

SITE TEST: Coil Siding Nailers

Coil nailers that can shoot a 2¹/₄- or 2¹/₂-inch-long siding nail are among the newest air guns on the market.

by Steve Farrell

This is one nailer category that holds particular interest to my company. The Farrell Company will do about \$3 million worth of remodeling business this year, all in a very high-end residential market. Each year, we install several thousand square feet of various types of wood siding — including finger-jointed redwood and wood shingles, as well as manmade horizontal sidings, such as fiber-cement board and premium hardboards. For this work, air guns excel. In our labor-competitive market, we can't afford to do this nailing by hand. But we also can't afford to mess around with overdriven nails, jams, or misfires.

With all this in mind, our crews set out to examine five new siding nailers. We were looking for a reliable, lightweight tool that would drive consistently with a minimum amount of hassle to the operator. After using the nailers for several months, here's what we found.

Wire vs. Plastic

Dealing with nail coils takes the most getting used to. Coils can't tolerate any mishandling. Even unwrapping the paper packaging can be time consuming, and unless you're careful, you risk damaging the coils.

Wire collations proved to be more reliable for us. If dropped, a wire-collated coil might bend, but the nails stay aligned. Not so with nails in plastic-sheet collations, which tend to fall every which way when dropped, or when shoved into a nail bag (see Figure 1). Even if you do take the time to reposition the nails after dropping a plastic coil, it's often difficult to load, and the nails are more likely to misfeed in the gun.

Compared with stick nails, coils are cumbersome. We usually leave them in the box, near



Look for lightweight,
well-balanced models
and wire collations

the workstation. Occasionally we might carry the shorter wire-collated nails in our bags, but it's seldom worth the risk of damaging them.

One drawback of wire-collated nails is that when the wire breaks off as each nail is driven, the galvanized coating comes off with it. While this is not a concern for us, it could be a problem in wetter climates. Some of the better generic-nail manufacturers, such as Air Nail and Interchange Brand, offer a "plastic-rope" collation — a tough, fibrous plastic that wraps around each nail, holding it securely in place, even when dropped. When the plastic tears off, it doesn't damage the coating. Hopefully, more nail manufacturers will start using this collating method.

Nail Coatings

All of the guns, save one, fire a 2½-inch-long nail. The exception is the Duo-Fast, which fires nails up to 2¼ inches long. While I prefer the longer nails, especially for securing thicker exterior trim, the real difference in siding nails is in the coating.

Most coil siding nails come with an *electroplated* yellow zinc oxide coating. The coating oxidizes rapidly when exposed to moisture, and the nails begin to rust. This would spell disaster on a high-end siding job. Rusting hasn't been such a problem in our relatively dry climate, but it could present real problems for installations along the coast or in more humid climates.

A step up from electroplating is a *mechanically* plated nail. The nails are tumbled in a drum containing zinc powder, an activator fluid, and tiny glass BBs that pound the zinc onto the nail. Many ring- and spiral-shank siding nails are plated this way. While this process deposits a slightly thicker zinc layer on the nail, the coating still isn't as thick and durable as a hot-dipped nail.

Hot-dipped nails are immersed in a bath of molten zinc. This method of galvanizing provides the best bond between the steel nail and the zinc coating, and it deposits the thickest zinc coating available, particularly if

Bostitch N63CP

Stanley-Bostitch
Briggs Dr.
East Greenwich, RI 02818
800/556-6696

Nail length: 1½ to 2½ inches

Magazine: Side loading

Exhaust: Adjustable

Weight: 5.8 lbs.

List Price: \$578

Comments: Nail-setting adjustment requires a hex-head driver or pliers to adjust, but its accuracy and ability to keep its setting are by far the best.



Duo-Fast RCN-60/225

Duo-Fast Corp.
13951 Quality Dr.
Huntley, IL 60142
888/386-3278

Nail length: 1¾ to 2¼ inches

Magazine: Side loading

Exhaust: Front only

Weight: 6.8 lbs.

List Price: \$662

Comments: The heaviest gun in our sample. Trigger set up for sequential-trip fire (no bounce firing). Requires proprietary nail collation; coils only available in plastic-sheet collation, which make them hard to handle.



Figure 1. Wire-collated nail coils (left) can stand up to getting dropped or carried in nail bags. Plastic-sheet collated coils (right) tend to fall apart with even the slightest mishandling.

Max CN565

Max Co.
585 Commercial Ave.
Garden City, NY 11530
516/222-2184

Nail length: 1 1/4 to 2 1/2 inches

Magazine: Top loading

Exhaust: Adjustable

Weight: 4.9 lbs.

List Price: \$700

Comments: Overall favorite gun of our crews. Well balanced and light. All parts very well designed and manufactured. New guns include swivel air nozzle (not shown at right), rubber-padded handle, and carrying case.



the nails have been “double dipped.” Only one manufacturer — Duo-Fast — offers double-hot-dipped coil nails. (These nails are made by W.H. Maze and sold to Duo-Fast for collating into coils.) It’s the only nail recommended by James Hardie Building Products for installing its fiber-cement siding materials. Unfortunately, Duo-Fast uses the plastic-sheet collation, which makes these coils hard to handle.

Streamlined Bodies

It doesn’t take much power to sink a 2 1/2-inch nail, so these siding nailers have a fairly small head. But the coil magazine adds considerable bulk to the gun. The weights shown in the model profiles are without nails; a full coil adds another couple of pounds. Combined with dragging the hose and keeping the coils close at hand, these tools can be cumbersome, to say the least.

Makita and Senco make the most streamlined coil siding nailers, offering the best combination of size, weight, and balance. Of these, the Makita is probably the easiest to handle, sight, and fire. Its light weight is due, in part, to a plastic nail housing. While Makita claims it is made of a tough, impact-resistant plastic, this housing would probably be the first thing to break if the gun were dropped onto concrete.

Makita AN611

Makita U.S.A.
14930 Northam St.
La Mirada, CA 90638
714/522-8088

Nail length: 1 1/4 to 2 1/2 inches

Magazine: Side loading

Exhaust: Adjustable

Weight: 4.8 lbs.

List Price: \$753

Comments: The lightest gun in our sample, and probably the easiest to sight and fire. Has trigger switch that allows you to choose between sequential-trip or bounce firing. Belt clip works well to hold the gun when you need your hands free. Comes with comfortable padded handle and carrying case.



New Kid on the Block

Hitachi recently introduced a new coil siding nailer in this class. While our testers didn’t have time to test it for this review, we have included the manufacturer’s specs for comparison. We plan to test this tool and review it in an upcoming issue.

Hitachi NV65AH

Hitachi Power Tools
3950 Steve Reynolds Blvd.
Norcross, GA 30093
800/598-6657

Nail length: 1 1/2 to 2 1/2 inches

Magazine: Side loading

Exhaust: Adjustable

Weight: 4.2 lbs.

List Price: \$818

Comments: Lightest coil nailer in its class. Tool-less depth-of-drive adjustment. Trigger set up for sequential-trip firing. Tool includes leather handle grip and carrying case.



UNTESTED

Figure 2. Because different siding and substrate materials can vary in density, coil siding nailers need a conveniently located depth adjustment. The dial adjustment found on the Max has positive-click stops (see arrow), which make it easy to reset.



Figure 3. Makita has added a safety-select switch (see arrow) to the trigger. One position allows you to bounce-fire; the other limits the gun to sequential-trip firing.

User-Friendly Features

One of the most important features on a siding nailer is the depth-of-drive adjustment. Overdriven nails can cause real problems. The indent caused by the nail head invites water into the siding, which can cause the wood to split. With manmade materials, such as fiber-cement and hardboard, the nail holes swell, and will lead to premature disintegration of the material.

The Bostitch gun has the best depth-of-drive adjustment by far. It takes a hex-head driver (or pliers) to adjust, but the adjustment stays where you set it, without creeping. The Bostitch also has positive stops, so it's easy to tell exactly where you've set the depth, and you can quickly return to a given setting. Makita and Max have good adjustments, too (Figure 2). Both have positive-click dials that can be

easily adjusted with one finger. But they can be turned a little too easily — sometimes inadvertently. The adjustment on the Senco is hard to get to, as it's tucked away on the nose of the gun. And it's difficult to reset, since there are no positive clicks or marks to reference.

Other useful features to look for include:

Nose tip. All of the guns came with a rubber tip that helped prevent marring soft wood surfaces, but sometimes obscured the line of sight. The best is the one on the Makita, which is removable.

Belt clip. Makita is the only manufacturer that has added a belt clip — a feature that works well when you need to free both hands but want to keep the gun within easy reach.

Trigger select. The Makita gun also has a unique trigger select switch (Figure 3): One setting gives you sequential-trip fire (one nail at a time); the other setting allows you to bounce-nail. The Duo-Fast gun is set up for sequential-trip firing only, which works okay for a siding nailer.

Directional exhaust. All of the guns except the Duo-Fast have adjustable exhaust hoods. The Duo-Fast exhaust shoots out the front, but there are times when you have to turn the gun to make it fit into a space, and the exhausts ends up right in your face.

Crew Favorites

After using all five guns for several months, including using them all on one 5,000-square-foot siding job, the crew grew to favor some guns over others. The overall favorite proved to be the Max. Everything about this gun suggests a well-engineered, reliable tool. The Makita ran a close second, while the Bostitch and Senco came in neck and neck in third. The Bostitch has a better depth-of-drive adjustment, but the Senco seems to be a more solidly built gun. The Duo-Fast falls to the bottom of our list, primarily because it's heavy, and it requires a proprietary nail coil that's only available in the plastic-sheet collation. 

Senco SCN55S

Senco Products
8485 Broadwell Rd.
Cincinnati, OH 45244
800/543-4596

Nail length: 1 1/4 to 2 1/2 inches

Magazine: Side loading

Exhaust: Adjustable

Weight: 6 lbs.

List Price: \$682

Comments: Probably the most solidly built gun in our sample, and most likely to run reliably over time, and suffer the most abuse. Nail-set adjustment has a plastic door over it; this makes it difficult to adjust and hard to gauge setting.



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