Toolbox

Deck Driver

by Jeremy Hess

Our company always uses screws with decking. Although pneumatic nailers are faster, we find that the pressure-treated lumber cups and warps less with screws, and customers appreciate our extra effort. But running in hundreds of screws is slow, and bending over a screw gun all day is tough on the back and knees.

When I saw Senco's newest collated screw gun, the DS300-AC, I couldn't wait to give it a try. It has a telescopic handle that adjusts from 31 to 41 inches and allows you to stand up while running screws. Because it's adjustable, it's comfortable for just about anyone. I recently had the chance to use it on several decks and to fasten subfloor for a new family room addition.

Operation

The gun weighs about 8 1/2 pounds, so it's twice as heavy as a regular screw gun. But it's not overly taxing to use, and the handle and extra large trigger are easy to grip.

When screwing down deck boards, I found it more efficient to lay all the boards first and run a few screws just to keep them in position. Then I snapped a blue chalk line above all the joists and ran in the remaining screws.

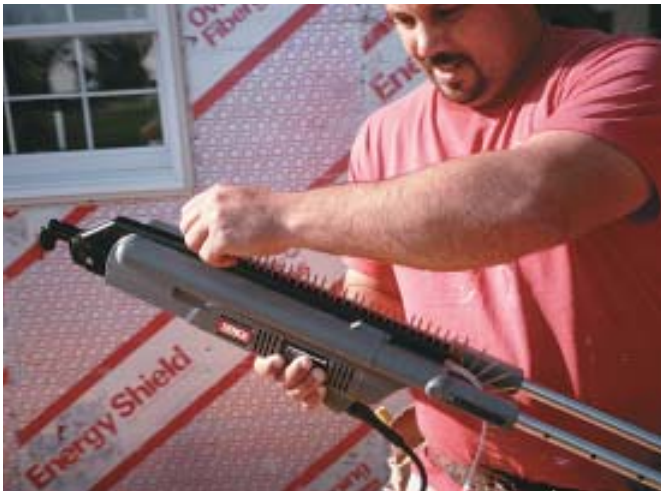
The collated screws advance smoothly, strips are easy to load, and I didn't experience any jams. I found the depth-of-drive adjustment stays consistent, and it's easy to adjust. The gun does have a reverse switch, but I found it pretty useless. When you need to back out a screw, the strip of remaining screws must be removed, and you have to engage the driver bit into the screw head. Engaging the bit from a standing position is tough, and bending over the long-handled tool is awkward. I found it easier just to keep a cordless drill nearby to fix the occasional errant screw.

Available Fasteners

Screws come in packs of 800 and are collated in strips of 50, with both Phillips and square drive available. Screw lengths go from 1 1/4 inches through 3 inches, in phosphate, yellow zinc, galvanized, and stainless-steel finishes. Prices range from $20 for the phosphate sheathing screws to $120 for the stainless-steel deck screws. Senco doesn't yet have a dedicated composite decking screw, so the company recommends stainless for this application. The screws are available at most major home centers and on a few websites, so I've had no trouble finding them.

Bits are a different story. None of my local suppliers stocked them, so I had to order replacement bits directly from Senco. They come in five-packs and sell for about $6. I just wish they were standard

A telescopic handle that adjusts for the user's height, along with a large trigger and padded handle, makes the DS300 comfortable to use. Walking around a subfloor or deck makes the job go faster than crawling around on your hands and knees.



Screws load from the top of the DS300, which keeps them from poking you in the leg while you're using the tool. The 50-screw collations feed consistently, and the screws seem to be of high quality, with sharp points.

1/4-inch hex bits like those found on a conventional screw gun because they would be cheaper and easy to find locally. The bits will last for about 1,500 phosphate or galvanized screws, but only about half as long with stainless, which is tougher on bits. Bit replacement is easy; you just need a pair of pliers to remove the old bit from the driver shaft.

The Verdict

Overall, I found this tool enjoyable to use. It cuts the time it takes to drive deck screws by at least half compared to a conventional screw gun, and it's much easier on the body. If you are running a lot of deck or subflooring screws, you owe it to yourself to try one. The Senco DS300-AC costs about $250 and includes a blow-molded case.

Jeremy Hess *is a carpenter with D.E.R. Construction in Bainbridge, Pa.*

Metal-Cutting Circular Saw

by David Frane

For most carpenters, cutting metal means using a fine-toothed blade in a recip saw or an abrasive blade in a circular saw. Both methods work, but recip saws are slow, and the teeth distort light-gauge metal. Circular saws are fast, but abrasive blades wear out quickly and produce a shower of chips, sparks, and grit.

I recently tried out a new metal-cutting circular saw (model 6370-21) from Milwaukee. It's basically a sidewinder with a removable metal shroud that covers the blade. The saw has some unusual features and uses a type of blade that few carpenters are familiar with.

Dry Cutting

Milwaukee's metal-cutting saw uses an 8-inch dry-cut metal blade, which resembles a standard wood-cutting blade. But if you look closely, you'll notice that the gullets are very shallow and the tips do not rake forward. What you can't see is that the tips are made from a special alloy that cuts metal without a lubricant (hence the term dry cutting). The tips on Milwaukee's blade are made from Cermet, an alloy that's 70% aluminum oxide and 30% titanium. According to the manufacturer, they last two to four times longer than carbide tips.

Milwaukee offers two different blades for this saw. The 42-tooth model is designed for cutting material over 3/32 inch thick; the 50-tooth model is for thinner material. I tested the saw with a 42-tooth blade, and it made smooth, clean cuts with minimal burring. It also cut very quickly, nearly as fast as a carbide blade cuts wood and much faster than an abrasive blade cuts metal. The 42-tooth blade cut through 25-gauge metal studs as easily as a pair of scissors cuts paper, and it whipped right through 3/4-inch galvanized pipe. Although dry-cut blades cost more than abrasive blades, they last so long that they yield a significantly lower cost per cut.

Milwaukee's newest circular saw, model 6370-21, is made for metal, not wood. A removable chip tank covers the blade and captures most of the airborne particles that could cause injury or damage surfaces. The 8-inch blade has teeth of Cermet, an aluminum oxide and titanium alloy that Milwaukee claims lasts two to four times longer than carbide.

Testing

I tested the Milwaukee saw by cutting sheet metal and 3/4-inch galvanized pipe. The housing and blade guard also function as a chip tank that's designed to collect sparks and metal chips. Cutting produced few visible sparks, and I was surprised by how little debris ended up on the floor. I was even more surprised when I emptied the chip tank, because, judging by its contents, the vast majority of particles were captured. Using this saw to cut metal is safer and cleaner than using an abrasive blade in a regular circular saw. Most sparks and chips are contained, so you're less likely to get something in your eye or set the place on fire. There's also less metal debris around to scratch finish surfaces or cause rust stains.

The chip tank is not the only unusual feature on the Milwaukee saw. A guard-retracting lever makes it possible to plunge-cut without taking your hands off the grips. Although the motor is not in line with the blade, the rear-mounted main grip and side handle are similar to what you'd find on a wormdrive saw.

The tool's 13-amp motor spins at 3,700 rpm and has plenty of power. The saw weighs 13.3 pounds, a couple of pounds more than a regular sidewinder. I tested the kit version of the tool, which includes a plastic case and a 42-tooth Endurance blade.

According to the manufacturer, this saw will cut steel studs, steel decking, 2 1/2-inch angle iron, 1/4-inch steel plate, and a variety of other materials. Milwaukee says that if you use a slow enough feed rate, you can even cut the occasional piece of 3/4-inch mild steel. The saw is new to the market and is expected to retail for around $300. Replacement blades cost about $50 each. I liked the saw. If I were cutting metal on a regular basis, I would seriously consider getting one.

TOOL TECHNIQUES

Cutting Openings With a Router

by Tim Uhler

It doesn't take long to sheath walls on the deck, but cutting out door and window openings can really slow you down. Our crew tried a number of methods for cutting out sheathing before we came up with one we liked.

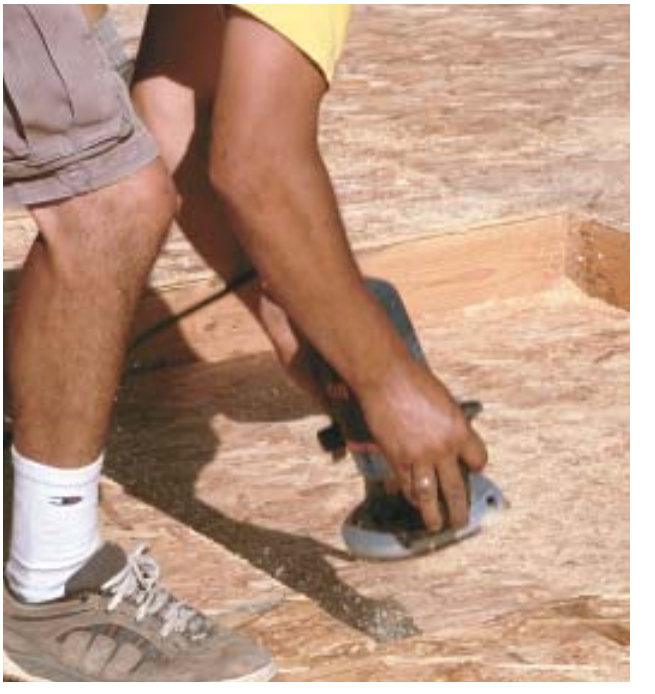
We tried using a circular saw, but it's time consuming to do the necessary layout. Using a recip saw means that you can skip the layout by running the blade against the opening. That works, but the cutting action is slow, and the edges will definitely be rough. We've even tried chainsaws, which are very fast, but they're dangerous, and the chips go everywhere. It's even worse if you have to stand on a ladder to make the cut.

Finally, we took someone's advice and tried using a router with a flush-trimming bit. It turned out to be an extremely fast way to cut openings. We started out with a 2-hp router, but it burned up on the first job. Now we use a 3 1/4-hp plunge router with a 1/2-inch flush-trimming bit, and it has no trouble cutting the 1/2-inch OSB and 5/8-inch fir plywood that we normally use. You have to try this method to appreciate just how fast it is.

Our $300, 3 1/4-hp plunge router has paid for itself many times over, but you don't have to spend as much as we did. For $200 or less, you can find a quality 3-hp router. Just be sure to replace bits when they get dull; otherwise, you risk burning up your machine. We spend about $20 per bit and can get two 2,500-square-foot houses out of each one.

Tim Uhler *is a framer for Pioneer Builders in Port Orchard, Wash.*

Cutting out door and window openings with a router saves time and makes a splinter-free cut. Start by making a hole with the claw end of your hammer. If you don't know exactly where the opening is, you can walk on the sheathing and feel where it flexes. Drop the bit through the hole, turn on the router, and move to the perimeter of the opening.



Moving in a counter-clockwise direction, work your way around the opening. The bearing guides the router for an accurate cut, and the whole process takes about a minute. Once you're done, you can nail off the sheathing and stand the wall.

SIDING TOOLS

Cutting and Marking Made Easier. Skip the chalk lines and combo squares, now you can cut window and door openings, as well as final courses of siding, with a time-saving specialty tool from Malco.

The *Sider*'s 1/8-inch graduated slots receive a utility knife and make quick work of long parallel cuts. The aluminum template is available to match most vinyl siding profiles, including double 4 and 5, dutch lap 4 1/2 and 5, and triple 3. The stainless-steel marking gauge sells for about $16.

Malco Products, 800/328-3530, www.malcotools.com.

Siding Saw. Installing ten squares of cedar shingle siding on my new addition has made me appreciate my Bosch model *1660 24-Volt Cordless Circular Saw* more than ever. The 6 1/2-inch saw has really proved its merit cutting shingles for gables and dormers. It stays up on the scaffold with me, and the huge pack provides enough power to last all day. The intelligently designed blade guard almost never gets hung up on the skinny cedar shingles, and a cool depth adjustment shows where the blade is set with only a quick glance. I'm sure this saw would work equally well for clapboards, vinyl, and fiber cement. I found it on the web (www.toolsteal.com) as part of a reconditioned three-tool kit (model 3960CFK) that includes the saw, 1/2-inch drill, flashlight and two batteries for under $300.

Robert Bosch Tool Co., 877/267-2499, www.boschtools.com.

Take a Brake. Setting up and carrying a bulky metal brake can be the hardest part of bending and installing trim metals and flashing, especially when you're working by yourself. The *Quick-Start Brake Rack* mounts your Tapco or Van Mark metal brake to your truck's ladder rack, which not only saves space in the bed of your truck, but also creates a convenient work station. According to the manufacturer, the Brake Rack makes your expensive metal brake harder to steal, as well. It sells for about $230.

Brake Products Co., 610/941-4333, www.brakeproductscompany.com.

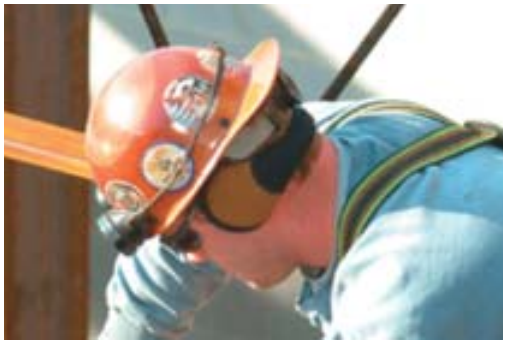
Better Snips. I don't know about you, but I think typical aviation snips should last longer than they do. Keepers bend and break, springs lose their spring — and few things are more annoying than being perched high up on pump jacks with a set of shears that can't make the cut. If you're ready for a higher-quality product, check the offerings from Klenk. Their models *MA72010* and *MA72000 Siding Shears* are perfect for vinyl siding. Large handles and serrated jaws require less cutting effort, and fine points allow the jaws to get closer to rolled edges. They sell for about $21 and $32, respectively.

Klenk Tools, 800/327-5619, www.klenktools.com.

COLD WEATHER GEAR

Supreme Socks. When builders and remodelers talk about cold feet, they're often referring to customers who change their mind about a project after getting a bid for the work. But if your cold feet come from socks that aren't doing the job, you might consider a pair from TechSpun. Favored by members of the U.S. Special Forces, *Environmental Sock Systems* are comfort-rated for temperatures down to -40°F. The wool-polypropylene blended socks are matched with a comfortable liner that wicks away moisture and prevents chafing. According to the maker, the socks are not intended for people who can be content with a bag of tube socks from Wal-Mart. They're made for people who simply can't afford problems with their feet. The socks start at $16 per pair, and liners sell for $7.50.

TechSpun, 800/392-8500, www.techspun.com.



Manly Earmuffs. Earmuffs might not be the manliest of work wear, but whining about your ears hurting won't do much for your image, either. If you have enough faith in your masculinity, you might try a set of *Earwarmers* from Gorgonz. The adjustable muffs are available not only in several colors of fuzzy fleece, but also in brown duck, so you can make a coordinated ensemble with your barn coat or insulated coveralls. Prices start at $15.

Gorgonz, 410/534-6320, www.gorgonz.com.

Breathing Room. On a cold day, good gloves can make the difference between getting things done and going home early. Gorgonz makes a complete line of gloves for people who have to wear gloves to do their jobs. The gloves have special features for improved dexterity and grip, plus extra padding at the knuckles for protection. But perhaps the coolest feature is what the manufacturer calls the *Exhale Heating System*. Gloves in this product line have a small mouthpiece near the cuff that channels your warm breath to your fingertips. I've tried them, and they work great. They cost about $35.

Gorgonz, 410/534-6320, www.gorgonz.com.

High-Tech Long Johns. Even in temperatures well below zero, you can be quite comfortable with Duofold's *Varitherm Base Layer* long underwear. The product is available in four weights — expedition, heavy, medium, and light — to match any temperature and outdoor activity. The high-tech knit polyester fabric helps you adapt to changing weather or activity level by moving moisture away from your skin. Aside from its excellent insulating properties, the product is very comfortable and extremely well made. Expedition-weight garments sell for about $37 per piece; all the others sell for about $16 per piece. I think it's the best long underwear available.

Duofold, 800/994-4348, www.duofold.com.