

Unnecessary tools

Is there any woodworker whose shop does not have lots of tools that have been used once or twice and are now gathering dust? That woodworker will not be found around here. Like everyone, I have bought my share of tools that I do not use—an often expensive mistake. When students ask me how to avoid buying such a mistake, I tell them this story:

In the mid 1970s I was the chair maker at Strawberry Banke, a Williamsburg-type museum in Portsmouth, N.H. However, I was not an employee, and I was allowed to work in whatever manner I chose. I did not have to re-create the past.

I worked in a one-room shop, about 14 ft. by 14 ft., where I made two chairs each week, always following the same schedule. Every Wednesday morning I cut out the seats with a 25-in. bowsaw. Without fail, one of the tourists would say to me, "You need a bandsaw."

If I was in a good humor—about 50,000 people a year passed through my shop, and I had trained

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myself to ignore heckling and inanities—I would patiently explain as follows. "No, I don't need a bandsaw. I cut out two chair seats once a week. The bowsaw is as fast as a bandsaw, so I am not going to need it for more than 10 minutes. After that, it is returned to a nail on a wall, where it takes up no space in this very small shop. If I had a bandsaw, it would take up about a square yard of precious floor space. My bowsaw cost me only \$45. A bandsaw would cost about 14 times that much. So, as you can see, I don't need a bandsaw."

Today, my wife and I run a school with 16 people per class, all of them cutting out their seats at the same time, so we do need a bandsaw. We have a 14-in. Delta on the classroom floor.

That is the key. Before buying a tool, ask yourself several questions. Does your woodworking really require the tools you think you need? Are there less expensive and more efficient alternatives? Can you learn a skill (like using a bowsaw) and save yourself some money and space?

There are four influences that mislead us into buying the wrong tools. The first is what I call "the Tim Taylor effect." The others are "the how-to TV-show effect," "gadget fascination" and, finally, "the good deal."

The Tim Taylor effect

On the TV show *Home Improvement*, Tim Taylor spoofs our fascination with the biggest and most powerful tools, and those that have the most bells and whistles. I cannot count the number of home shops I have been in where the central tool is a cabinet saw. For most woodworkers, a contractor's saw is more than sufficient. However, the cabinet saw is the more powerful (and expensive) machine. More than 350 students a year come to our woodworking school, and all of our prepwork is done on a contractor's saw. This is not to say no one needs a cabinet saw. If you are working a lot of sheet materials or cutting thick wood, you do need the extra power.

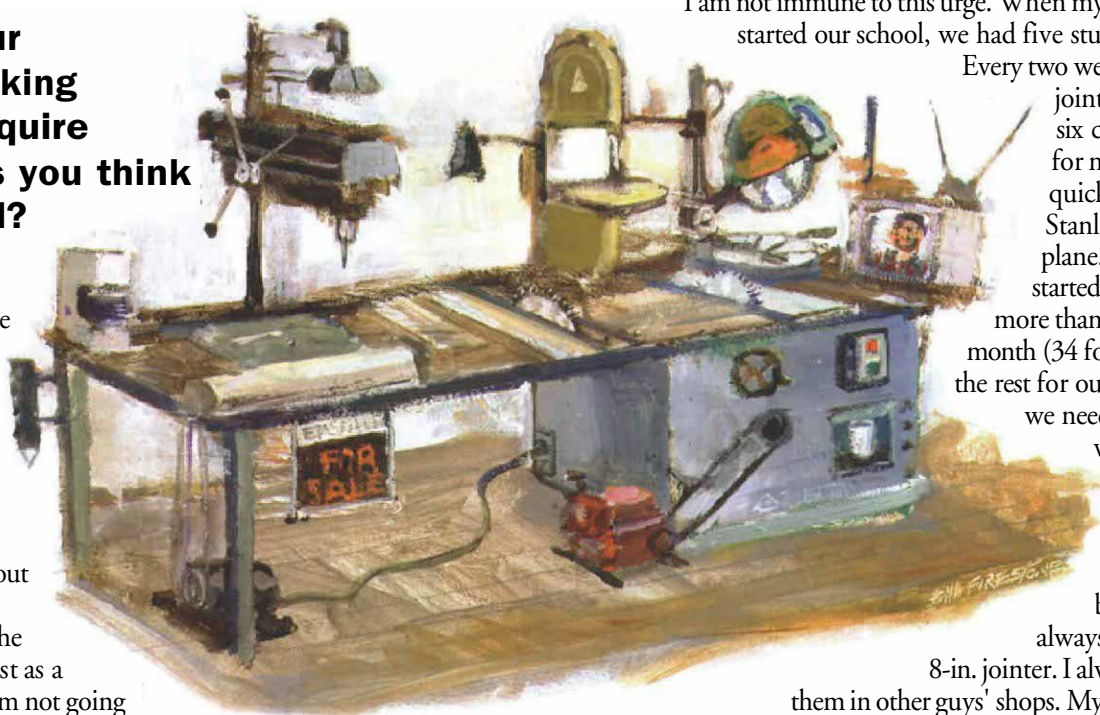
I am not immune to this urge. When my wife and I started our school, we had five students per class.

Every two weeks I had to joint and glue up six chair seats (one for me). I did it very quickly with a Stanley No. 7 jointer plane. But once we started going through more than 50 seats in a month (34 for classes and the rest for our own work), we needed a jointer. I wanted to get an 8-in. machine. I don't know why, but I have

always wanted an 8-in. jointer. I always admire them in other guys' shops. My wife and staff had more common sense, and they eventually prevailed. We now have a 4-in. jointer in our machine building. The surfaces we joint are all 22 in. long by 1¾ in. wide, and this machine is more than sufficient for our needs. It cost a lot less than my fantasy jointer, and it is also portable. When my guys are done jointing, they store the machine in a corner, leaving more room for other machines and for storage.

The how-to TV-show effect

How-to TV shows are fun to watch. However, they all have sponsors, and usually the sponsors insist that their tools be used. Thus, to satisfy the sponsors, you see projects being made using tools that are not always necessary or the most efficient. Television is a powerful medium. Its moving images make a

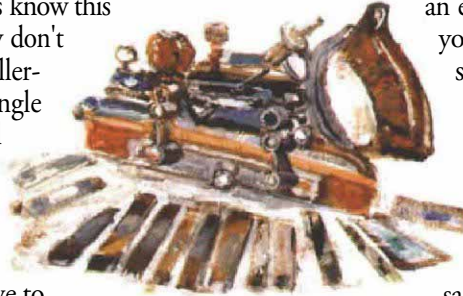


Rules of Thumb (continued)

lasting impression and leave us assuming that we cannot get along without the tools we see on these shows.

Gadget fascination

Woodworkers are fascinated by tools that seem to do neat tricks and offer us an opportunity to wow our friends. Another urge is to get into the shop and right to work rather than spend a lot of time learning skills. We delight in gadgets that promise to get us to work easily and quickly. Tool companies know this and fill their catalogs with gizmos we really don't need. The one that comes to mind is the roller-skate device used to hold a tool at a fixed angle while sharpening. First of all, holding a tool steady is not hard and can be learned very quickly. (Here's a tip: go side to side rather than front to back or in figure-eights.) Second, the roller skate works only on chisels and plane blades. Woodworkers have to sharpen many other shapes—gouges, for example.



The good deal

Some tools are frequently sold in sets, but you are often better off buying the tools individually. When I bought the drill press for my school, I also purchased a plastic case of twist bits. We only use a handful of sizes. When the bits we use most often got dull or broke, I bought another case of bits. The same thing

happened this time, and we ended up with duplicates of all kinds of sizes of bits we never use. Now, we buy individual bits.

The same situation applies to carving sets. You will frequently use only specific carving tools and would be better off buying them individually. However, if you buy a set of bench chisels in four or six common sizes, you will use them all. They are cheaper than the same tools bought individually.

Combination tools are a similar situation. They look like such an easy way to outfit a shop—all of the machines you need in one. However, these machines seldom work as well or as easily as a dedicated machine does, and some of the functions will be seldom used.

Two of the most famous combination tools are the Stanley No. 45 and No. 55. Frequently, students tell me of the great deals they have gotten on these planes. The story is always the same. The plane is still in the original box, and the parts are all there. There is an explanation as to why this happens so often with these hundred-year-old tools. The original owners tried them and, in disappointment, put them back in the box. This was repeated with each owner over 100 years. The parts and the box never got lost because the tool was always stowed away, gathering dust. Every one of the tool's owners would have been better off skipping this "good deal" of many-planes-in-one and buying dedicated planes.