

New 15-Gauge Finish Nailers

by Claude Leger

I recently tried out 15-gauge finish nailers from Porter Cable and Makita. I was curious about these guns because they're made by well-known power tool companies that just started selling pneumatic nailers in the U.S. Plus, the Makita and PC guns sell for between \$250 and \$280, a lot less than comparable Senco or Bostich guns. The prices were right, but I wanted to see what you get for the money.

Better Nails

Ten years ago, when I bought my first 15-gauge finish nailer, most guns took 16-gauge nails. If you've installed much trim, you know how tough it is to get 16-gauge fasteners to go through hardwood without bending. While it may not sound like a big difference, the 15-gauge nails are much stiffer. And unlike 16-gauge nails, which have tiny heads that tend to pull through softwood, 15-gauge fasteners actually look like real nails. Also, the guns that shoot the heavier nails are more maneuverable because their magazines tilt up and away from the tip. This makes it possible to come at the stock from almost any angle. Until recently, carpenters who wanted to use 15-gauge nails had to use Senco or Bostich guns. I still use the Senco SFN1 I bought in the mid-1980s, but it only drives 4d and 6d nails. For a while, I had an SFN2 so I could drive 8d nails, but I didn't like using it because it was too large and heavy.

A year or so after Senco started making 15-gauge nailers, Bostich introduced the N60FN. The nice thing about this gun was that it drove 4d, 6d, and 8d nails, and it wasn't all that heavy. Then a few years ago, Senco introduced the SFN40. I know a lot of

carpenters who bought one, because the gun had many nice features and drove every size of finish nail.

Porter Cable DA250

Now it seems as if every tool maker is coming out with a 15-gauge finish nailer. The first gun I tested was Porter

Weight Comparison

Senco SFN1	4.3 lb.
Bostich N60FN	4.6 lb.
Senco SFN40	4.7 lb.
Makita AF631	5.5 lb.
Porter Cable DA250	5.7 lb.
Porter Cable DA250A	6.0 lb.

Cable's DA250. Like the Bostich gun, the magazine is offset to make it easier for right-handers to work in corners or close to the floor. But I'm left-handed, so the handle configuration made it harder for me to maneuver the gun.

The DA250 was also noticeably heavier than the SFN40 I use at work, but the extra weight doesn't translate into extra power. To test power, I loaded each gun with 2 1/2-inch nails and drove them into a 3-inch-thick piece of oak. It's not something a carpenter normally has to do, but it's a good way to find out if one nailer is more powerful than another. The DA250 and the SFN40 both drove the nails home, but the heavier gun seemed to have a harder time doing it.

The DA250 has a number of annoying features. First, its exhaust port isn't adjustable, so air blasts straight out the front after every shot. This means dry-wall and plaster dust blow back at you when you nail baseboard. Second, the rubber button on the tip is large, so it's hard to get the nose into low spots on molding. Finally, although a nut on the safety linkage looks like a depth



Porter Cable
DA250

setting mechanism, the only way to change the depth of drive is to fool with the pressure in the air line.

DA250A

I was surprised to see how quickly Porter Cable came out with the DA250A, an improved version of the DA250 that solved some of the design problems in the earlier model. In addition to a rubber grip on the handle, the DA250A has an adjustable exhaust port so you can aim the air blast in any direction you want. The button on the tip was replaced with a rubber sleeve similar to the one on the SFN40. The new tip makes it easier to place fasteners accurately and get the nose into tight spots. The safety linkage was also redesigned to tuck tight to the side of the gun where it's less likely to get damaged.



Porter Cable
DA250A

Best of all, the DA250A has a mechanism that lets you change the depth of drive by turning a wheel on the nose. (Bostich and Senco have offered this feature for years; I've often wondered why any company would make a finish nailer without it.)

On the downside, the DA250A still has an offset magazine and is even heavier than the DA250.



The author found the tip protector on the Makita nailer (right) to be too large, but liked the depth adjuster, which has index points that make it easy to duplicate previous settings. On the Porter Cable nailer (left), the rubber bumper that covers the wire-bale tip is smaller, making it easier to place nails accurately in tight spots. A small, knurled thumb-wheel on the linkage changes the depth of drive.

Makita AF631

Makita made and sold pneumatic nailers in Japan for a long time before it started selling them in the U.S. My first impression of the AF631 was of a sleek well-thought-out gun. It's compact and has a magazine that's in line with the handle, which makes for good maneuverability. Rubber bumper strips on the sides of the piston housing keep it from sliding off slick surfaces.

Most carpenters use short nails to fasten casings to jambs and long ones to fasten casings to the wall, so they end up changing back and forth between nail sizes. It's easier to do this with the Makita than with either of the Porter Cable guns. To remove nails from the AF631, you pop the feed mechanism and they slide right out. With a Porter Cable gun, you have to pop two separate clips to get the nails out. Another nice thing about the Makita gun is that it won't

fire when it's empty. This prevents you from accidentally punching a bunch of useless holes in your trim.

On the downside, the exhaust port isn't adjustable, and the tip protector is a large button. The depth adjuster, however, is really slick. It has a series of index points so you can duplicate previous settings without trial and error.

Unfortunately, the AF631 didn't want to set nails. This wasn't for

lack of power, however. It

had no trouble driving

2¹/₂-inch nails into solid

oak; it just wouldn't set

them. If I held the gun hard

against the stock, the nails ended

up slightly below the surface. After

I removed the rubber tip, however,

the AF631 had no trouble setting

nails. It seemed to me that Makita had

designed the gun tip without consider-

ing how thick the protective button was

going to be. ■



**Makita
AF631**

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