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POPULAR WOODWORKING

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Best New Tools of 2005

We test a fair number of tools and machines here at *Popular Woodworking*, but some years generate a different crop of “Best New Tools” than other years.

In 2005, we actually didn’t get to test as many of the serious cast-iron machines as we usually like. This wasn’t part of some plan, it just worked out that way. Look for us to make up some time in that department in 2006. But as a result, you aren’t going to see any table saws, planers or band saws on this year’s list.

The other thing fertilizing this particular harvest of new tools has been the undeniable bumper crop of high-quality hand tools. For years, this sleepy side of the tool-making world was dominated by big corporations that weren’t investing in innovations in quality hand tools.

And as these tools slipped in quality, many woodworkers became uninterested in using them. But thanks to Veritas, Lie-Nielsen Toolworks and other small manufacturers, we are officially in a second golden age of hand-tool manufacturing. Many of the hand tools available today are as good (or even better) than those produced during the creative apogee of our craft.

If you’ve ever been frustrated by your dime-store chisels or flea-market planes, I urge you to try again. Purchase a small block plane or a chisel from one of these new companies and I bet you’ll find that it will flip a switch in your head. These tools really work.

As always, the hand-held power tool market is highly competitive, and the new crop of these tools has some big surprises. Who knew that you could make a lami-

nate trimmer this powerful (Bosch did), or that you could make a jig-saw that cuts right up to a wall (DeWalt found a way).

One last note: We’ve tested all these tools in our shop. You might not agree with our preferences, but they are real and they’re based on some real shop time by woodworkers just like you.

— Christopher Schwarz,
editor



The Winners

Bosch

DeWalt

Festool

Grex

JessEm

Jet

Lie-Nielsen

Powell Manufacturing

Ray Iles

Veritas

■ Grex 23-gauge Headless Pinner

888-447-3926 or grexusa.com

In the interest of full disclosure, know this: We're fools for 23-gauge headless pinners. There's no better pneumatic tool for attaching delicate mouldings without worrying about splitting the work.

The only limitation we've encountered with these fine air guns is that they generally only fire pins up to 1" in length. That does get you most of the way there, but more often than not, we want a 1 $\frac{3}{8}$ " pin for attaching $\frac{3}{4}$ "- or $\frac{7}{8}$ "-thick moulding. Our prayers to the pneumatic goddess were answered this year with the Grex P635 headless pinner.

This tool goes to 1 $\frac{3}{8}$ " (1 $\frac{1}{8}$ " and 1 $\frac{3}{8}$ " pins are available from suppliers). If that's all the tool did, we'd be happy. But the Grex goes a step further; it's a well-designed gun.

The fit and finish is excellent, for starters. It also exhausts out the rear and has a silencer. The safety on the gun is both safe and convenient. And the magazine for loading the pins is thoughtfully designed: A small metal clip keeps the pins from falling out of the magazine when you open it up, and the magazine automatically adjusts for different pin sizes (some pinners require you to reconfigure the magazine when you change to a different length). Plus, the tool's shape and size allow you to get in tight spaces under mouldings. It's pricey (\$199) but we're completely sold.



■ JessEm MastRSlide 7500

866-272-7492 or jessem.com

For more than a decade, we've struggled to find the perfect crosscutting attachment for our table saw. We've been through other sliding tables and just about every high-end aftermarket miter gauge.

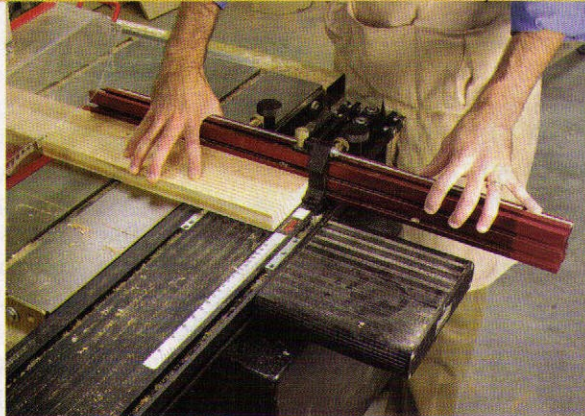
All left something to be desired for us, but we've been especially frustrated by the sliding tables. The ones that sit on the shop floor go out of alignment with just a hip check. Others tables just couldn't hold the tolerances we wanted during normal use.

Our search for the perfect sliding table ended this year with the JessEm MastRSlide (\$540). This table system takes up little space, is lightweight, has all the capacity a traditional shop would want and can be used on a saw with a mobile base.

But the real reason we love it is this: You can make a square crosscut, remove the fence for ripping and

then return to crosscutting without realigning everything. No other sliding table system has given us that feature day-in, day-out.

The JessEm does a lot of fancy mitering tricks, and the fence can be positioned at the front edge, back edge or near the middle of the sliding carriage. And the fence telescopes to handle stock up to 48" long. You'll be seeing it in step-by-step photos in future editions of our magazine – this one is a keeper.



■ JET Parallel-jaw Clamp

800-274-6848 or jettools.com

We've always been particular in our preference for the red Bessey parallel-jaw clamps in our shop. But this year Jet has introduced its own line of red parallel-jaw clamps that in many ways are better than our trusty Bessey K-bodies.

These Jet clamps are far less fussy to engage and release. They have bigger clamping faces that allow them to be used on edge. They have a kickstand at the end of the bar to prevent the clamps from tipping up. They can be turned into a spreader clamp. The handles are bigger and easier to grip.

And, of course, the Jets apply all the pressure right where you need it with almost no flexing of the bar (we tested all of the clamps in our shop and found

these flex the least). And although we've been using them for less than a year, we anticipate they will be quite durable. The main screw thread is a tough Acme-style design. And we've dropped them repeatedly with no damage to the red composite resin cladding.

Available in 12" to 98" lengths, we found the Jets priced between \$33 and \$70 each, depending on the size. This actually was a bit more than K-body clamps at press time, so be sure to shop around when you're ready to buy because prices could change.

