

If you're in the market for decent hand tools, you have two options: Pay high prices for top-of-the-line new tools (such as those made by Clifton, Lie-Nielsen, or Veritas), or start searching the used-tools market. You may have to remove a little rust and do some tuning up on old tools, but dollar for dollar, they're hard to beat.

Everyday tools such as basic bench planes, chisels, spokeshaves, and marking and measuring devices were made in abundance during the first half of the 20th century. While the antiques market looks for expensive collectors' tools to trade, a woodworker more concerned with a tool's usability than its historical value can choose from a wide variety.

I've been to auctions, bought tools online, and dug through boxes of rust at antiques stores in about every town I've visited. After finding some good deals and being dealt a few disappointments, I've learned what to look for and what to avoid. I've also talked to well-known furniture makers—Garrett Hack, Lonnie Bird, Phil Lowe, and Chris Gochnour among them—who rely on vintage tools in their everyday work to find out what they look for when buying old tools.

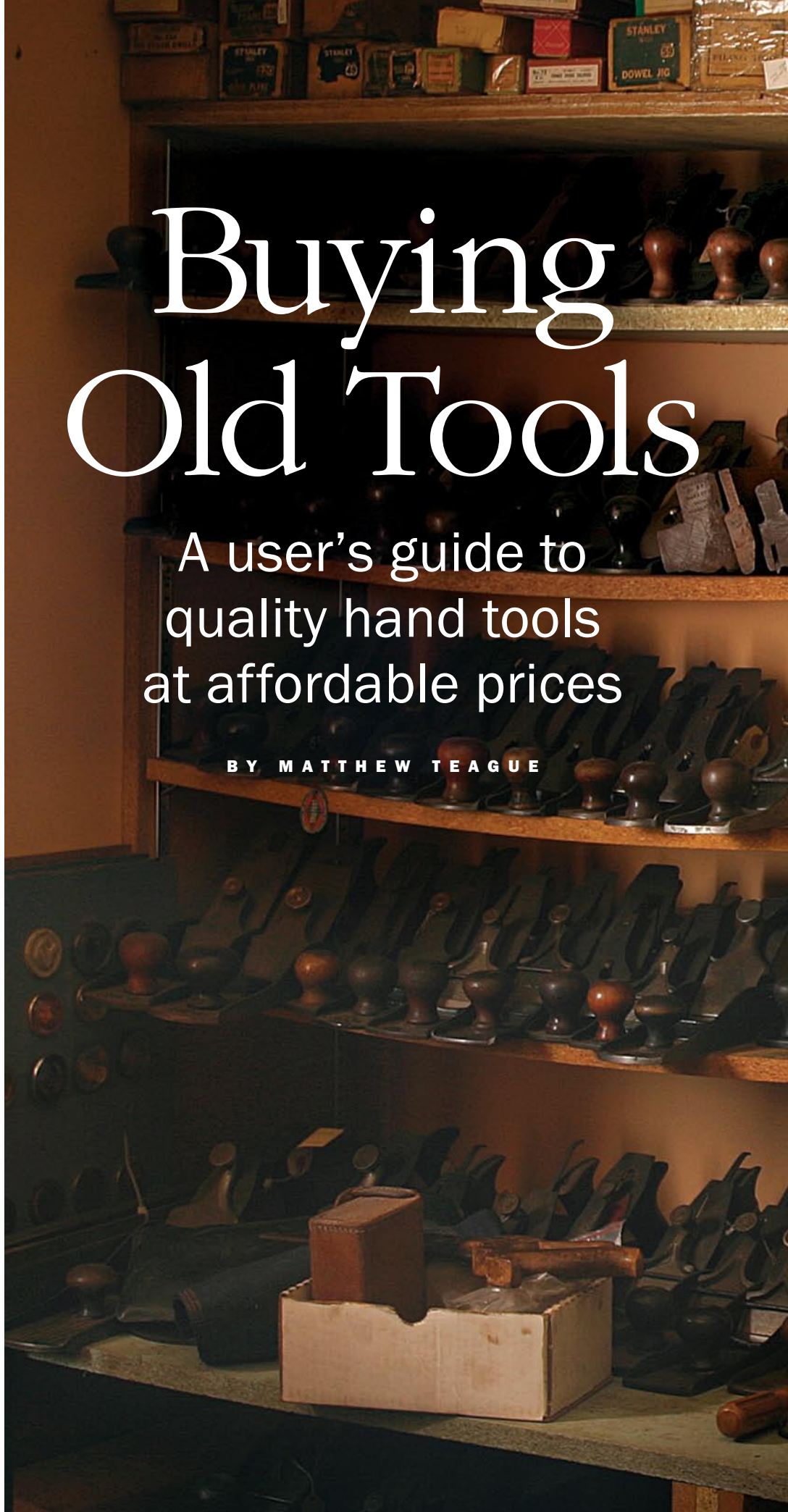
### Get to know styles and prices before you pay up

Before you go hunting old tools, it pays to know a bit about what you're looking for. You can buy reprints of old tool catalogs and browse the Internet to become familiar with what is available and what it is worth (see "Where to find old tools," p. 85). If you register on the online auction site eBay, you can view past auctions of tools and the prices they sold for. For instance, if you're in the market for a Stanley-Bailey No. 3 bench plane, simply run a search on "Stanley Bailey No. 3," select "show completed listings," and you can scroll through old auctions. If you see one that sold for \$125, chances are it is an impeccable model with all original parts, full japanning (the black enamel finish), and little or no use under its belt. A model for \$25, on the other hand, may have missing

# Buying Old Tools

A user's guide to quality hand tools at affordable prices

BY MATTHEW TEAGUE

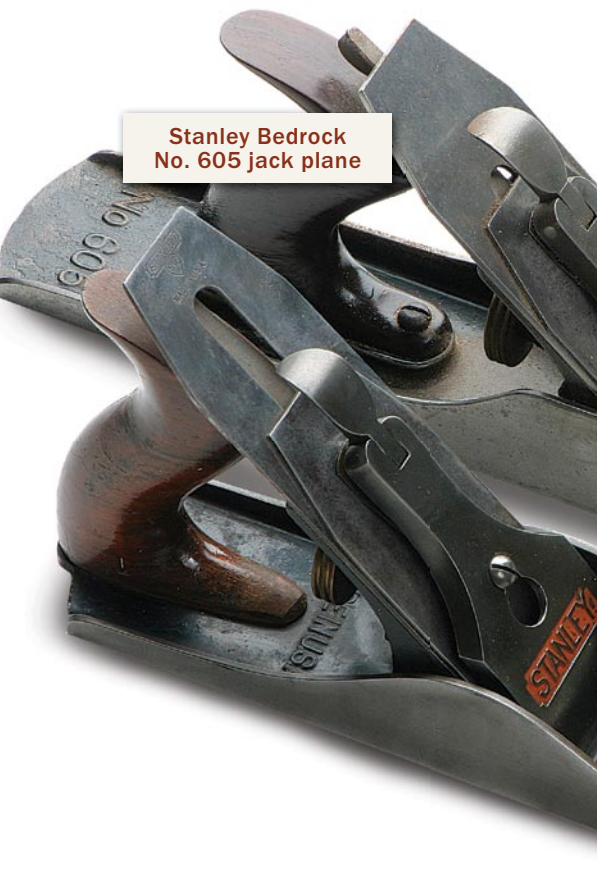






**Buyer beware.** Carefully inspect a used hand tool before buying it. Check for flatness, pits, cracks, and missing parts. Where there are adjusters, check to make sure they work.





Stanley Bedrock  
No. 605 jack plane

## Bench planes

**T**hough I'd stay away from their household tools such as the Four-Square models, well-tuned Stanley-Bailey bench planes (No. 4, 5, etc.) are a good addition to any workshop. Stanley's more refined Bedrock designs (No. 604, 605, and so on, mimicked by Lie-Nielsen and Clifton) allow you to adjust the frog without removing the blade assembly but have become rather pricey.

Some of the bench planes made by Keen Kutter are based on the Bedrock model. You can get them for about half the price of the Stanley planes. The key is to look for models marked with a single "K" instead of the "KK" models, which were based on regular Stanley-Bailey designs. (Look closely, as not all "K" models are Bedrock designs.) Millers Falls, Sargent, and others made quality planes as well. Familiarize yourself

with the Stanley-Bailey design, and use it as a benchmark for rating other planes.

or replacement parts, a pitted sole, or worse. While you will want tools that aren't pitted from extensive rust, a little surface rust wipes off with only steel wool and wax. If a handle has been replaced, collectors will stay away from the tool, but it will work just as well in your shop.

### Handplanes need a flat sole and all of their adjusters

Buying a basic set of used bench planes is a good way to get started. Your first plane should be a No. 4 smoothing plane or a No. 5 jack plane. After that, you'll want to look for a good block plane. As for the rest of the bench planes, fill out your collection as you find them.

If you are buying at a store, an auction, or a flea market, use a straightedge to check the sole for flatness. Be sure that all the adjusters are present and in working order because there is a good chance that they are nonstandard and hard to replace. The lever cap should be in decent shape, as replacing it will mean tracking down spare parts. Don't worry if the sole is a little rusted or even pitted, but the blade and chipbreaker (or cap iron) shouldn't



**Advantages of a corrugated sole.** The corrugation on a plane's sole reduces suction between the sole and the workpiece, thereby requiring less effort behind the stroke than with a uniform sole.

### BEST BET

Stanley-Bailey No. 4  
bench plane  
Price: \$45-\$65

A well-tuned Stanley-Bailey No. 4 is hard to beat for planing surfaces; it's the go-to plane in most shops. Because there are so many on the market, hold out for a clean model with plenty of life left in the blade.



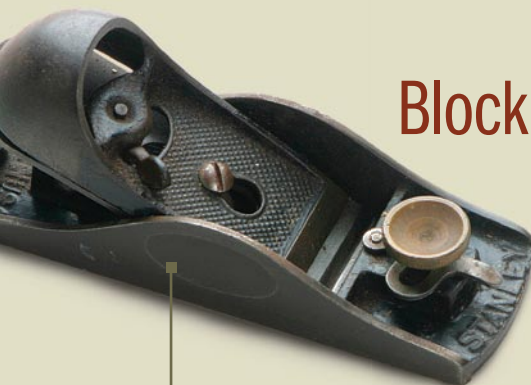
Millers Falls No. 22  
CBG jointer plane

Sargent Hercules No. 4  
smoothing plane

Keen Kutter No. 4  
smoothing plane



# Block planes



## BEST BET

Stanley No. 9½ block plane  
Price: \$20-\$30

This basic model is readily available. The adjustable mouth makes it handy for either rough or fine work, and it's as comfortable in your hand as any plane out there.

**Y**ou'll run across good block planes from numerous manufacturers—Craftsman, Keen Kutter, Millers Falls, and Sargent—but you'll see only a few of those as compared to the number of Stanley planes you'll find. Stanley made so many block planes that even many collectors can't keep them straight. A few stand out as easy to find and good workers. Look for an adjustable throat and convenient adjusters to set the blade depth. The No. 9½ is a good plane to start with, but some users prefer the No. 18, which is the same but has a two-piece "knuckle-joint" lever cap rounded to fit your hand. Expect to pay \$30 to \$50 for the No. 18.



Stanley No. 18 block plane



Stanley No. 65 low-angle block plane



Stanley came out with several versions of the hinged lever cap. The Stanley No. 18 is one of the later versions. Before purchasing one, be sure all the parts are present and in working order.



Millers Falls No. 7 skew block plane with removable side plate

be, unless you plan to replace them with new ones. Good-quality replacement blades made by Hock or Lie-Nielsen are available in various sizes and thicknesses, but you should factor their cost into the overall price.

## Chisels should have handles and a flat back

There's really not much that can be wrong with chisels as long as you buy a reputable brand and the tool is in good shape. Avoid chisels without handles, unless you are prepared to spend time fitting them with new ones; perfectly good chisels with handles are readily available. When buying in person, carry a small straightedge to check the back of the blade for flatness. Stay away from chisels with backs that aren't flat—some have been tuned on a curved stone. A little surface rust can be removed easily, but you'll be unable to sharpen a chisel with a pitted back until you grind the pits away. Also, because chisels work like an extension of your hand, make sure the tool is comfortable to hold and is well balanced.

If you find a full set of quality bench chisels, it's probably worth spending an extra few bucks. My preference is to have chisels with the same weight and handle so that I can use the same technique and grip as I switch mid-task from one size to the next.

## Better marking and measuring tools have etched graduations

When I go out looking for marking and measuring tools, I'm likely to pick up any reputable brand. I also may buy off-brands, as long as the graduations are finely etched and not painted or stamped on. Generally, if a measuring tool is from a reputable manufacturer and the used tool is cheaper than a new version, I go with the older tool, as long as it's in good shape

(which includes making sure that squares are actually square).

For marking gauges, I prefer older tools that have measuring graduations on the arm of the gauge.

## Keep an eye out for these

If you don't have a spokeshave, or are frustrated with a newer model, you probably will have better luck with an older Stanley (those numbered No. 51



# Chisels

**B**uck Brothers, D.R. Barton, Stanley, Swan, and Witherby all made excellent chisels, but some of them are becoming pricey. Early Stanley chisels are easier to find and more affordable. I like their “Everlasting” chisels, the old 750 series (¼ in., ½ in., ¾ in., and 1 in.), as well as the longer, paring-style 720s. But don’t get too hung up on brands—look for chisels made during or prior to World War II, and choose those with plenty of life left in the blade. Off-brands often cost only a few dollars, so there’s little risk.

through No. 55 have slightly different adjusters or soles, but each is reliable). Besides, older spokeshaves are often cheaper than new models—I’ve never paid more than \$25 for one. Just make sure that the mouth isn’t chipped or cracked, the blade has plenty of life left in it, and all the adjusters are in good working order.

Old wooden molding planes are worth considering because they often have a more refined profile than you’ll get from a router bit. Among other tasks, I rely on them for dressing up door frames and skirts on tables. Make sure the irons fit the profile of the plane, and stay away from anything with rotten wood, a cracked body, or a missing wedge. For starters, track down basic cove and bead profiles with sizes ranging from ⅜ in. to ¾ in. Prices for wooden molding planes can vary greatly based on the maker, but I’ve found that my \$15 models from unknown makers work fine when sharpened and adjusted well.

For saws, whatever brand you choose, take a pair of calipers along and look for a thin blade—about 0.020 in. for dovetail saws and 0.025 in. for tenon saws. Old saws likely will need sharpening, a task you can tackle yourself (see *vintagesaws.com* or *FWW* #125, pp. 44-47) or farm out to a professional service; the charge is usually \$20 or less.

## Sources for used tools

The Internet has multiple sources for buying vintage tools: dealers, collectors associations, and auctions on eBay and other sites, some specifically focused on hand tools. There are also general auctions, tool auctions, tool shows, and local sales. And if you have the time, garage sales and junk and antiques stores often offer the best deals.

**The Internet is a good place to buy run-of-the-mill used tools**—A number of dealers have Web sites or send mass email lists of available tools (you can sign up on their Web sites). The prices vary greatly from one dealer to the next, so compare them, and look closely at the photos of the tools. And don’t hesitate to call or email

Witherby mortising chisel

Buck Bros. butt chisel

Stanley No. 750 butt chisel

Witherby bench chisel

W. Marples & Sons paring chisel

**Loose handles are common.** Quality chisels such as the Stanley No. 750 (above) are worth buying even if the handles are loose.


## BEST BET

**Stanley No. 750 chisel Price: \$10-\$15**


The balance of the Stanley No. 750 chisels is near perfect—so much so that the new Lie-Nielsen chisels are based on this very design. If possible, buy a whole set: The series is still affordable and available. If not, pick them up piece by piece, and in larger sizes. Either way, expect to pay \$32 to \$60 for a set.








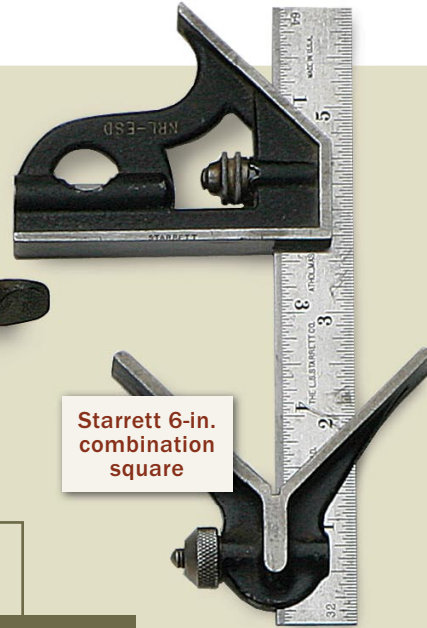
Starrett No. 4 blade  
with No. 12 protractor



Starrett outside caliper



Craftsman sliding  
bevel gauge



Starrett 6-in.  
combination  
square

### BEST BET

Stanley No. 65 marking gauge  
Price: \$20-\$30


The marking gauge seen here is a No. 65, but Stanley made countless gauges, and many of them are equally as good. Be sure that the gauge block slides smoothly on the arm, and, if possible, track down a model that has rule marks on the arm.



Lutz No. 806 6-in. rule

## Measuring and marking tools

**T**hough they often sell for half the price, older marking and measuring tools were made to the same exacting tolerances as today's top-of-the-line tools. If you find squares and rules from reputable manufacturers—Brown and Sharpe, Goodell-Pratt, Lufkin, and Starrett among them—they're almost always a safe bet. Many of the Stanley tools were also very good. Antiques stores (and even some collectors) seldom separate the good models from the bad, so you can pick up high-quality measuring tools for almost nothing. You also can find quality tools from manufacturers you've never heard of—look for etched graduations and a good price.



Stanley No. 62 folding rule

questions to the dealer, even on eBay.

The bidding process on eBay and other auction sites is usually straightforward: You register, enter the highest price you're willing to pay, and if it's higher than the other bidders' highest prices, you get the tool. Just because your maximum bid was \$50 doesn't mean you'll pay that much. If the second highest bidder was only willing to pay \$25, then you'll pay \$25.01.

**General auctions and tool auctions are a sure bet**—Most of the general auctions that you find listed in your local newspaper will feature a cache of tools, often pulled out of an old-timer's workshop. Tools usually are sold in lots rather than one by one.

Tool auctions, which you can discover through newspapers or various collector groups and Web sites, are much more abundant than they once were. At auc-

tion, you have the chance to evaluate tools beforehand, and then bid on them when they come up for sale.

The great secret of tool auctions are the tool sales that are set up beforehand or spring up in the parking lots and in nearby hotels. In these spots, dealers sell directly to the public, without bidding and totally separate from the auction.

Larger auctions publish catalogs, and so do a few of the larger tool dealers. The



## Miscellaneous tools

Stanley No. 66  
hand beader

**W**hatever you're up against, chances are good that at some point a tool was designed for the task. For shaping and smoothing curved surfaces, there's no better tool than a spokeshave. Dadoes, rabbets, coves, and beads all can be cut by hand with specialty planes or tools—and it's often quicker and less expensive than buying and setting up a power tool. Many users of old

### BEST BET

Stanley No. 51  
spokeshave  
Price: \$15-\$30

Stanley made almost two dozen different spokeshaves, each with slightly different handles, soles, or adjuster caps. The No. 51 is a straight-forward and common tool that does excellent work.

unrivaled by anything made today.

Millers Falls No. 85 rabbet plane

Stanley No. 71 router plane

Stanley No. 90  
bullnose rabbet plane

Disston backsaw

Molding planes

catalogs are available prior to the auction and enable you to bid on tools without being present—through email, by phone, or even through old-fashioned mail.

When buying at auctions, make sure you decide what you're willing to pay for a tool before it goes up for bid. Otherwise, it's too easy to get competitive with other bidders and end up paying way too much.

### Local venues are full of surprises—

Throughout the country, local woodworking guilds or tool-collectors' associations host tool shows and sales, or publish small guides or Web sites that allow woodworkers and dealers to list tools for sale. It's a good idea to get in touch with them because if they have collectors' tools, chances are they bought them in lots and ended up with leftover user-quality tools. They usually want to get rid of these tools about as badly as you want to add them to your tool kit.

There are also tool dealers who don't send out lists. To order from them, you may have to depend on the description given to you over the phone. That said, those listed on the facing page have solid reputations for representing their tools accurately and standing behind them after the sale.

Some of my favorite finds came from antiques shops. I recently came across an entire 1920s set of Stanley-Bailey handplanes tucked away in a shop corner. All seven were in good working shape, and I bought the lot for less than \$300.

I also go to the occasional yard sale or estate sale and find good tools. I once found a set of Craftsman chisels that I got for almost nothing, and they turned out to be as fine as any chisel in my shop. □

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