



# How to Handle Plywood

Take the backache out of sheet goods and make better cuts, too

BY GREGORY PAOLINI

Plywood, melamine, and other sheet goods are great for cabinets, shelves, racks, and more. These materials are large, flat, and stable, but they're also heavy, awkward to handle, and hard to transport. Being a solo woodworker, I've learned lots of tricks for buying and handling sheet goods safely and efficiently. It all starts at the lumberyard.

## How to get the sheets to the shop

If you're buying hardwood-veneer plywood, it's worth paying a delivery charge to have the supplier bring those expensive sheets right to your shop door; there's less risk of having the veneer damaged in transit. Save your energy for transporting less-expensive plywood and medium-density fiberboard from the local home center.



TIP

### CUT BEFORE YOU LOAD

Whenever possible, have the home center or lumberyard cut down sheet goods to manageable sizes before you haul them home.

Before you go to the lumberyard, make a cutting diagram for each sheet. It's the best way to get the most out of each sheet, so you won't buy more material than you need. The diagram also shows you how to cut down the sheets to a more manageable size before you bring them into the shop. Rough-cutting the sheets is especially important if you don't have a pickup truck or a van.

Most home centers and lumber retailers have a panel saw and will generally make one or two cuts for free or for a nominal fee. Before you have the sheet cut to rough size, mark the factory edges for later reference if they don't already have a mark from the mill.

If it's not possible to cut down the sheets at the home center, you'll need a truck to carry full sheets home.



1



## Keep it flat

If you didn't break down the sheets at the store, make the rough cuts when you unload them.

2

**Waist level.** Slide the sheets from the store rack to a dry-wall cart (1). Then slide the sheets from the cart right into the truck bed (2). When you unload, support the sheets on sawhorses and a sacrificial layer of rigid foam insulation. Mark the factory edge (3) and use a drywall square or a chalkline to mark cut lines (4). Rather than make a crosscut in one pass, cut only about two-thirds of the width (5), then finish the cut from the other side of the sheet.



3



4

The bed on a full-size pickup is wide enough to hold 4x8 sheets flat between the wheel wells; with a short-bed pickup, you'll have to fold down the tailgate. Compact pickups can't fit a 4x8 sheet between the wheel wells, but many have indentations in the bed sides for 2x lumber that will support a load above the wells. If you don't have a way to keep the sheets flat, slide them over the closed tailgate and tip them down so the edge butts against the front of the bed. Don't overload the tailgate. A tie-down near the tailgate secures the load. Use cardboard or a blanket to protect the sheets where they contact the truck. Flag any load that extends past the truck bed.

### Handling sheets at the shop

If you rough-cut the sheets to size at the home center, getting them into your



5

# Rip first

The factory edge is good as a reference only. Use it to get one clean edge, and then rip it away.



**Get one clean edge.** With a factory edge against the rip fence, cut the piece slightly oversize.

shop is simple. If not, you have a bit of work to do.

With a larger truck, you can rough-cut the sheets with a circular saw as you slide them out of the truck, using the tailgate as a makeshift sawhorse. Just be sure to leave a factory edge on each piece, marking it if necessary with chalk or pencil. In the shop, you'll use the factory edge to begin cutting the piece to final size.

As an alternative, position sawhorses near the back of the truck, with one or two sheets of rigid building insulation on top of them. Slide a sheet out of the truck, onto the insulation, and then make your cuts. Adjust the saw's depth of cut so it's only slightly deeper than the sheet you're cutting. If you have to carry a full sheet more than a few feet, use a panel-carrying handle that lets you support the weight



**Rotate and rip again.** Spin the piece around, putting the freshly cut edge against the fence and keeping the good side up in case there is slight tearout (left). Reset the rip fence and trim the piece to final width (right).

with one hand and steer with the other. This is the best way to get through a door or around a corner.

## How to make precise cuts

To prevent chipout on expensive veneer plywood, especially when crosscutting, I favor a blade with 60 to 80 teeth and a triple chip grind. Sometimes called laminate/melamine blades, they make flawless cuts in plywood and composite materials.

If a dedicated tablesaw blade isn't in the budget, then make a 1/8-in.-deep scoring cut on the bottom followed by a through-cut. Or run masking tape over the cut line on the bottom of the sheet to minimize chipping. Be sure to keep the good side up when you cut.

In my experience, factory edges and corners aren't true enough or clean enough to use in furniture. So I cut them away when I trim pieces to their final size. Begin

# Clean crosscuts



**Two techniques.** A sled ensures that you'll make safe, square crosscuts. To avoid tearout, either put tape over the cut line on the bottom of the piece (above left) or make a shallow scoring cut (above right) followed by a through cut.



by ripping pieces  $\frac{1}{8}$  in. to  $\frac{1}{4}$  in. oversize, with a factory edge against the rip fence. Rotate the piece end for end, reset the rip fence to the exact size, and rip the piece again. This yields two clean, parallel edges. There won't be much tearout when ripping along the grain lines.

Crosscuts, on the other hand, are prone to tearout, but you can prevent it (see photos, above). Don't use the rip fence to crosscut long pieces. It won't control the workpiece safely, nor will it ensure that your crosscuts are at a perfect  $90^\circ$ . Instead, if you have a large enough crosscut sled, use it. With mine, I can cut pieces up to about 32 in. long and 24 in. wide. Position one of the newly cut edges against the sled's fence and square one end. Flip the piece around and cut it to the desired length.

If the piece is too big for a sled, rough-cut it about  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. oversize with a circular saw, then square and smooth the edges with a router. To guide the router, I use a simple shopmade panel-cutting jig made to work with a  $\frac{3}{4}$ -in. straight bit (see tip at right). I can align the jig right to the layout line and make a perfect splinter-free cut. Make the first cut so the workpiece is square but still about  $\frac{1}{4}$  in. oversize, then cut it to exact size when you run the router along the opposite edge.

I can use the same router jig to joint a long panel down its full length. If I forget to mark factory edges, I can use the router jig to cut a fresh jointed edge. □

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**TIP**

**A ROUTER JIG FOR LARGE PIECES**  
First, use the router to trim the edge of the jig. Now that edge shows you exactly where the router will cut.