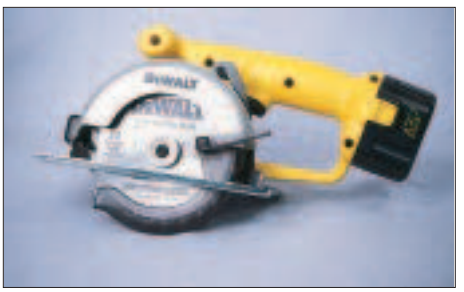
New Cordless Saws

by Clayton DeKorne

DeWalt just introduced a couple of cordless saws that promise to transform builders' ideas about the capabilities of battery-operated tools. These two saws — one powered by a 12-volt ni-cad, the other by a 14.4-volt ni-cad — both have 5 3/8-inch blades. Each one is light enough (6 lb. 8 oz.) to carry just about anywhere and use comfortably with one hand. But they are still strong enough to do some significant cutting. As a result, these new saws have the capacity to actually change the way we work.

No Comparison

Cordless saws have been around for years. Makita was the first to introduce both a small 9.6-volt model with a 3 3/8-inch blade and a larger 10.8-volt model with a 6 1/2-inch blade. Hitachi used to offer a 6 1/2-inch, 10.8-volt model, too, but this saw has since been discontinued. Then a couple of years ago, Skil introduced a 12-volt model with a 3 3/8-inch blade, similar to the small Makita.



The 14.4-volt DeWalt cordless saw can cut up to seventy-five 2x4s on a single charge. With this much power, it becomes the punchlist saw par excellence.

The two small cordless saws fill a class by themselves. They are strictly specialty saws. At a street price below $100, both the small Makita and Skil saws are revered by contractors for cutting plastic pipe used for ventilation exhausts and drainpipes, and for trimming shingles, clapboards, and vinyl siding panels. For another $100 or so, both saws come set up with a diamond blade and water reservoir, making them effective tile cutters for small jobs and specialty cuts. However, with a maximum depth of cut of only 7/8 inch and limited battery power, they can't be classified as general-purpose cutters.

Only the 6 1/2-inch Makita (or the old Hitachi), which has a depth of cut of 2 1/8 inches, can be legitimately compared with the new DeWalts. But even this is a stretch. While the big Makita can cut a 2x4, it bogs down in plywood, cutting only about half as much material on a single charge as the DeWalt saws. The old Makita is also much larger and not quite as light and maneuverable as the new DeWalts.

Performance Testing

I tested both the 12- and the 14.4-volt DeWalt models. With a cutting depth of 1 3/4 inches, and powerful 1.7 amp-hour batteries, these saws can easily handle 2x lumber. In fact, with a new blade and a full charge, the 12-volt model cut through sixty 2x4s. The 14.4-volt model cut 75. I made these cuts continuously, releasing the trigger between each cut. The little saws plowed right through each cut, knots and all. I cut nearly as fast as I would with a regular circular saw. While I could hear the motor bog down, the blade hardly slowed down at all until just near the end of the charge. At that point I eased up, going a little slower for the last ten cuts. Near knots, these saws are more likely to jam. And any of the conditions that would cause a saw to kickback, such as twisting the blade to get back on the cut line or overfeeding the saw, are likely to bog these saws down.

I laid into a pile of plywood next. Again with a full charge (but with a blade that had just cut a pile of 2x4s), I was able to cut 20 linear feet (five crosscuts of a 4x8 panel) of 3/4-inch CDX with the 12-volt model, and 30 linear feet with the 14.4-volt. After charging the batteries again (but still using the same blade), I cut 52 linear feet of 1/2-inch CDX with the 12-volt model, and 68 linear feet with the 14.4-volt. When cutting plywood, it's great not to have a cord that snags on the edge of the sheet.

Identical Design

Except for the greater voltage of the 14.4-volt model, both models are identical. They feature the same 24-tooth carbide blade with an ultra-thin kerf (a fat 1/16 inch), the same housings (with the blade to the left, as on a wormdrive saw), and the same cutting capacities. It's worth noting that the increased power of the 14.4-volt model mostly increases the number of cuts you can make. You can't take any larger cuts. But the 14.4-volt saw seems slightly stronger, allowing you to cut a bit faster.

Punchlist Saws

I doubt these are saws you'd want to use all day long, even if you had a pile of batteries. Nevertheless, they have the power to make a variety of tough cuts, and because they're exceptionally lightweight and maneuverable, you can do things in a way you wouldn't have otherwise. For example, when strapping a ceiling, you can make all the cuts in the air. These are the saws I'd grab for retrofitting continuous strip vent in a soffit panel, or for any other overhead work. Anytime you're on the roof or on scaffolding, it's probably worth having one of these saws within reach, to make whatever adjustments you need to avoid passing a piece of material back down to a worker at the cutting station. These are also the saws to drag with you through the crawlspace, or up a ladder, to cut that odd piece of blocking, length of ridge vent, or the opening for a gable end vent. Overall, they are punchlist saws par excellence.

The new DeWalts sell for about $220 and $250, respectively, in a kit that includes saw, blade, charger, and a well-designed metal case. Like any cordless tool, I recommend you buy an extra battery, which will cost an extra $50. There's nothing more frustrating than cutting halfway through a sheet of plywood and having the tool cut out. ■