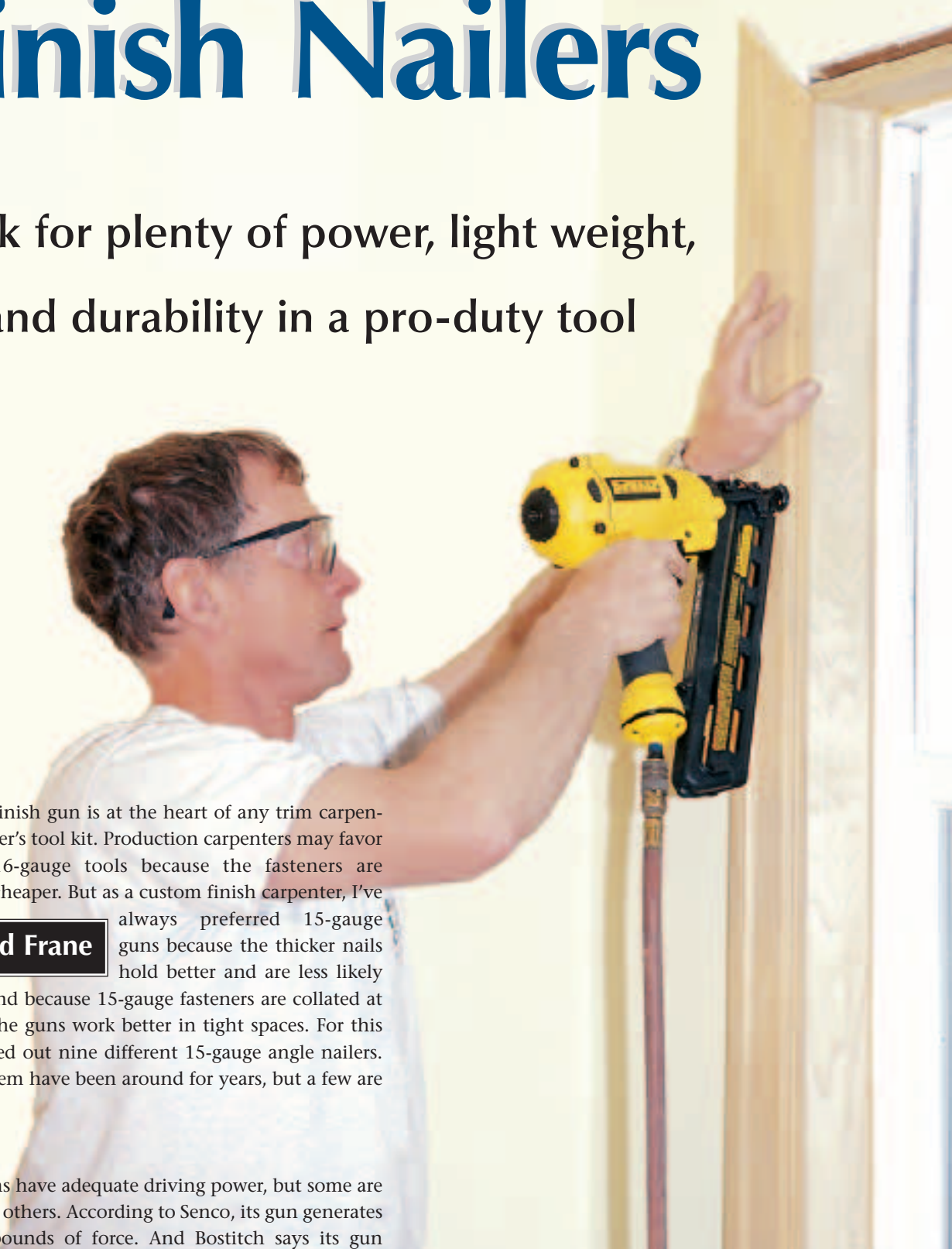


15-GAUGE ANGLED Finish Nailers

Look for plenty of power, light weight,
and durability in a pro-duty tool



A man with glasses and a white t-shirt is using a yellow and black 15-gauge angled finish nailer to install a piece of wood trim on a wall. He is holding the tool with both hands, and his left hand is also touching the trim. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

A finish gun is at the heart of any trim carpenter's tool kit. Production carpenters may favor 16-gauge tools because the fasteners are cheaper. But as a custom finish carpenter, I've always preferred 15-gauge guns because the thicker nails hold better and are less likely

by David Frane

to bend. And because 15-gauge fasteners are collated at an angle, the guns work better in tight spaces. For this article I tried out nine different 15-gauge angle nailers. Some of them have been around for years, but a few are brand new.

Power

Most guns have adequate driving power, but some are better than others. According to Senco, its gun generates 380 inch-pounds of force. And Bostitch says its gun packs a 400-inch-pound wallop. But most companies don't release this data, and the only test that counts is how well the tool drives nails.

Bostitch N62FNK-2

Street price: \$199

Weight: 3.8 pounds

Firing modes: sequential, bump

Nail type: Bostitch/FN

Nail capacity: 130

Magazine type: load-and-lock

Made in: USA

The N62FN has an excellent power-to-weight ratio. It sets fasteners as consistently as any tool I tested and is significantly lighter than most guns. It takes FN rather than the more common DA-style fasteners and is one of only two nailers that doesn't take oil. This tool is sleeker and less cluttered than others because there's no latch on the front. Instead, jams are cleared by releasing a catch and popping the magazine back from the nose. The only thing I don't like about this tool is that it's configured for sequential trip. Some carpenters don't consider this to be a shortcoming, but if you do, you can convert it to bump-fire by changing the trigger.

Contact: Stanley Fastening Systems, 800/228-0567, www.stanleyworks.com.



I tested power by shooting 2¹/₂-inch nails into 3-inch fir and mahogany. Most guns had no trouble setting fasteners in either, so I tried them on hard maple. It was asking a lot, but I figured any gun that sets nails in maple will have no trouble with standard trim items.

Most of the guns set nails in everything I put in front of them. But a few had trouble. Makita's gun set nails in maple but just barely. The Campbell Hausfeld would not set nails in maple and barely handled mahogany, which is similar in density to poplar. Unless I removed the rubber tip protector, the Duo-Fast wouldn't set nails in much of anything.

Weight

A light gun is easier to handle than a heavy one and produces less fatigue over the course of a workday. Until recently, Hitachi's 4.2-pound nailer was the lightest tool around. But that was before Bostitch and DeWalt broke the 4-pound barrier by substituting magnesium for aluminum in the castings. The Max and Senco guns fall in the middle range with guns that weigh just over 4.5 pounds. I would

consider the rest of the guns heavy, with weights between 5.4 and 6 pounds.

Configuration

Except for Max, the companies that make high-end nailers have all gone with in-line magazines. In-line guns are symmetrical so they work equally well in either hand. The magazines of some tools are set to the left, which makes it easier to keep the hose out of the way when you work right-handed.

Campbell Hausfeld NB356599

Street price: \$160

Weight: 5.4 pounds

Firing modes: sequential, bump

Nail type: DA

Nail capacity: 100

Magazine type: lock-and-load

Made in: Taiwan

The only thing that's special about this nailer is the price. It's not a bad tool, but for a little more money you can buy a far superior gun. The NB356599 is relatively heavy and has a tough time setting fasteners in hard, thick wood. Interestingly, it shares parts with some of the other guns I tested. The magazine, which is the best part of the tool, is identical to the one on Max's NF550. I know, because I swapped them out. And the cylinder cap assembly is interchangeable with the one on Duo-Fast's DAFN6480.

Contact: Campbell Hausfeld, 888/247-6937, www.campbellhausfeld.com.



Firing Modes

In a few years, most finish nailers will come with sequential trip. That is, you won't be able to bump-fire them in their factory configuration. Most guns come ready to bump-fire, but others have to be converted from single-shot. Campbell Hausfeld's gun is

DeWalt D51275K

Street price: \$249

Weight: 3.85 pounds

Firing modes: sequential, bump

Nail type: DA

Nail capacity: 110

Magazine type: lock-and-load or load-and-lock

Made in: Taiwan

DeWalt hasn't been in the nailer business for very long, so I was surprised by how much I liked its first 15-gauge nailer. The D51275 has power to spare and is less than an ounce heavier than the lightest tool in its class. Features like the built-in belt hook and bumper pads on the piston housing are a sign that the design team paid attention to the details. The depth-of-drive is indexed to a scale, and you get a good view of the work because the contact element is thinly clad. My only complaint is that the exhaust blast torques the gun sideways when the port is set 90 degrees to the handle. But the problem is easily fixed by aiming the port slightly to the front or back.

Contact: DeWalt Industrial Tools, 800/433-9258, www.dewalt.com.



Max's NF550 features both a trigger lock and an anti-double-fire mechanism.

easy to change over; all you do is remove a set pin. The Bostitch and Porter-Cable tools are sequential trip but can be converted to bump-fire by changing triggers. Duo-Fast's gun is sequential trip only.

Max and DeWalt both bump-fire but come with user-activated trigger locks. In addition, the Max gun has an anti-double-fire mode that prevents accidental second shots.

Depth-of-Drive

At one time, carpenters controlled depth-of-drive by changing compressor settings. These days, though, finish nailers have depth-of-drive mechanisms that work by changing the length of the contact element. On most tools, you make the adjustment by turning a thumb-wheel on the safety linkage. The DeWalt gizmo is different; you operate it by sliding a lock button near the trigger. I particularly like



It's easy to gauge depth-of-drive on the Hitachi nailer because the adjuster wheel is indexed to a scale.

Duo-Fast DAFN6480

Street price: \$250

Weight: 5.4 pounds

Firing mode: sequential

Nail type: DA

Nail capacity: 100

Magazine type: load-and-lock

Made in: Taiwan

This finish nailer has been around for six-plus years. It has stayed the same while nearly every other gun has improved. It closely resembles and shares a number of common parts with Campbell Hausfeld's NB356599. The DAFN6480 is one of the heavier 15-gauge guns and had more trouble setting fasteners than any tool I tested. There's no reason to buy this gun with so many better ones available in the same price range.

Contact: Duo-Fast, 888/386-3278, www.duo-fast.com.



DeWalt's depth-of-drive is easily adjusted by sliding a button under the trigger.

the mechanisms on the DeWalt and Hitachi guns because settings are indexed to a scale, which lessens the need for test shots.

Tips

Metal contact elements can scratch the work, so finish guns come with protective plastic tips. Big button-shaped tips prevent scratches, but they also block your view. Senco and Porter-Cable make it easier to see what you're doing by covering their elements with thin plastic sheathes. DeWalt took the idea further by bonding strips of padding onto the parts that touch the work. Short of working with a bare metal tip, this design gives you as good a view as you're going to get.

Tips work pretty much the same when



DeWalt's tip protector is bonded to the contact element and doesn't block your view of the work.



The contoured tip on the Porter-Cable gun makes it easier to nail from an angle.

Hitachi NT65MA

Street price: \$339

Weight: 4.2 pounds

Firing mode: bump

Nail type: DA

Nail capacity: 100

Magazine type: load-and-lock

Made in: Japan

This is a new version of an earlier Hitachi finish nailer. It was the lightest 15-gauge tool on the market but was recently undercut by other models. That said, the NT65MA is still one of the lightest nailers around. It has plenty of power and features, like an in-line magazine, a well-padded grip, and no-tools jam clearing. Unlike that of most guns, the depth-of-drive is indexed to a scale. The most unusual thing about this tool is the blow gun, which consists of a small nozzle and trigger button built into the piston housing. It may be a bit of a gimmick, but I love this feature because it means I can blast dust and debris out of the way without having to connect a separate blow gun.

Contact: Hitachi Power Tools, 800/830-7593, www.hitachi.com/powertools.



you nail straight into the stock. But curved tips are better for nailing at an angle because they maintain a constant distance between the driver and the work. This decreases the likelihood of under-driven fasteners. The Senco, DeWalt, and Porter-Cable guns have heavily contoured tips. Bostitch, Makita, and Max achieve similar results by chamfering the edges of their buttons.

Adjustable Exhaust

Finish nailers used to have fixed exhaust ports, which meant you were bound to catch an occasional face full of drywall dust while nailing baseboard. But those days are gone — adjustable ports have become standard equipment on finish nailers. Most guns have ports that rotate 360 degrees, but Senco uses a dated design that allows you to aim the blast in only one of four directions.

A few of these guns are so light that if you aim the port sideways, the recoil from the air blast will kick the gun to the side. It's especially noticeable with the DeWalt nailer, and you can feel it slightly on the Bostitch. However, the problem is easily solved by aiming the port slightly forward or back from 90 degrees.

Makita AF632

Street price: \$249

Weight: 5.5 pounds

Firing mode: bump

Nail type: Bostitch/FN

Nail capacity: 125

Magazine type: load-and-lock

Made in: Taiwan

This is one of two guns that take FN-style nails. It replaces the earlier model AF631, a gun that compared favorably with the competing Bostitch model. Unfortunately, the AF632 does not — it's heavier and more expensive. This nailer is moderately powerful and appears to be well made. It has an offset magazine, a padded rubber grip, and a large indexed depth-of-drive wheel.

Contact: Makita USA, 800/462-5482, www.makitatools.com.



Magazines

Some magazines lock and load, while others load and lock. It's a three-step process to put nails in a lock-and-load gun, retract the pusher, load the fasteners, then release the pusher. I prefer load-and-lock because you can skip the last step — just slide in the nails and pull back on the pusher.

Big magazines are better because they're easier to top off and you don't have to load them as often. The average gun holds 100 fasteners, but some take more. Senco and DeWalt hold 110, Makita 125, and Bostitch 130.

Manufacturers save weight by substituting composition materials for metal in magazines. The composition magazines often have an open web design, which saves more weight

Max NF550

Street price: \$275

Weight: 4.6 pounds

Firing mode: anti-double-fire, bump

Nail type: DA

Nail capacity: 100

Magazine type: lock-and-load

Made in: Japan

The NF550 is sleek, powerful, and well made. Someone sweated the details when they designed this gun. It has a user-activated trigger lock and a large indexed depth-of-drive control. There's even a place to store the tip if you need to take it off. The NF550 will bump-fire, but it also has a unique anti-double-fire mode. In this mode, you depress the contact element before you squeeze the trigger. This prevents double shots because the gun won't cycle till you release the trigger. I prefer in-line nailers, but if you want an offset magazine, this is the gun to get.

Contact: Max USA, 800/223-4293, www.maxusacorp.com.



The front of the Bostitch gun is particularly sleek because jams are cleared by popping the magazine back from the nose.

and makes it easier to see what size fasteners are inside.

Other Features

It wasn't long ago that you had to disassemble the front of the gun to remove bent fasteners. But these days you can clear jams without tools. In most cases you do this by popping a latch on the nose of the gun. On the Bostitch, you do it by releasing a catch on the magazine and popping it back from the tip. Every tool I tested comes in a plastic case and has some kind of padded or molded grip surface.

Oil vs. no oil. The problem with oil is that if you forget to use it, the gun wears out quicker. Plus, oil will blast by worn seals and spray the work. Senco invented the oil-less nailer and for a long time was the only company that made one. But the latest version of the Bostitch gun is also oil-less.



A built-in air gun on the Hitachi nailer makes it possible to clear dust from the work without using a separate air nozzle.

Porter-Cable DA250A

Street price: \$199

Weight: 6.0 pounds

Firing modes: sequential, bump

Nail type: DA

Nail capacity: 100

Magazine type: load-and-lock

Made in: Taiwan

When the DA250A came out, it was significantly cheaper than other brand-name tools with similar features. But that was five-plus years ago, and the price gap is much narrower now. This tool has all the usual features — a rubber grip, indexed depth-of-drive, tool-less jam clearing, and an adjustable exhaust port. The contoured contact element and thin rubber tip make it easy to see where you're nailing. This tool has excellent power but is the heaviest gun I tested.

Contact: Porter-Cable, 800/321-9443, www.porter-cable.com.




Fastener Type

There are two types of 15-gauge angle nails: the DA type that was invented by Senco and the FN type from Bostitch. The only two guns that take FN nails are the Bostitch and the Makita. Most guns take DA nails. There are only minor differences between the DA and the Bostitch-type fasteners. DA fasteners are collated at a slightly steeper angle and have rounder heads than the Bostitch nails. Both types are available in a variety of finishes and materials. Senco

recently introduced a hardened DA nail designed to fasten trim to steel framing.

Favorite 15-Gauge Nailers

It's hard to choose a favorite 15-gauge nailer because there are so many good ones out there. If I had to buy one tomorrow, I'd probably go for DeWalt or Hitachi. But you wouldn't have to twist my arm to get me to consider Bostitch or Max. All four guns have power to spare.

DeWalt's D51275 is one of my favorites because it's powerful, extremely light, and equipped with well-conceived features like a belt hook, indexed depth-of-drive, and a tip that doesn't block your view. I like the Hitachi NT65MA because it's a lighter-than-average gun with a comfortable padded grip and a very cool built-in blow gun. The Bostitch N62FN is extremely powerful and is the lightest 15-gauge nailer you can buy. It's sleek and uncluttered and is one of only two guns that doesn't need oil. Max's NF550 is a well-made tool with superior features like a trigger lock, a large depth-of-drive wheel, and an anti-double-fire mechanism. 

Senco SFN40

Street price: \$249

Weight: 4.7 pounds

Firing mode: bump

Nail type: DA

Nail capacity: 110

Magazine type: load-and-lock

Made in: USA

When the SFN40 came out, it was the only oil-less gun on the market and stood head and shoulders above the competition. Though it hasn't changed in six years, it's still one of the better finish nailers around, an extremely durable and powerful tool. The one thing I don't like about it is the exhaust port, which is adjusted by removing and replacing snap-in pieces. Everyone else switched to rotating ports years ago. By the time you read this, Senco will have introduced three new 15-gauge angle nailers: two pneumatic and one powered by batteries alone. They weren't available in time for me to review them.

Contact: Senco Products, 800/543-4596, www.senco.com.



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