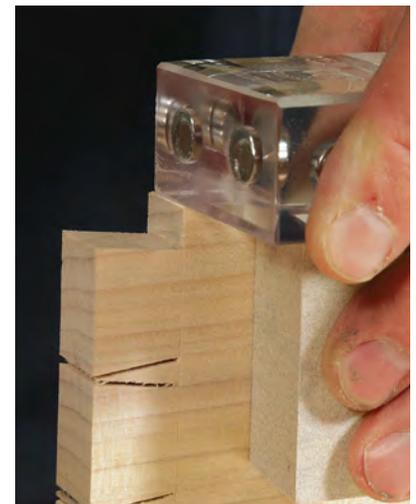
Then I decided to try a guide. Right out of the gate, first try, I had a very nice joint. I needed that win to give me the confidence to try dovetailing on an actual project.

Confidence is also critical for the seasoned woodworker who has cut lots of dovetails—again, like me. For example, if I am dovetailing a case, I have already invested several hours into panel glue-ups where I've used specially selected, beautiful boards. And this case may already have some joinery, like dados, and shelf-pin holes. In other words, the stakes are high. A mistake on one of the workpieces would mean a lot of work to repair or remake the part, and that's enough to spook me a bit. A dovetail guide helps me execute each of the four corner joints accurately, precisely, and without mistakes.

Avoiding mistakes points to another benefit: consistency. I am certainly no Christian Becksvoort,



**Transparent guide lets you see layout lines from above.** The closer you saw to your lines, the less fitting there is later. The Katz-Moses guide makes this easy.



**The only guide with a square cutting surface.** Tail boards always have a 90° cut at the edge. Thanks to this guide's square sawing surface, cutting these shoulders is easy and accurate.

# David Barron

\$55

**T**he David Barron is a simple, well-executed guide with a less-is-more style. It feels excellent in the hand, better than I can put into words. The machining is premium and the size is just right. The sandpaper applied to the reference surfaces helps hold it securely. There's only one magnet, but it straddles the line between strength and size excellently. It neither death-grips the saw nor lets the cut feel sloppy. The magnetic surfaces are covered with a slick, thin, replaceable plastic. The body of the guide is small enough to cut a reasonably deep dovetail using a saw with a spine. It also comes in the largest variety of dovetail angles.



**Sticky sandpaper's supplied.** You can hold the Barron guide in place with only moderate pressure thanks to the adhesive-backed sandpaper that comes with it.



**It just feels good.** Thanks to its machining, size, and finish, the guide feels great in the hand. Farrington could instantly tell he was using a premium tool that was equally intuitive.

but I am pretty good at cutting dovetails without a guide. Still, every so often I simply make a mistake, like not sawing square to the face on a tail. I honestly have never made this mistake while using a guide.

Plus, the guide means I'm always consistent; I don't need to worry if I've gotten rusty. I am a cabinet and millwork kind of builder, so I use screws, biscuits, and glue for most of my joinery. But a few times a year, a customer will approach me looking for finer work, and I'll use as many dovetails as I can. Because this happens infrequently, I may not have had the chance to cut a dovetail for months. Using a sawing guide allows me to jump right in and cut clean joints without much fuss. Without the guide, I would need to do a few practice joints—spending time and effort away from a paying gig—to even get close to an acceptable joint.



**Effective magnet.** The magnet strikes the right balance between size and strength to hold the saw in the two necessary planes for each cut. Its plastic cover, used to protect the saw teeth from the metal, is replaceable too.



## Veritas

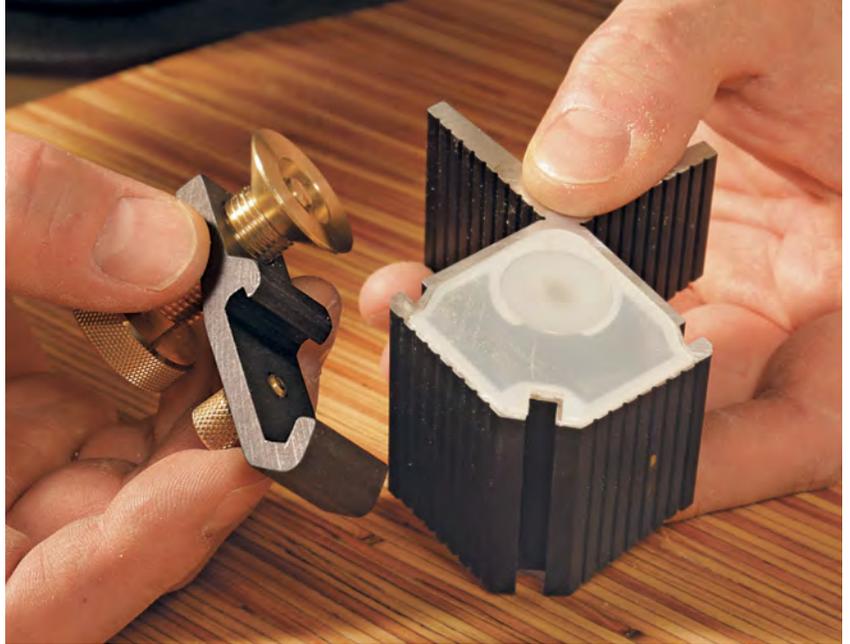
\$50

**T**his guide's standout feature is its clamp, which I love. While it's not absolutely necessary, it certainly boosts my confidence that the guide will never drift. And since you don't need to hold the guide in place, you can cut on both sides of the guide with ease. Also thanks to the clamp, this guide works better than the others when cutting half-blinds. Sure, the clamp slows down the overall process, but the returns are worth it.

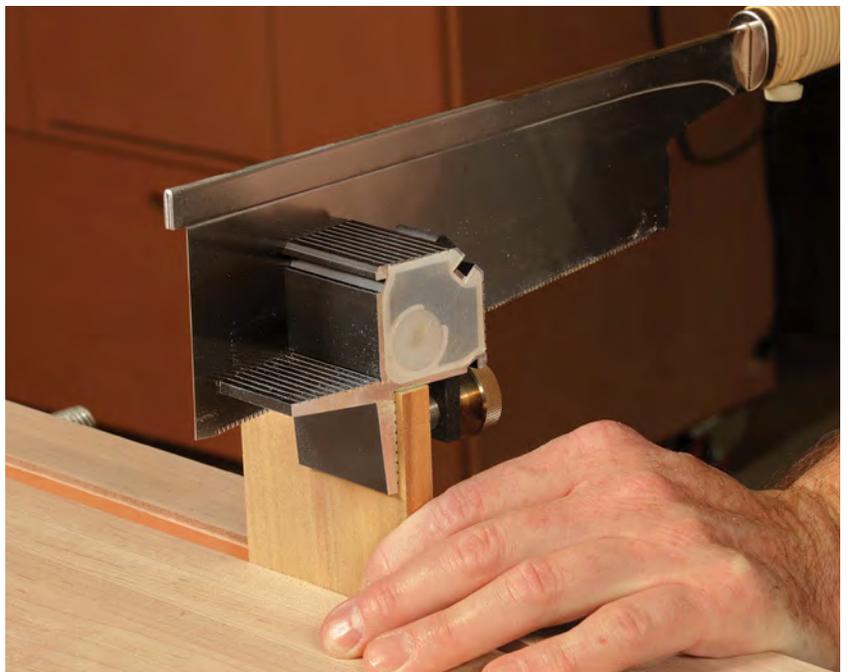
The guide's reference surface for the saw is wide and tall, letting it function well. However, because of the height of the guide above the workpiece, the depth of cut is much more limited when using a traditional dovetail saw, which has a narrow plate. I use a ryoba as an alternative, because it doesn't have a spine, but a saw with a deeper plate works too. Lee Valley bundles a spineless saw with the guide for an extra cost.

This brings me to the third benefit, speed. For all but the most seasoned professional, using a guide will speed up the process; and let's face it, cutting dovetails takes lots of time. Not only the act of sawing, but the whole process from start to finish. If you saw accurately, there's no checking and paring before transferring the joint. Each step builds on the last, and these little improvements mean a corner that is finished faster. I don't want to toot my own horn, but directly off the saw using a guide, I can cut a dovetail joint that is as close to perfect as possible. You can, too, once you get familiar with your guide.

So if I'm using a guide with my handsaw, why not just use a router and a dovetail jig? For one thing, sawing by hand makes it possible to leave a much smaller space between the tails, creating a look that instantly conveys "made by hand." The space can be even smaller than with a tablesaw



**Flippable clamp holds the guide in place.** Instead of securing the guide with your hand, the Veritas uses a clamp. You change the clamp's orientation depending on whether you're cutting pins or tails. A small set screw keeps the clamp from sliding.



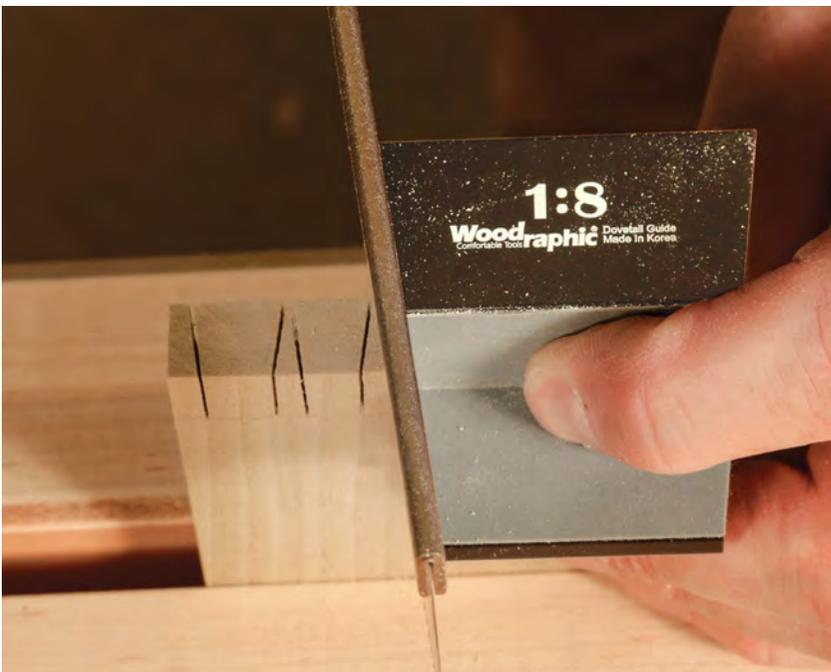
**The off-hand can take it easy.** Because the clamp, not your hand, holds the guide, the Veritas is a great option for those with hand injuries or grip issues. For everyone else, the clamp still lends a lot of confidence that the guide will stay put.

# Woodraphic

\$30

**T**he Woodraphic is the smallest of the guides, and it works well on small projects. Small saws feel at home on the guide, even small backsaws. When the guide is used with larger saws, though, the magnet doesn't have quite enough holding power and the saw reference surface isn't quite big enough to hold the saw as well as the other guides. The guide does have a nice slick surface for the saw to glide on, and the silicone gripper material holds the guide against the workpiece securely with minimal hand pressure.

**Small guide pairs nicely with small saws and small stock.** Like most of the other guides, the Woodraphic uses a magnet to hold the saw. It works nicely with light, scaled-down saws, but the holding power drops off with larger saws.



**Great grip.** The guide is covered in a silicone material, which increases friction against the workpiece and aids in keeping your fingers in place, letting you hold the guide securely with minimal hand pressure, a nice benefit on small stock.



**TIP**

**ADD SUPPORT FOR CUTS NEAR AN EDGE**



When cutting near the edge, you can add a second board so your guide isn't hanging out in space. Just make sure the ends of both boards are aligned. Alternatively, you can flip the board you're cutting face for face. (The Veritas typically doesn't need a workaround; the clamp stabilizes it, and it's easy to saw on both sides of the guide.)

blade ground for dovetails. Second, size and spacing are infinitely adjustable with a guide, while a router jig limits both. This second reason leads to the third: While a router jig is great for cutting a lot of identical dovetails on a lot of like boards, setting one up can be finicky and time-consuming for just four corners. Not so with the saw guide. And finally, handsaws are nice and quiet.

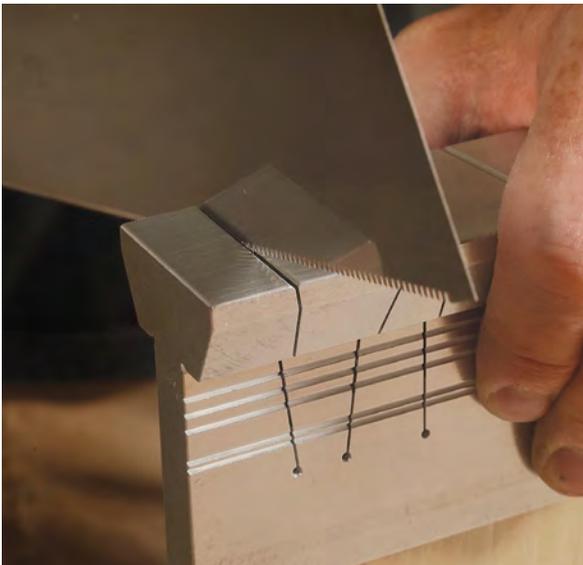
To be clear, these guides aren't perfect for everyone or for all situations. Take half-blind dovetails, for example. The tail board is easy enough, but the pin board can get fussy with almost all the guides. Next, while these guides excel when working with

# Papa-Made-It

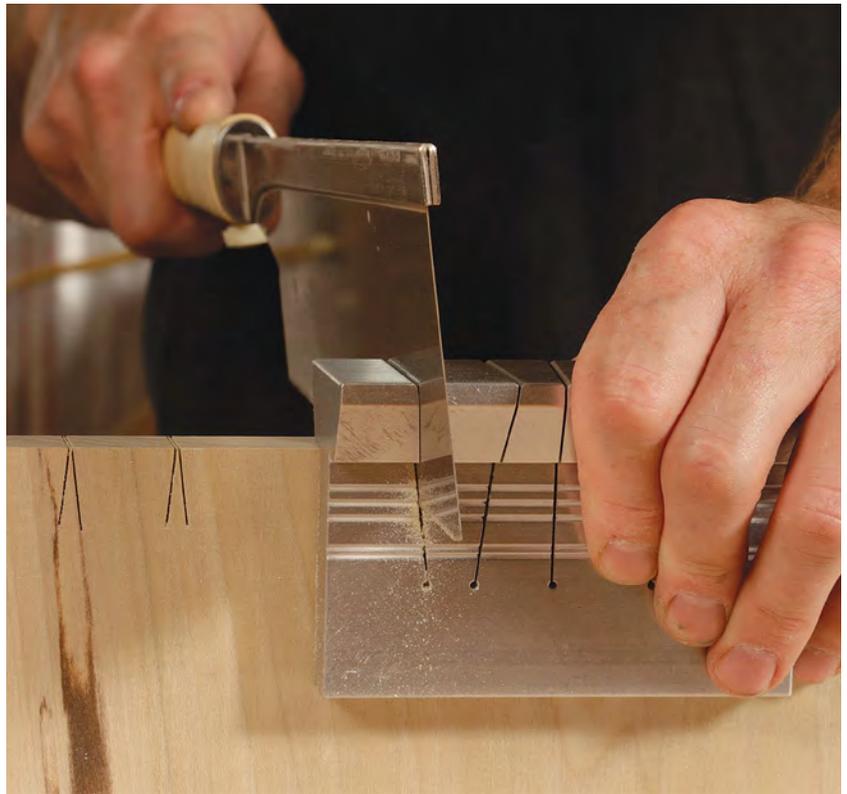
\$35

**T**he Papa-Made-It dovetail guide does not control the saw with magnets, like the other guides. Rather, it uses four slots, two for each tail and two for each pin. The lack of magnets makes cutting smooth. For the slots to work, you need to use an appropriate saw, one whose kerf isn't too thick (the saw won't fit in the guide) or too thin (the saw will slop around, yielding a poor cut). The Papa-Made-It website lists several saws that work well with the guide, as well as the dimensions of the slots. The slots limit the depth of cut to just over 1 in.

The guide is the largest in the test, which gives it a very nice, beefy feel, but its size is something to consider if your work is especially small. For normal-sized drawer boxes, the size isn't an issue.



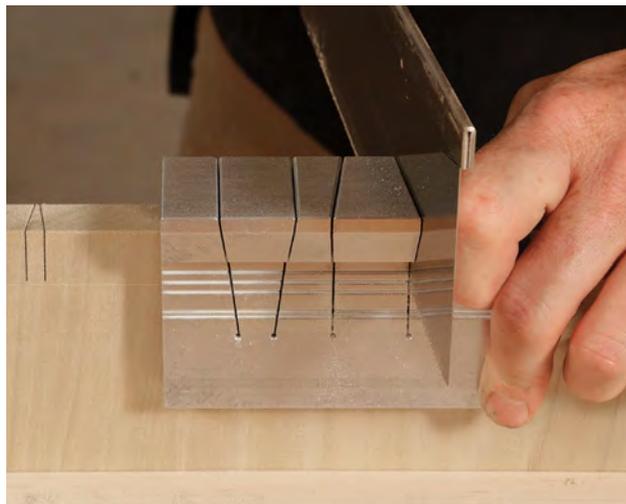
**Slots guide the saw.** Unlike the other guides, the Papa-Made-It uses slots, not magnets, to keep the saw on track. The manufacturer's website lists several compatible saws, as well as the slots' thickness in case you want to check a saw that isn't listed. The lack of magnets gives a nice, smooth feel during use.



flat and square stock, they start to falter on dovetails that aren't 90° to the board's face or are on a curved workpiece. They also limit you to one slope, so if your guide is 1:8 but you want to cut 1:6, you'll either need a second guide (assuming what you want is available) or you'll have to cut them without a guide.

To help you pick the right guide, I took a look at five quality options on the market. All work as advertised, and I can recommend each of them. It just comes down to your skills, tooling, work habits, and, primarily, preferences. □

*Mike Farrington, a FWW ambassador, is a professional furniture maker in Aurora, Colo.*



**Four slots mean a wide, hearty guide.** While the other guides need to be flipped to switch between pins and tails, this guide puts all the cuts in a single line. That makes for quick, intuitive use. But since the guide is the largest of the bunch, it's probably best suited to larger workpieces.