Tight Connections With Pocket-Hole Screws

by Gary Katz

I first saw the Kreg Pocket-Hole Jig at one of those fast-talking woodworking-show demonstrations. It immediately got my interest. I knew I could use it for joining stile-and-rail work perfectly, as the demonstrator suggested, but I suspected there would be lots of other uses as well. I bought the K2000 ProPack kit ($144.95, 800/447-8638, www.kregtool.com). It comes with the jig, two support wings, accessory blocks for drilling pocket holes in 1/2-inch and 1 1/2-inch material, a 6-inch face clamp, a pocket-hole drill bit and stop collar, two Phillips-head and two square-head extension drivers, and a small assortment of Kreg's pocket-hole screws. It's a pretty complete package, except for the screws. You'll need more (drywall screws work, too). The kit also comes with a Mini Kreg Jig; I've used that tool almost as frequently as the main jig.

I also bought an extra drill bit (you can send the bits to Kreg for sharpening) and a 9-inch face clamp for some of the bigger projects I had in mind. Other than a few set-up tasks, the kit is almost ready to use right from the box. Kreg recommends mounting the jig on a 1x12 board, so that workpieces have better support (see Figure 1). I chose to mount my jig on a 20-inch length of 2x12 planking because I knew I'd be working on bigger material than just 1x4 stiles and rails.

To use the jig, you simply place the workpiece between the clamp and the drill guide and then pull the toggle. Three bushings in the top of the drill guide are smartly positioned to allow a choice of pocket-hole positions: The two outer bushings — spaced farthest apart — are meant for 1x4 stock; the two bushings on the left are perfect for 2-inch-wide stock, and the two closest bushings on the right are great for material under 2 inches wide.

A guide molded into both of the jig's support wings makes it easy to attach the stop collar at the right position on the drill bit (Figure 2). The support wings are marked for 1/2-inch, 3/4-inch, and 1 1/2-inch material. Simply lay the bit in the molded guide, with the shoulder of the bit aligned with the thickness of material, and then tighten the collar on the bit. The collar controls the depth of the pocket hole so that the pocket-hole screw penetrates just far enough without poking out the other side (Figure 3).

Drilling is easy and fast. The steel pocket-hole bit is sharp and aggressive from the factory. I've used mine to drill hundreds of holes — in softwood, hardwood, and MDF — and it's still sharp. The bit is designed to draw sawdust and shavings quickly out of the hole, and then they're dumped out the side of the jig, without jamming the bit in the bushing. Unlike a spline joint or biscuit joint, only one mating piece needs

Figure 1. Mounted on a piece of 2x12 for greater stability, the Kreg jig makes quick work of pocket-hole joints.

Figure 2. The jig's support wings include a handy guide for setting the stop collar on the drill bit.

Figure 3. The Kreg jig can make joints in material from 1/2 inch to 1 1/2 inches thick.

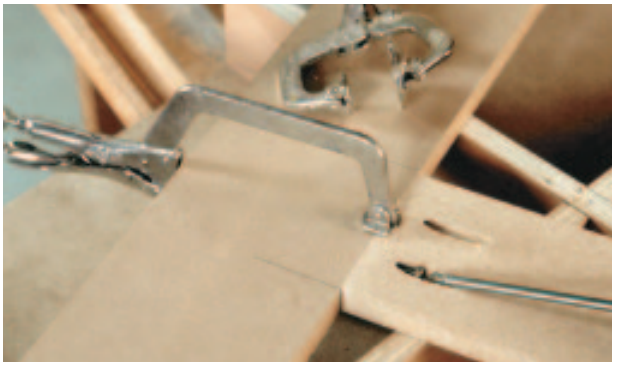

Figure 4. A simple plywood work grid makes it easy to manipulate face frames for making joints and glue cleanup (left). The vise-grip clamp holds joints secure for screwing (right).

Figure 5. The Mini Kreg Jig comes in handy for installing cabinets and bookcases, and for joints in hard-to-reach places.

pocket-hole preparation. This saves time and permits final adjustments.

Kreg urges users to build a simple plywood grid for face-frame assembly (Figure 4). I already had a pair of glue-up stands, but I built the grid anyway and I'm glad of it. The grid allows easy access to all joints so that glue-up, clamping, and fastening (even for large frames) are quick and easy. Unlike splines and biscuits, pocket-hole assembly can begin at any face-frame joint. Simply apply glue, clamp the two pieces, and drive in the screws.

Kreg's proprietary pan-head screws are definitely better for pocket holes than drywall screws. Kreg's flat-bottomed pan-heads seat in the pocket hole and pull tight, without spreading the wood fibers. Bugle-head drywall screws tend to bury themselves farther in the hole and split the stock, especially in MDF. To save money on screws, I found myself using both types. I used Kreg's screws for composite material and drywall screws for solid wood, especially 1 1/2-inch stock. But even then, care must be taken when driving pocket screws. Applying too much torque can strip the screw hole, shear the screw, or drive the screw too deep. Using a cordless drill with a sensitive clutch gives me the control I need.

The Mini Kreg Jig, also included in the ProPack, is always in my tool tote (Figure 5). It's perfect for drilling holes in existing floor joists and fixing squeaking floors, but I've used it for installing bookcases and cabinets and even held it by hand. I've also used it to drill pocket holes in cabinets that I hadn't remembered or couldn't drill before assembly.

An instruction manual accompanies the K2000 ProPack, and the manufacturer suggests several applications. Besides simple face frames, pocket holes are great for assembling angled joinery, table-top aprons, edge banding, jamb extensions, and even picture frames.

I've used pocket holes to assemble large bookshelves built from 1 1/2-inch material and have even turned to pocket holes for gluing up blanks for wide doors because I didn't have enough clamps and didn't want to wait for the glue to dry.

The Kreg jig's uses are limited only by your imagination. Just recently, while installing the radius gable-end decorations on a Victorian home, I used pocket holes to attach the web at the peak of the gable! It's a fast, secure connection. I'm sure even more uses will present themselves in the future.

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