CUTTING Fiber-Cement

Use the right tools for faster, easier work and less dust

by Rodney Proctor

I've been working with fiber-cement siding and trim for the last several years and have seen it become an increasingly popular alternative to wood siding. One of the problems builders have had to deal with, though, is that although fiber-cement is a great product, until recently there weren't a lot of choices for cutting it. The regular carbide blade in a circular saw makes a great cut, but the resulting dust is horrible, both for the workers and the customers. Fortunately, as the popularity of these materials has grown, a wide variety of specialized tools and accessories has emerged.

Although I specialize in residential construction, here in Texas these products are being widely used in commercial construction as well. On the majority of my job sites I've used the 8-inch lap, but the 4x8 sheets of siding, with or without texture, have become quite popular, too. No matter the size, though, it's the materials you use and the size of the jobs you do that will influence how you think about cutting this material.

Cutting With Shears

I plugged along with a regular $7\frac{1}{4}$-inch circular saw with a carbide blade for years until, luckily, I

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BOB RUDD

The SS210M Manual Shear takes some effort, but it's great for rake cuts up to 21 inches long — no electric power needed.

PORTER-CABLE

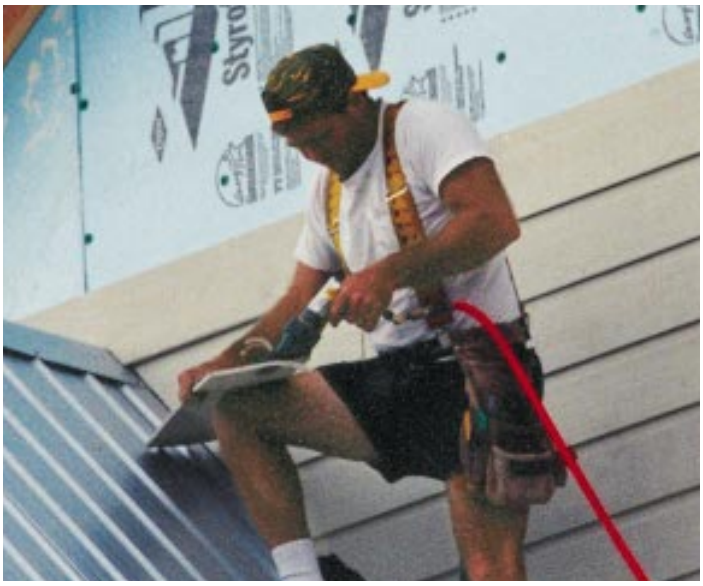
Figure 1. The SS304 Snapper Shear will cruise through miles of siding between blade changes, and it's dust free (left). The new Model 6604 shears from Porter-Cable are especially easy to handle, and the belt clip is handy (right).

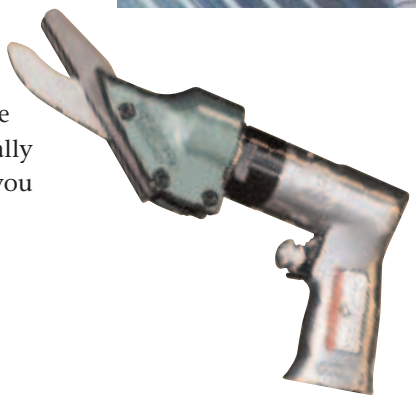
discovered fiber-cement shears (or as they're called around here, "nippers"). I wouldn't recommend them as the only tool, but they are a "must have" for anyone installing fiber-cement siding on a regular basis.

The SnapperShear Steelhead SS304 110V (retail price $279, from Pacific International Tool & Shear, P.O. Box 1604, Kingston, WA 98346; 800/297-7487; www.snappershear.com) is my personal favorite. This handy tool is a dust-free fiber-cement cutting whiz. It will cruise through miles of cement siding before wearing out the blades (see Figure 1).

The blades can be changed out quickly and inexpensively, at about $65 for a complete kit. It's easy to use, lightweight, quiet, and gives a smooth cut. I use it primarily for 3/8-inch by 8-inch lap siding. It's not much good for 4x8 sheets, though, and doesn't have the capacity to cut 3/4-inch trim material.

Another option is the recently introduced Porter-Cable 6604, 110-volt shears ($240 retail from Porter-Cable, 4825 Hwy. 45 North, Jackson, TN 38302; 800/487-8665; www.porter-cable.com). They are easy to handle and make for smooth cutting. The blades are not as durable as the Snappers, but I really like the clip on the end of this tool, which allows you to attach it to your nailbags.





PACIFIC INTERNATIONAL

Figure 2. The pneumatic SS309 WindShear Steelhead is a real convenience when you're up on the scaffold.

Figure 3. The SS306 WhipperSnapper is the best tool I've found for cutting curves.

Figure 4. If you're a high-volume installer, the pneumatic Platform Shear and Roller Table are excellent, but too big for small jobs.

Another line of electric and pneumatic shears, which I haven't tried, comes from Kett Tool (Kett Tool Company, 5055 Madison Rd., Cincinnati, OH 45227; 513/271-0333; www.kett-tool.com). The price for their KC-193 electric shear retails for about $260.

I have also used the Snapper Shear pneumatic SS309 WindShear Steelhead cutters ($299 retail from Pacific International Tool & Shear). These little beauties are great for trimming mis-cuts. Up on a scaffold you can slip it right in your nailbag. Then it's no problem to unplug your nail gun, slap the nippers on the hose, trim a piece of siding, and go right back to nailing without sending the piece back to the cutter (Figure 2). The only drawback is that they use a lot of air — 10 cfm at 90 psi. This will quickly drain the compressor, so I don't use them for multiple cuts at the sawhorses.

Another nipper I like to use is the SS306 WhipperSnapper arch-cutting electric shears ($279 retail from Pacific International Tool & Shear). This is the absolute best tool I've found for cutting curves. It is lightweight, and cuts smoothly, without dust. I use it not only for lap siding, but also for 4x8 sheets where an arch or even a hole is required. These shears won't cut 3/4-inch material, though, so don't throw away the circular saw yet (Figure 3).

A good choice for high-volume cutting is the Snapper 14-inch, 110V pneumatic SS110A Platform Shear and Roller Table ($998 retail from Pacific International Tool & Shear, Figure 4). Although it's excellent on large jobs, I stay away from this tool on smaller jobs, mainly because it's heavy and bulky to pack around.

The 24-inch SS210M Manual Shear ($573 retail from Pacific International Tool & Shear) is a good tool for smaller jobs. It cuts an almost flawless line for butting siding to trim, and is especially good at rake cuts or on gable ends, where running cuts are needed (see photo, page 51). It's somewhat difficult to push down through the material, though, and multiple cuts are tiring. This tool is also rather bulky and heavy. Although it is strenuous for the user, it's handy for those times when electricity is not available.

Improved Cutting With Saws

The one drawback shared by all of the shears is the inability to cut more than one piece at a time or cut 3/4-inch Harditrim. So I always keep a circular saw ready for action.

Makita has come out with a unique line of dust-collecting saws for fiber-cement. The dust collector

Figure 5. By themselves, the dust collectors on these saws don't completely eliminate the dust, but they do cut it down. If you hook up a vacuum, however, they are just about dust-free.

Figure 6. If you had to choose just one tool, the Makita 5057KB 110VAC, 7 1/4-inch circular saw with dust collector (top) would be the one. The Makita 5044KB 4-inch circular saw with dust collector (bottom) is a compact saw that's as solid as the larger Makita, and will cut two pieces at once quite effectively.

doesn't completely eliminate the dust, but does cut it down significantly (Figure 5). By connecting these saws to a shop vacuum, however, they become almost dust-free. I like the Makita XSV10 type 4, heavy duty (2 peak HP) wet/dry industrial vacuum ($349 retail from Makita U.S.A., 14930 Northam St., La Mirada, CA 90638; 800/462-5482; www.makitatools.com). It has a 10-gallon stainless steel tank with a crushproof 12-foot by 1 1/2-inch hose and a 14-inch metalmaster nozzle. The dust collectors on these saws do hamper your view of the blade while cutting, but the guide on the shoe allows for accurate cuts.

The Makita 5057KB 110-volt 7 1/4-inch saw with dust collector is excellent for production fiber-cement siding work ($329 retail, replacement blade is $33 retail). It's solidly built and lightweight, and cuts any type or size of fiber-cement material available. If you had to choose just one tool, this would be the one. It will make very smooth cuts through five pieces of siding at once (Figure 6). With a cement-cutting diamond-tipped blade, it cuts smoothly and leaves the stock virtually flawless.

Another option from Makita is the 4-inch 5044KB with dust collector. This practical little saw is compact and great for tight spots. It won't cut as many pieces at a time as the larger model, but it's much more portable. I've used this one 25 feet up on a scaffold with no problem ($289 retail, replacement blade is $25 retail).

The Makita 5036DWA 18-volt, 6 1/4-inch cordless is an excellent tool for portability or where electric

MAKITA

Figure 7. The Makita 5036DWA 18-volt cordless fiber-cement saw with dust collector.

power is not available (Figure 7). It's not completely dust-free, but the collector does cut down on most of the dust. Teamed up with the 24-inch manual shears, this saw will get you through the job, but I would not recommend it for large jobs. It's especially good for small, quick repairs ($379 retail, replacement blade is $26 retail).

Blades. I tried blades made by American Tool, DeWalt, Hitachi, Magna, and the stock Makita blades that came with the saw. The blades all worked about the same, which was very well. I've been using some of these blades for almost eight months and they are not even close to worn out. Typically, these blades have either four or six teeth. Those with more teeth cut smoother, but the blades with fewer teeth definitely last longer (see "Fiber-Cement Blades").

What to Buy

I'd advise anyone who installs cement siding with any frequency to invest in at least one set of nippers and one good dust-collecting circular saw with cement-cutting diamond-tip blades. For larger or commercial projects, a 14-inch pneumatic shear is a good investment. For the contractor who only occasionally works with cement siding, or for the one-time installation, it's possible to get by with the old reliable circular saw using a diamond-tipped fiber-cement blade.

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Fiber-Cement Blades

There are several new blades designed specifically for fiber-cement. Although regular carbide blades will cut fiber-cement, they won't last long and they will make a mess. The dedicated blades are definitely an improvement: They last much longer (we don't know how much longer yet, but manufacturers' claims vary from 100 to 225 times as long as regular carbide blades), and they produce a lot less dust.

American Tool Fibercut Blade. Available with four diamond teeth ($90-$100) for cutting stacks of material and a 6-tooth model with carbide teeth ($20) for cutting single sheets; American Tool, 92 Grant St., Wilmington, OH 45177; 800/866-5740; www.americantool.com.

AMERICAN TOOL

Hitachi Fiber-Cement Saw Blade. Developed in co-operation with James Hardie Building Products, this 4-tooth blade uses polycrystalline diamond (PCD) tips. A layer of powdered diamond is bonded to the tungsten-carbide tips through microwave heating, $69; Hitachi Power Tools, 3950 Steve Reynolds Blvd., Norcross, GA 30093; 800/546-1666; www.hitachi.com/powertools.

DeWalt Fiber-Cement Saw Blade. Six-tooth polycrystalline diamond blade with a 5-degree negative hook angle for a better finish on the cut. Suitable for single or stacked cuts, $59; DeWalt, P.O. Box 158, Hampstead, MD 21074; 800/433-9258; www.dewalt.com.

Magna M87340 Fiber-Cement Blade. Four-tooth chemical-vapor deposition blade, with 10-degree positive hook angle for ease of cutting and longer blade life. From $65 to $71; Magna Industrial Tool , 101 S. 5th St., Louisville, KY 40202; 800/624-9044; www.magnatool.com.