

Four tools you shouldn't overlook

You have finally set up your shop just the way you want it. You've built your workbench. You have bought your tablesaw, thickness planer, jointer and bandsaw. On your shop wall you have sharp chisels, a dovetail saw and smoothing and block planes. You feel equipped to handle any project, but you may be overlooking a few very useful hand tools.

I find the following four tools indispensable: drawknife, shallow gouge, spokeshave and shoulder plane. The first two are used generally for roughing; the others are used for fine work. However, all are so handy that it would be impossible to describe all of their uses. Put them to work, and you will soon come up with jobs I haven't thought of. As a bonus, only the shoulder plane will cost more than \$100. The other three tools are priced closer to \$50.

With some practice, hand tools like these are faster than machines, easier to control and pose less danger to a semifinished workpiece. While they cut a little more slowly than a bandsaw or router, they don't require any setup or test cuts. Just pick up the tool, do what you need, and move on. Frequently, the job is over before you could set a fence and flick a switch.

Drawknife

There is only one explanation for why old drawknives are so plentiful. Until this last generation, every woodworker owned one. The tool is so useful that I cannot imagine a shop without one. It is used for quick stock removal along the grain and across the grain and for concave and convex curves. It will cut away heavy amounts of wood far faster than a bandsaw can.

Here are couple of tips on using a drawknife. It is a slicing tool, not a two-handed hatchet. Hold it



DRAWKNIFE

This tool is plentiful at flea markets because every woodshop used to have one.



SHALLOW GOUGE

A wide, shallow gouge is handy for much more than carving.



SPOKESHAVE

A wooden spokeshave has a lower cutting angle than a metal-bodied shave, making it easier to control.



SHOULDER PLANE

If you don't have a shoulder plane, your joints probably don't fit as well as they could.

askew and draw the edge through the wood the way a butcher slices meat. You will be amazed at how effortlessly and cleanly it works. Use the drawknife with the bezel (the ground surface often called the bevel) and manufacturer's stamp up. Many woodworkers use the knife upside down, because they think it gives them more control. However, because they cannot take a heavy chip in this position, they sacrifice the tool's most important ability: fast stock removal. Far better that you learn to use the knife the proper way. You will be able to take paper-thin shavings that rival those made with a plane or hog off slices as thick as your finger.

The drawknife can be used to shape complex contours, such as those on chair parts, or quickly remove waste, such as when a turner cuts away the corners of a square blank before mounting it on the lathe. I often use my drawknife in an unconventional way. If I have a crooked or irregular board that needs one edge jointed straight, the drawknife gets me a straight edge as quickly as a bandsaw. First, I snap a chalkline, and then, after determining the grain direction so I am working with it rather than against it, I use the knife as a lever, prying loose the waste close to the line. A few passes over the jointer, and I have a straight edge.

Buy an old drawknife or a good replica made by a smith who understands the tool. Most modern knives are ground as steeply as chisels, and this edge will not slice like a knife.

#3 sweep-35mm gouge

Not a day goes by that the #3 sweep-35mm gouge is not in my hands many times. The tool handles rough stock removal in places where the drawknife is too large. Depending on the size of the job, it

Rules of Thumb (continued)



Used bezel-side up, the drawknife quickly slices away material. The tool is held at an angle and pulled across the work as it's pulled through, to create a shearing action. Here, a blank is prepared for turning.

Driving it with a mallet, he used it to rough out the concave curves of a crest rail on a Queen Anne chair. This is a job most of us would have done on a bandsaw, but Headley did it with the part already glued in place, by blending the contours of the rail smoothly into the back posts. The gouge Headley used was a modern copy of an old one archeologists dug up in Williamsburg at the site of an 18th-century cabinetmaker's shop. Those old boys also knew how handy this tool is.

When I'm shaping parts, fitting tenons or whittling pins, I usually hold the chisel handle against my chest and pull the wood toward the blade. This gives me more control, and it's safer when working around other people.

Wooden spokeshave

This tool is as close to magical as any you will ever use. It is the equivalent of using a photo-editing program to work on a picture. You can smooth curves and blend elements together.

Do not confuse the wooden shave with the metal tool that bears the same name. They have very little in common. The wooden shave's blade is set nearly parallel to the sole with the bezel up, so it has a low cutting angle. This makes it ideal for end grain. A sharp

can be driven with the heel of my palm or with a mallet. The gouge trims joints in far less time than a saw does. It whittles pins and wedges for mortise-and-tenon joints, and because it is so constantly at hand, I use it in place of a jackknife. Because its edge is a shallow curve, it is far less likely to dig in and scar your work than a flat chisel, making it ideal for trimming pegs flush.

At the recent *Fine Woodworking* conference "Working Wood in the 18th Century" at Colonial Williamsburg, I was surprised to see the center's master cabinetmaker, Mack Headley, pull out a gouge nearly identical to mine.

shave will take clean shavings from end grain that hold together like those taken from edge grain.

A wooden spokeshave is ideal in many of the situations where woodworkers would use a rasp, such as cabriole legs, but the shave leaves a surface so smooth that it is almost ready for finish. Often a spokeshave is used to refine the larger facets left by a drawknife or gouge.

A shave can be pulled—when whittling—but it is primarily a pushing tool. While its handles seem to imply that you grip them, you should instead hold the central body of the tool between your fingers with your thumb behind the blade. This position makes it a lot easier to control.

When setting up your shave, cock the blade so that the cutting edge is higher on one side than on the other. This gives you high, medium and low settings all in one. When you need to take a shaving of a different thickness, just move the shave to a different point along the edge. It saves a lot of time making adjustments.

Shoulder plane

No matter how precise your joinery, you will have to make fine adjustments. Often, there is no practical way to do this with machines. That's why every shop should have a shoulder plane. This plane has an extremely narrow mouth, which allows it to make cuts so fine that the chips just crumble to dust.

As its name implies, a shoulder plane can be used to snug up the shoulders on mortise-and-tenon joints. But the tool is far more versatile than that. Because its mouth and blade are as wide as its sole, it can reach completely into a corner to trim a rabbet joint or the shoulders on a tongue-and-groove joint. Many woodworkers also use a shoulder plane to shave away the cheeks of a tenon to create a perfect friction fit. (While doing this job, use the plane to chamfer the end of the tenon so that it slides in easily.) It is also ideal for truing, trimming or smoothing the flat filllets on moldings.

Shoulder planes are not cheap, and I would be leery of one that is. However, you will never wear one out, and it will make an important difference in the quality of your work.

Try these hand tools. Each of the four is sure to speed up and refine your work. □



A sharp spokeshave fairs complex contours. Hold the tool near its body for better support and control of the blade. Here, the author shaves away bandsaw marks on a chair leg.



A wide gouge with a shallow sweep can whittle or trim. Here, the author uses his favorite version—#3 sweep—35mm wide—to pin the joints in a frame-and-panel door.



A shoulder plane is unmatched at trimming joinery. The tool works all the way into corners and can take very fine shavings.