

A New Saw to Fit an Old Standard

by J. R. Mann

In January 1991, one of a contractor's worst fears became my reality. My van was broken into and all my power tools were stolen. I was able to borrow some tools to stay in business. Meanwhile, I asked everyone I knew which tools were the best buys. Though I would have never wished for this to happen, at least it was a good chance for me to start over with the best.

My biggest quandary was which circular saw to choose. I could no longer get a Rockwell, which I had had before. So I set my sights on the other top American-made 7¼-inch circular saws — the Milwaukee 6367, the Porter-Cable 617, and the Black & Decker 2694 — hoping to find one that would match the standards I was used to.

Through the *Journal*, I was given the opportunity to test each of these saws for over a year before I purchased one. While there wasn't

of this. In an effort to repair the reputation of their industrial-grade tools, Black & Decker has given many of them a new name — DeWalt, a name which long ago earned the approval of the trades with excellent radial arm saws. Black & Decker also added a few new tools to complete the DeWalt line. The Super Sawcat — once labeled the Black & Decker 2694 — is now sold to the building trades as the DeWalt DW364.

Performance Features

All the saws I tested have 13 amp motors that turn at 5,800 rpm. Nevertheless, I heard several times from my crew that the Super Sawcat seemed more powerful. I attribute this to ease of control. The saw is well balanced and the adjustments are very smooth.

Adjusting the depth-of-cut on the Super Sawcat is much easier

two saws, I have to turn each upside down and hold a tape measure to the blade to get an accurate adjustment.

The Super Sawcat's shoe tilts to 50 degrees rather than the standard 45 degrees. We found this helpful when cutting bevels on hip jacks and rafters. The tilt gauge at the front of the saw is marked for every degree, whereas the Porter Cable and the Milwaukee are marked every five degrees.

The Super Sawcat has a larger than average shoe, measuring an exact 5½ inches to the left and 1½ inches to the right of the blade. One of my carpenters, who is left-handed, found that markings on the toe of the shoe make it easier to line up a cut. The bold markings every ½ inch across the

front make it easy to rip by following the edge of a board, without drawing or snapping a line.

To change the blade, the shaft lock on the Super Sawcat is conveniently placed at the front of the saw. By contrast, the Milwaukee shaft lock is in an *continued from page 59*

awkward place at the back of the saw, and the Porter Cable doesn't have one. With these other two saws, it works best to retract the blade guard so the blade can bite into a piece of lumber when you loosen the blade.

I do have one pet peeve with all the saws. I have five blade-changing wrenches in my general toolbox, and not one of them has any markings to identify which saw it goes with. Of course, they are all



The author chose the Black & Decker Super Sawcat for its precision engineering and smart ergonomics. The saw is now sold as the DeWalt DW364.

a bad saw in the lot, the Black & Decker Super Sawcat was the one saw favored by me, my crew, and the other contractors who used it.

New Name

I was surprised by my choice. Though it came well recommended, of all the saws I tested, I was most skeptical of the Black & Decker. I had always believed that they make cheap tools for homeowners and throwaways for contractors. I know a master carpenter who specializes in boat finish work who likes that type of saw so he doesn't feel bad when it falls overboard. That was the last kind of tool I wanted to buy.

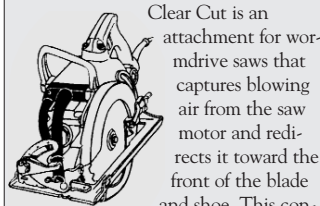
Black & Decker once signified a professional tool of choice. But when the company catered heavily to the consumer market in the 1970s and '80s, a lot of tradespeople — myself included — lost sight

than it is on the other two saws. The Porter-Cable and Milwaukee saws have a drop-foot mechanism that tends to stick, and I usually end up having to push, pull, and bang to get a careful adjustment. I tried greasing the slide mechanism, which then gummed up with saw dust.

By contrast, the Super Sawcat features a unique design that works very well. By loosening the front handle and pushing forward, the saw pivots, rather than drops, into position. This is combined with an accurate depth-of-cut gauge that is clearly marked in fractions of an inch on the top of the blade guard. (The indicator on this gauge is adjustable, as well, so it can always be kept true.) Because the depth adjustment is so easy to use, I find myself adjusting the depth of cut every time I cut different thicknesses of lumber. With the other

TOOLBITS

Dust blower. The Clear Cut is such an ingenious device, you'll kick yourself for not thinking of it first. The

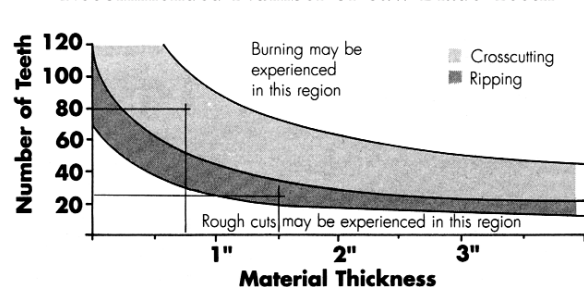


Clear Cut is an attachment for worm-drive saws that captures blowing air from the saw motor and redirects it toward the front of the blade and shoe. This concentrated air stream clears away sawdust, so you have a clear line of sight when cutting. The Clear Cut retails for about \$13. For more information, contact R&A Tool & Engineering, 935 American St., San Carlos, CA 94070; 415/508-1934.

Choosing a saw blade. If you're overwhelmed by the variety of saw blades and aren't sure which blade to use on a job, you might want to check out Freud's new saw blade catalog. While the catalog is inherently out to sell Freud blades, it offers a lot of general technical information, such as blade sizing charts (see table below), descriptions of carbide types and tooth configurations, tips for getting the most appropriate cut, and a glossary of saw blade terminology that will help sort out the many features available on today's blades. Single copies are available free from Freud, P.O. Box 7187, High Point, NC 27264; 919/434-3171.

— Clayton DeKorne

Recommended Number of Saw Blade Teeth



Note: The optimum number of teeth on a saw blade depends on the thickness of the material you are cutting. The gray bands on the chart indicate the minimum and maximum number of teeth that should be used for crosscutting (light gray band) and ripping (dark gray band). To get the smoothest possible cut without burning, choose the number of teeth in the middle of each band. For example, the best blade for crosscutting a ¾-inch board has 80 teeth, and the best blade for ripping a 1½-inch board has 24 teeth.

different; the third one I try is usually the right one. Please, Mr. Saw Maker, at least stamp your logo on it.

Safety Features

The Super Sawcat has a trigger guard which I didn't think I liked until my helper picked up another saw with his finger on the trigger, accidentally started the saw, startled himself, and dropped the saw. No harm done that time, but I thought better of the trigger guard after that.

OSHA requires, and good sense demands, that goggles be worn when cutting with a power saw. But I do like the way the Super Sawcat directs the sawdust down and away from the saw. It is much easier to follow a line without sawdust blowing in your face.

The Super Sawcat has an electric brake, which is an especially nice feature when working in a finished home. One morning I

watched a carpenter set a circular saw down on the carpet. It hadn't stopped turning and the blade guard failed to bounce back to cover the blade. It unraveled a line almost 8 feet long in the wall-to-wall carpet before it came to a halt. Luckily, the client was planning to replace the carpet anyway! With an electric brake, the blade of the Super Sawcat stops by the time the saw is set down. I also like the electric brake when I'm cutting only part way into a board or making a pocket cut. When the blade touches my mark and I let go of the trigger, the blade stops almost instantly.

Overall, the precise control and the attention to engineering detail and ergonomics make Black & Decker's Super Sawcat a pleasure to use. ■

Guest columnist J. R. Mann is a remodeling contractor in Merrick, N.Y.