



Getting More From An Extension Ladder

by Clayton DeKorne

An extension ladder is frequently used as scaffolding — that is, as a place to work rather than just a means of getting up there. Among the scaffolding options available, a ladder is one of the most versatile. But it is also one of the least stable and most difficult to work on. If you use a ladder for more than just climbing up and down, it's worth taking a look at a few accessories that can safely extend the use of your ladder.

If the Shoe Fits...

OSHA requires all manufactured extension ladders to have ladder shoes. There are two standard shoe types — hoop feet and swivel feet. Both have rubber soles to grip on smooth surfaces.

I once worked for a guy who religiously removed the shoes from his ladders. He hated battling with stuck swivel feet, and he claimed any shoe prevented the ladder feet from digging into wet grass. The OSHA inspector who visited our site, however, did not agree with this rationale, pointing out that the bare ends of the aluminum rails wouldn't hold well when we moved the ladder onto the sidewalk on the other side of the house.

The contractor did have a point, though. Rubber shoes can slip in wet grass. What he should have on his ladder feet, however, is a pair of retractable spur feet. At least one company, Bauer Corporation (P.O. Box 165, Wooster, OH 44691; 800/321-4760, or 800/821-9408 in Ohio), makes spur feet for fiberglass ladders that swing out of the way when not needed. These are a variation on spike feet and spur wheels, which are used by many line workers on their ladders.

There are a number of accessories to secure the top end of the ladder, as well. Most ladder companies sell cable hooks and pole lashing, such as seen on line workers' ladders, and rubber house pads that fit over the top of the rails. House pads are protective mitts that keep the siding intact. They are meant to replace the old rags you might otherwise be tying over the rail ends, but they should not be used in place of the plastic end caps on your ladder. If the end cap has broken off, have the ladder repaired.

Perhaps the most useful accessory for the top end of a ladder is a stand-off stabilizer, which holds the ladder at a comfortable working

distance from the wall. Both Bauer and Lynn Ladder and Scaffolding Company (P.O. Box 346, West Lynn, MA 01905-0646; 617/598-6010) are good sources of supply.

On The Level

It's rare that you get to set up a ladder on a perfectly level base. More often the ground slopes, the front steps are in the way, or there's a rock garden just where you need to set up your ladder. What do you do in this case?

OSHA specifies that ladders must be placed on a "substantial" base. This leaves a lot of room for interpretation, however. In the field this usually means blocking the legs of the ladder with whatever



The Level-Eze ladder leveler, shown above, automatically adjusts to a 9-inch difference in grade. The legs extend when weight is taken off the ladder, and lock into position when the ladder is set back down.

er scrap happens to be at hand, including old paint lids and rocks. (I've been as guilty of this as anybody.)

A much easier and safer solution is to mount a pair of *Level-Eze* automatic ladder levelers at the base of the ladder. By just picking the ladder up to take the weight off the feet, these extension legs can adjust to any difference in grade.

Inside the leveler, a gear locks into a series of notches running the length of the leveler. When weight is lifted off the ladder, a spring disengages the gear, allowing the feet to slide. It takes only seven pounds of pressure to lock the leveler in position — less than the weight of the ladder — and the mechanism will reportedly support over 300 pounds, more than the duty rating of a Type 1A lad-

der. The levelers comply with OSHA and UL standards. According to the manufacturer, adding these levelers to a ladder will not change the duty rating of the ladder.

Level-Eze ladder levelers can be bolted onto the outside rails of any aluminum or fiberglass ladder. The installation is a little tricky, but it only takes about half an hour. Jer-shon (P.O. Box 35, Shelby, MI 49455; 616/861-2900) is the primary manufacturer of this type of leveler, but they are also distributed by the R. D. Werner Company (P.O. Box 580, Greenville, PA 16125; 412/588-8600) under the trade name *Level-Master*.

These automatic levelers retail for about \$70 per pair. If you think that's expensive, it ain't nothing compared to the potential workers compensation increases. And once the ladder levelers are on your ladders, the crew will have to use them.

Ladder Jacks

Ladder jacks won't take the place of pump jacks when you're working at many different levels. For siding, for example, it would be very time-consuming to keep adjusting the height of the ladder and the jacks to position you at the right height and distance from the wall. In addition, OSHA limits the height of ladder jacks to 20 feet above ground.

But for some jobs, such as running fascia where you are working at a constant height, ladder jacks make the fastest platform to move around the house. Ladder jacks can also be used on the roof, where they prove to be the least destructive to the roof surface. This makes them especially useful for repair work.

There is considerable variation in ladder jack design, each suited to a particular kind of ladder. If you have a wood ladder, you'll have to use ladder jacks that attach to the side rails. The side-mounting type is very stable, but time-consuming to install.

On fiberglass ladders your only option is the rung type. These adjustable aluminum brackets usually fit any O- and D-rung ladder, but are recommended for use on Type 1 and Type 1A ladders only. Stinson (P.O. Box 3644, Spokane, Washington 99220; 800/932-2885) makes the best one I've seen so far.



The Ladder-Brace makes a simple-to-use ladder jack for repair work on a pitched roof.

All types will work on an aluminum ladder, but the simplest, most versatile ladder jack I've seen is the *Ladder-Brace*, (Maria Soccoro Industries, 7791 Capital Blvd., Suite 1, Macedonia, OH 44056; 800/628-1322). The bracket simply fits into the holes of any 1-inch O- and D-rung aluminum ladder, so mounting takes almost no time. The spring tension of the brackets holds them in place, but I find it necessary to wrap a bungie cord around them to secure them. Without the bungie, the brackets have a way of gradually working out of their holes.

Two brackets must be used on each ladder to adequately support the plank. As a scaffold platform, the manufacturer recommends hanging the brackets under the ladder and sliding the plank through each bracket. Depending on where I'm working, however, I sometimes prefer to mount the brackets on top of the ladder, so I'm standing a little farther away from the wall's surface. This is a must for cornice work. When they're mounted over the ladder, it's absolutely necessary to lash the plank to the brackets, and it's harder to climb onto the plank from the ladder.

As a roof bracket, the plank is always tipped up perpendicular to the roof surface. On steep roofs, where I really want a secure place to stand, I once again lash the plank to the brackets with a bungie cord. However, on 6:12 and flatter roofs, where I'm less dependent on the platform, the angle of the plank is steeper than I would like.

The manufacturer advertises the *Ladder-Jack* as a roof hook for roof scaffolding, too, but I wouldn't trust it to hold on roofs steeper than 6:12. I prefer steel roof hooks that clamp onto the top two rungs of each ladder (available from Bauer and Lynn Ladder and Scaffolding).

The *Ladder-Brace* works okay as a gutter stand-off, one of its other advertised uses. But OSHA inspectors want to see ladders extend at least 36 inches above the eaves edge, so if you use the jacks as a stand-off, make sure to mount the brackets far enough down to satisfy this requirement. ■