

Marking Knives

These must do more than follow a straightedge

BY STEVE LATTA

The marking knife seems like such a simple tool that it would be easy to dismiss it as little more than a blade and a handle. But we all know better: Marking out with a knife instead of a pencil means that you care about the details. So it makes sense to focus on the details when choosing the knife. A good marking knife will do a number of things well. It will cut wood fibers cleanly, leaving a narrow, crisply defined line, easily visible and deep enough to anchor a chisel. The blade will fit into tight spaces and the tool will be easy to hold in a pencil-style grip.

That said, individual needs and preferences do play a role in choosing a knife. I do a lot of inlay, for example. For me, a skew point with two bevels and a slightly

Five tests for a good knife

SCRIBING

Scoring a line against a rule. Latta looked for cleanly defined, narrow lines deep enough to anchor a chisel.

DOVETAILS

Marking for dovetail pins. The narrow spacing of these dovetails puts a premium on blade size and shape, testing each knife's ability to strike a line in confined quarters.

Photos: Steve Scott

flexible blade is key for accurately marking out bellflowers and bandings. Also, because I move around a lot between student benches in a large shop, I favor a small, lightweight knife that I can carry in my apron. You might be surprised to learn that I've used a simple X-Acto for many years.

My friend Bess, on the other hand, builds tall-case clocks with huge dovetails in their hoods. She finds a large marking knife with a long, thick blade best suited to the task. Fellow contributing editor Chris Becksvort recommends having a variety of marking knives handy but says he personally favors a straight chip-carving knife. The bottom line: One size or style does not fit all.

I sought to keep that in mind and to set aside my own preferences as I sampled more than a dozen knives representing the most common designs among the many knives on the market. Some are specifically for layout. Others are carving or craft knives popular with woodworkers as layout tools. I was eager to see whether any of them would make me want to give up my trusty X-Acto.

A good knife handles a variety of tasks

I put each knife through five tests, each a real-world woodworking task:

Scoring a line—With the blade riding against a combination square, I struck a line

And the winners are ...

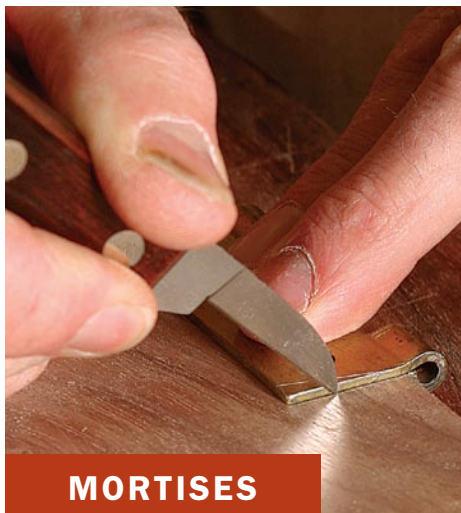
Three knives scored very highly on the full range of tests, with hardly a scribe line of space between them overall. Each had its own unique strengths. The Blue Spruce felt great in the hand, and its long, reinforced spearpoint blade and flat back made it a champ at laying out dovetails. Hock's double-beveled skew point features a heavy blade that stayed solidly on track in all situations. The X-Acto's thin, flexible blade left a deep, narrow line, carried a line easily around a corner, and was nimble enough to trace delicate inlays. The slim cylindrical handle fit comfortably in the hand and in an apron pocket.

I'm hard-pressed to pick a favorite among these three—any one of them would be a smart buy. However, the low cost of the X-Acto makes it a perfect first knife. It may be a long while before you need a second.



Online Extra

To see how Steve Latta tested the knives, go to FineWoodworking.com/extras.



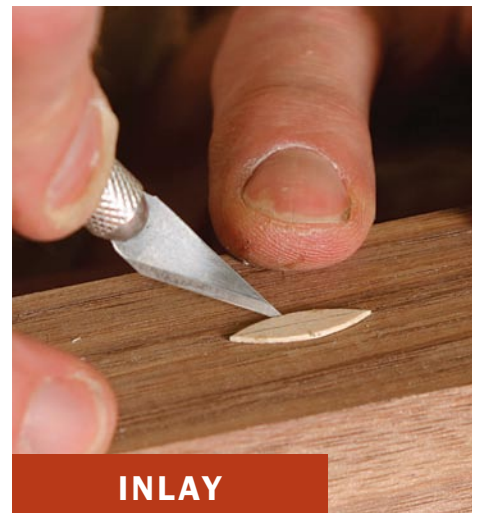
MORTISES

Tracing a hinge. This involves cutting both with and across the grain. After tracing the hinge, Latta made the lines deeper, testing how well the knife tracked in a channel.



BANDING

Marking for a banding. This task is easier with a knife that works well cutting either toward or away from the user. The test also gauged a knife's ability to carry a line around a corner.



INLAY

Tracing the boundaries of an inlay mortise. A flexible blade works best for this intricate work. The lines must be crisp, but not too wide, because the inlay must fit tightly in the recess.

Marking knives



SINGLE-BEVEL SKEW

These tapered blades, beveled on one side, are often sold in matched pairs. They are meant to be pulled in one direction with the flat back riding against a straightedge. Reversing direction for bandings or mortises was a challenge. For closely spaced dovetails, where the beveled side of the blade must ride the reference surface in tight quarters, the thicker blades simply couldn't do the job.

DOUBLE-BEVEL SKEW

These perform equally well with either side against the work, so you can use them in either hand, whether pulling toward or away from you. The bevels on most are shallow enough that the edge can be held tight to the work without angling the knife too steeply. As with the single-bevel skewers, the wider blades sport a much longer edge than is necessary.



SPEARPOINT

These knives, single beveled with a pointed tip, performed consistently well. The blade shape allowed them to easily mark crisp lines going in either direction. Steeper points like those on the Hock and Blue Spruce left the most precise lines and easily fit into the spaces between dovetails. Models with thicker blades may feel sturdier; the tradeoff is a wider line at any given depth.

CARVING KNIVES

Characterized by long, narrow, twin-bevel blades that resemble those on a small pocket knife, most of these performed adequately, leaving fair to decent line quality. The blade's narrow profile and long reach make it great for tight spaces. The Flexcut had an excellent blade, but its handle, designed for rough carving, wasn't suited to the pencil-style grip that is best for layout.



| MODEL/SOURCE | STREET PRICE |
|---|--------------|
| SINGLE-BEVEL SKEW KNIVES | |
| Crown Tools www.rockler.com | \$12 |
| Japanese marking knife www.highlandwoodworking.com | \$13 |
| Laminated marking knife www.toolsforworkingwood.com | \$12 |
| Narex ½ in. www.highlandwoodworking.com | \$20 |
| DOUBLE-BEVEL SKEW KNIVES | |
| GarrettWade www.garrettwade.com | \$30 |
| Hock violin knife www.hocktools.com | \$31 |
| Western pattern knife www.japanwoodworker.com | \$19 |
| X-Acto No. 1 knife www.staples.com | \$4 |
| SPEARPOINT MARKING KNIVES | |
| Blue Spruce Toolworks www.bluesprucetoolworks.com | \$45 |
| Chester Toolworks www.chestertoolworks.com | \$39 |
| Hock marking knife www.hocktools.com | \$31 |
| Blue steel www.japanwoodworker.com | \$18 |
| CARVING KNIVES | |
| Flexcut roughing knife www.leevalley.com | \$21 |
| Oar Carver www.toolsforworkingwood.com | \$32 |
| Chip-carving knife www.woodcraft.com | \$15 |
| Two Cherries chip-carving knife www.toolsforworkingwood.com | \$19 |

across 5-in.-wide pieces of walnut and curly maple. I was looking for quality of line in both softer and harder material.

Dovetailing—I marked out a pin board for a set of narrowly spaced tails across a 6-in.-wide piece of ¾-in. stock. The narrow spacing tested each knife's ability to strike a line in confined quarters.

Laying out for a hinge mortise—I set a 1-in. by 1½-in. hinge against the edge

| SCORING WALNUT / MAPLE | DOVETAILS | HINGE | BANDING | INLAY | COMMENTS |
|---------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|---|
| Good / Fair | Very good | Good | Fair | Good | Can be purchased in left- and right-handed pairs. |
| Good / Fair | Poor | Fair | Good | Good | Back is hollow ground for easier sharpening. |
| Very good / Very good | Very good | Good | Poor | Fair | Excessive blade length makes some tasks awkward. |
| Fair / Fair | Poor | Fair | Fair | Good | Thick blade and short bevel performed poorly in tight quarters. |
| Good / Good | Good | Good | Poor | Fair | Excessive blade length is awkward. |
| Very good / Excellent | Very good | Very good | Excellent | Good | A single piece of steel forms both blade and handle. |
| Very good / Excellent | Very good | Very good | Very good | Very good | Similar in design and appearance to the Hock. |
| Excellent / Excellent | Very good | Very good | Excellent | Very good | Package of 5 Modified #11 replacement blades, under \$3 at www.dickblick.com |
| Excellent / Excellent | Very good | Very good | Very good | Very good | Versatile blade design, comfortable turned handle |
| Very good / Very good | Very good | Very good | Good | Very good | Thicker blade than Blue Spruce |
| Excellent / Very good | Very good | Good | Very good | Good | Like Hock's violin knife, can be fitted with a wooden handle. |
| Excellent / Very good | Very good | Fair | Good | Good | Back is hollow ground. |
| Excellent / Excellent | Good | Very good | Very good | Good | Terrific blade. Handle shape is awkward for some layout tasks. |
| Very good / Excellent | Very good | Very good | Very good | Good | Sturdy blade, comfortable handle |
| Fair / Fair | Good | Fair | Fair | Good | Common straight-blade chip-carving design |
| Good / Good | Good | Fair | Good | Good | Design very similar to Woodcraft |

of a walnut board and traced it out. This involves cutting both with and across the grain. I set the marking knife on the edge and cut back to the rear of the plate. Then I removed the hinge and made the lines deeper by running the knife in the channel. This tests the knife's ability to track in an already established groove.

Marking out for a banding—I scored one line running all the way around a ta-

pered walnut table leg, pulling the knife away from me. I then ran a second line with the knife coming toward me. This test helped me gauge the ease of handling the knife and whether both sides of the blade could easily be held tight to the work. It also demonstrated how easily each knife could carry a line around a corner.

Tracing for a bellflower—This is intricate work best done with a thin blade.

A line is scored around a small petal and then excavated with a tiny router plane. The knife lines must be precise enough to ensure a snug fit for the inlay and deep enough to provide a stop for the router plane's iron. The line must be crisp but not wide, or the final recess will be too big. □

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