Cordless Jigsaws

by Ross Welsh

It's been awhile since I switched from a Yankee screwdriver to a cordless drill, but I still remember how it revolutionized the way I installed door hardware. Like a lot of other carpenters, my first cordless tool was a Makita 9.6-volt pistol grip. About ten years ago, I went cordless with a second tool, a 14.4-volt DeWalt 5 3/8-inch circular saw. Although it looked a little like a toy when I first saw it, it turned out to be a sturdy and productive tool that changed the way our finish carpentry crew did business. As we continued to add cordless tools, we noticed we were accumulating many different kinds of chargers and batteries. The different voltages and manufacturers meant a lot of redundancy and additional expense, so we ultimately standardized by going to DeWalt's 18-volt cordless tools. Although most of DeWalt's cordless tools have performed well over the years, the jigsaw's reliability has been disappointing, so I recently went looking for a new cordless jigsaw, despite our commitment to a single 18-volt platform.

We tested 18-volt saws from Bosch, DeWalt, and Makita, along with a 19.2-volt Porter-Cable saw and a 12-volt Milwaukee saw. We put the saws out in the field for more than four months. Although our needs are fairly simple (tasks like notching window stools and cutting curves in wall caps for bull-nosed corners), the tools got a daily workout. I also did some side-by-side testing in the shop.

Bosch 52318, 18-volt

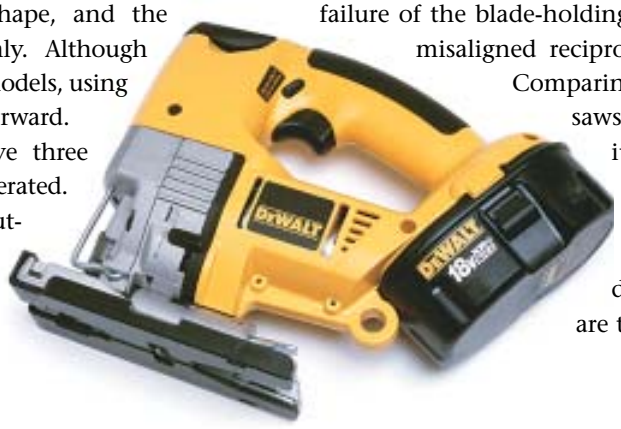
At just under 7 pounds, this top-handle saw is relatively light and small for an 18-volt model. It features a smooth-operating variable-speed trigger and a sliding safety lock that you can turn off. The handle has indentations for your thumb and index finger, so you can slide your hand forward and pull the trigger with your middle or ring finger. That combined with padding on top makes for a very comfortable handle. The blade changing system is the best of the bunch. When you push the lever, the blade is ejected and falls into your hand — especially fun when the blade is hot.

The shoe has one positive stop at 90 degrees. Unfortunately, it doesn't slide back for close-in cutting, and for adjustments you need a hex wrench, which isn't carried on board. The four-position orbital adjustment lever is easily accessible and operates smoothly. The air blower adjuster is small and hard to reach, but it works. Although this saw exhibits a moderate amount of vibration, I give it high marks because everything else is very good.

DeWalt DW933, 18-volt

This saw weighs in at 7 1/2 pounds. It has a nice top-handle design that's easy to use because it has a well-designed safety that you can turn off, similar to Bosch's design. Padding enhances the handle's comfortable shape, and the variable-speed trigger operates smoothly. Although blade changing isn't as fast as on other models, using the top-mounted lever is fairly straightforward.

Both orbit and blower selectors have three positions and are easily accessed and operated. The shoe doesn't slide back for close-in cutting, but tilting is easily accomplished by moving a lever under the shoe. You can adjust how firmly it holds the shoe.



Because we've used the DeWalt 18-volt battery platform for many years, this jigsaw has been our standard issue, receiving a lot of use. We went looking for another saw because we've had repeated failure of the orbital action, occasional failure of the blade-holding system, and an occasional misaligned reciprocating shaft on new saws. Comparing its reliability to the other saws is somewhat unfair, because its weaknesses have been revealed over time, and the other saws haven't been tested for an equal duration. Its strong points are the nice handle and trigger.

Makita 4334D, 18-volt

This top-handle saw has a trigger underneath and a safety button on top. It weighs just over 7 1/2 pounds. You have to depress the safety to start the saw, but once it's running, you can change hand positions without holding it. This is the only saw we tested with a speed control dial, and it's located close to the trigger. The Makita accepts both types of jigsaw blades. Blade changing is not fast but works well enough. The shoe slides back to allow close-in cutting,

and it includes a removable protective cover. The blade tilt works easily via a lever, but there's only one positive stop, at 90 degrees. The four-position orbital selector is a little stiff to operate, but it's easily accessible. This saw automatically blows air to clear sawdust, but it can't be regulated.

Overall this is a powerful, sturdy, and low-vibration saw. Weak points include the blade change system and the safety you have to engage every time you start the motor.

Milwaukee 6267-20, 12-volt

At 5 pounds 10 ounces, this barrel-grip model is the lightest, longest, and lowest of the group. This tool uses T-shank blades, and changes are easy. You lift a large lever on the front of the saw, insert a blade, and release the lever. Although this tool has no blower to clear the cut line, it does have a vacuum attachment under the grip. With the hose attached, your hand positions are limited, and, although the removable, transparent blade guard helps with vacuum efficiency, it also restricts the view of the cut.

The shoe tilts from 0 to 45 degrees with positive stops at 15, 30, and 45 degrees. The hex wrench that's needed for adjustments is carried on board. The shoe slides back for close-quarters pocket cuts and includes a protective sub base.

The motor switch, which is mounted on the left side, requires more effort than a trigger. As a right-hander, I had no trouble using it, but a left-handed crew member had difficulty sliding the switch with his index finger. A four-position selector controls orbital action. This saw operates smoothly, but at 12 volts it lacks power compared with the other saws.

Porter-Cable 643, 19.2-volt

At over 8 pounds, and with a sizable housing, this saw is the biggest and most powerful of the bunch. The top-handle design features a safety lock that you can leave off, so it allows a lot of freedom in hand position during operation. Grip-enhancing padding on the side of the handle makes it comfortable to use. The trigger has very smooth variable-speed action, but the tool vibrates more than the others. Changing blades took a little practice. Although it's a tool-less procedure, it requires the use of two small levers, plus the blade has to be at the bottom of its stroke. In addition, it takes some fiddling and turning to free the blade.

The shoe tilts easily by means of a slide-out lever. Positive detents at 15, 30, and 45 degrees help with common angles. But you need a screwdriver to slide the shoe back for close-in cuts. The four-position orbit selector operates smoothly, but the blower selector is small and difficult to operate. It blows just enough air to be useful, however.

My Picks

My overall favorite is the Bosch because of the combination of features in a relatively light and small package. The blade change feature is especially nice, as is the handle. The 19.2-volt Porter-Cable is also a good tool with plenty of power, but it's bigger than the others, and changing blades takes some getting used to.

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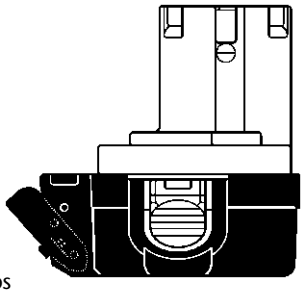
Work Lights That Work

Cool Light. Cheap halogen work lights found at the home center generate a good amount of light, but they also have some pretty significant drawbacks. Heat generated by a 500-watt quartz bulb can burn your fingers, ignite adjacent combustibles, and make a small space uncomfortably hot in a short time. If you're ready to upgrade, McGill's 175-watt *Wide-Beam Floodlight* uses a 175-watt metal-halide lamp that provides as much illumination as a typical 500-watt quartz halogen bulb. The smaller bulb results in lower energy consumption and cooler operation. A rugged stand, a cast-aluminum housing, and a 15-foot cord make it a pleasure to use compared with low-quality, home center work lights. It costs about $200 to $225.

McGill, 888/832-0660, www.mcgillelectrical.com.

Hands-Free Lighting. Years ago, I bought a Petzl headlamp for camping and backpacking. When I used it recently to run a wire through a dark crawlspace, I discovered that the high-quality lamp is perfect for hands-free lighting of construction tasks as well. The lightweight waterproof lights are comfortable to wear, direct the light where you want it, and cost about the same as a good flashlight. One of the newer offerings, the *Tikka Plus*, designed primarily for close-up work, will burn for up to 150 hours on three AAA batteries. It costs about $35 (batteries included), and it's worth every penny.

Petzl, 801/926-1500, www.petzl.com.



Pack Light. Adjustable on-board work lights on Makita's *eLuminate series* of 12-, 14.4-, and 18-volt battery packs make drilling and driving tasks easier. The LED bulbs generate a surprising amount of light and save you from the time-consuming hassle of setting up work lights for small projects. The new packs are especially useful in spaces without convenient outlets, like closets, attics, and crawlspaces. The bulbs are said to last more than 10,000 hours and are virtually indestructible. According to the manufacturer, they use so little additional energy that run times are unaffected. The 12-volt pack has a street price of about $90.

Makita, 800/462-5482, www.makitatools.com.

Shine On. Every well-equipped work rig needs one of these. Maglite, long known for its bullet-proof flashlights, offers an equally sturdy rechargeable version that's popular with police and rescue units. The NiCad *RX1019* includes both cigarette lighter adapter and 110-volt AC converter. The kit also includes two mounting brackets, so you can take the flashlight into the garage or the house at the end of the day. The maker claims that it will burn for $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours on a full charge. Like other Maglites, the RX1019 has an aluminum housing sealed with O-rings and a spare bulb in the tailpiece. You can find it on the web for about $90.

Mag Instrument, 909/947-1006, www.maglite.com.

Finish Carpentry Tools

Precision Router Guide. If you think router guides are all the same, you probably haven't seen the *Micro Fence*. The heart of the system is a micrometer adjustable edge guide that brings a new level of precision (.001 inch) to your hand-held router. Generally speaking, you can use the tool for just about any mortise or dado you're likely to come across. Optional accessories increase the tool's versatility; for example, circle and oval cutting jigs are available for round castings and curved inlay work. Optional vacuum bases hold the guides stationary without tacks, making them ideal for furniture and solid-surfacing. According to the maker, the Micro Fence is compatible with more than 50 routers and laminate trimmers. Prices start at $160 for the basic guide with no accessories. The circle jig also costs $160, while ellipse jigs start at $200.

Micro Fence, 800/480-6427, www.microfence.com.

A Cut Above. Some cuts you simply can't afford to mess up; stair treads are among them. But you can practically guarantee accurate cuts and a tight fit with the *Stairtool*, a well-made aluminum template with the single purpose of fitting treads on a finished staircase. The standard model works with treads from 34 to 50 inches, and the maker claims that it's appropriate for more than 99% of installations. An optional shorter set of tracks with a 27- to 42-inch capacity is also available. Large plastic knobs with steel inserts make the tool easy to adjust. You can order it from the manufacturer for $93 (shipping included).

Stairtool, 800/883-9818, www.stairtool.com.

Little Huffer. Dragging around an 80-pound hand-carry compressor to run a single brad nailer or finish gun is probably overkill. If you're looking for something a little more manageable, the *PC1010* might be just what you're after. At only 20 pounds, this little compressor is a breeze to carry, especially up steps, and the tiny motor is surprisingly quiet. Although it looks like a toy, it's built with easy-to-service pro-grade components. For less than $200, you can buy it packaged with a Senco FP18 brad nailer and a 25-foot coiled hose. That makes it about $200 cheaper than the industry's favorite cordless brad nailer.

Senco, 800/543-4596, www.senco.com.

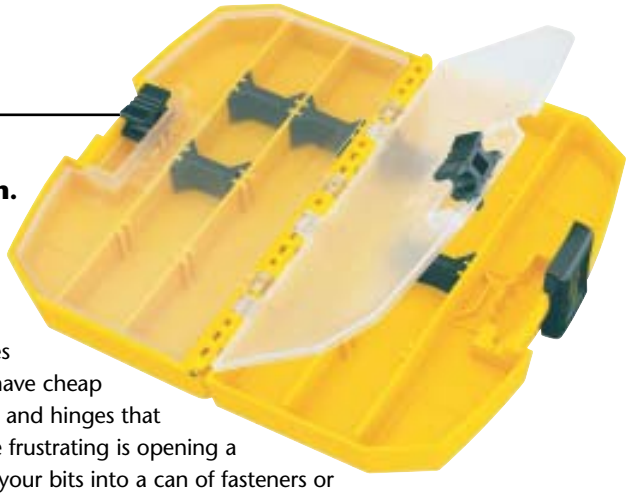
Fight Boredom. If you want the best and most complete lock-boring jig made, the *Bore Master* from Templaco should definitely be in the running. It adjusts for both $2^3/8$- and $2^3/4$-inch backsets and for door thicknesses from 1 inch to $2^7/8$ inches. High-speed steel spur bits in 1-, $1^1/2$-, and $2^1/8$-inch sizes are also included. Unlike most door boring kits, the Bore Master includes router templates for common latches and strikes, as well as a spring-loaded corner chisel for squaring up your hinge and lock mortises. It sells for $365.

Templaco Tools, 800/578-9677, www.templaco.com.

Tool Organizers

Great Crate. Milk crates are about as common on construction sites as port-a-johns and power tools, but using them for any purpose other than transporting milk from the dairy can lead to a hefty fine. When the penalties for stealing the handy stackables were increased tenfold, every discount store on the planet began selling cheap knockoffs. While the imitations might work fine for furnishing your kid's dorm room, they aren't up to the demands of construction work. Now Duluth Trading offers a *Black Plastic Crate* that's the same size as and as sturdy as a milk crate. It's perfect for carrying tools and other job-site essentials. The crates are about 12 inches square by 11 inches deep and cost about $12 each.

Duluth Trading, 800/505-8888, www.duluthtrading.com.



A Bit of Good Design. Storing and managing driver bits for your cordless drill or impact driver is often a bigger pain than it should be. Most of the cases included with a set of bits have cheap latches that won't stay shut and hinges that bend and break. Even more frustrating is opening a case only to have it spill all your bits into a can of fasteners or on the floor of the truck. DeWalt's ABS *Tough Case* has a sturdy hinge with a steel pin and a latch that stays closed. Interior lids prevent spills, and adjustable dividers allow you to organize it the way you want. But the best feature is an intelligent design that won't allow you to close it before the interior lids are latched tight. That way, you won't dump everything the next time you open it. The Tough Case costs about $8.

DeWalt, 800/433-9258, www.dewalt.com.

Tool-Hauling Vest. If you're having trouble organizing stuff in your toolbelt, you might try a Skillers *Tool Vest*. The lightweight cotton canvas vest has plenty of pockets for tools and fasteners, and the design spreads the load over your upper body for greater comfort. According to the maker, the 10-ounce canvas is better for warm climates, while the vest made with 12-ounce duck fabric might be more appropriate for cooler climes. You can have your company name embroidered on either one. The Tool Vest sells for about $60.

Skillers Workwear, 800/325-8707, www.skillers.com.

Plenty of Pockets. A tote with pockets is much easier to organize than a toolbox. Plus, if you can develop a system of always putting tools in their proper pocket, you will notice when something is missing, and hopefully you can track it down before you need it. Irwin's new *Soft-Sided Tool Organizer* is made of heavy-duty polyester and features lots of deep pockets with wide openings. Rubber-covered handles and a shoulder strap make it easier to carry than a bucket organizer, and a large footprint prevents spills. The bag is available in several sizes and sells for $20 to $40.

Irwin, 800/464-7946, www.irwin.com.