

Sidewinder Circ Saws

The best sidewinders are light and powerful, brake quickly, and have a large bevel capacity

The sidewinder circular saw is the quintessential East Coast framer's tool. As a full-time custom framer, I count it among my most important power tools. For

by Steve Veroneau

this article, I reviewed eight 7¹/₄-inch saws: the Bosch CS20, the DeWalt

364K, the DeWalt 369CSK, the Hitachi C7BD2, the Makita 5007FAK, the Milwaukee 6394-21, the Porter-Cable 325MAG, and the Ridgid R3200. While most manufacturers make several circular saws, I chose these tools over other models because they offer the most power and best features for professional users. They are all traditional sidewinders, with the blade on the right side of the motor.

Cutting Through the Choices

In choosing a favorite saw, I looked first at power. Framers have to make good time cutting a variety of materials, including dense engineered lumber like LVL and Parallam,

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Bosch CS20

Only Bosch has a built-in rafter hook, and it's exceptionally well designed. The Direct Connect cord system allows you to attach an extension cord directly to the saw and a positive stop prevents the cord from coming unplugged. No matter how I tried, I was unable to defeat the design. The plastic composite shoe makes the saw feel light and balanced. I dropped the saw numerous times to see if the shoe would bend or break and it survived with hardly a scratch. It's a great saw with only one negative — no brake.



DeWalt 364K

If I were picking a shop saw, this would be my first choice. My only complaint with the saw is its weight: It's simply too heavy to carry all day long. But when cutting panels, the large rear-pivot shoe and extra stability are a plus. The bevel scale is marked to the single degree and settings are easily adjustable.



DeWalt 369CSK

The best balanced of the bunch, this saw is no frills, all work. Bevel and depth adjustments are easy. It has a great bevel scale marked by the single degree with cast numbers that won't wear off. The 369CSK's shoe is made from a composite material similar to that on the Bosch, and it performed equally well in the drop test. It's a solid saw that provides good value.



Hitachi C7BD2

Solid, ergonomically sound, and with plenty of power, this tool is a workhorse. I wish the graduations on the bevel scale were closer together — my only real complaint.



Makita 5007FAK

The LED light is nice and the maker says the bulbs will last as long as the saw. Unfortunately, that alone doesn't make this saw a worthy choice. The small shoe gives it a top-heavy feel and it has the smallest bevel capacity.

TOOL TEST



Milwaukee 6394-21

This saw has plenty of power and feels well balanced. With the easily replaced Quik-Lok cord (common to many Milwaukee tools), you can swap the standard 10-foot cord for a 25-foot version. The handle rotates through eight positions for greater comfort. I never felt it was worth the time to use this feature, but it doesn't detract from the saw. The tool has an on-board hex wrench for blade changes.



Porter-Cable 325MAG

I found the Quik-Change system secure and quite easy to use. Instead of a blade wrench, it uses a hand-tightened nut to secure the blade. This is the most important circ-saw innovation to come along in years. Unfortunately, the saw won't cut through 1³/₄-inch LVL at a 45-degree bevel, making it unacceptable on my jobs. The dust port also needs work.



Ridgid R3200

The Ridgid is a decent low-cost saw, but it lacks a brake. Besides having the longest cord, nothing about it is really exceptional. It's probably a good choice if you don't want to spend too much money outfitting a crew. Light-up plug, cord wrap, and on-board blade wrench are good ideas.

Sidewinder Specs

	Bosch CS20	DeWalt 364K	DeWalt 369CSK	Hitachi C7BD2	Makita 5007FAK	Milwaukee 6394-21	Porter-Cable 325MAG	Ridgid R3200
Weight	11 lb 4 oz (without cord)	13 lb 4 oz	11 lb 5 oz	11 lb 11 oz	11 lb 12 oz	12 lb 1 oz	11 lb 2 oz	12 lb 5 oz
RPM	5,800	5,800	5,800	5,800	5,800	5,800	5,800	5,800
Maximum bevel	56°	50°	56°	55°	45°	50°	50°	51.5°
Cord length	Direct Connect	8 ¹ / ₂ '	8 ¹ / ₂ '	8'	8 ¹ / ₂ '	10'	10'	12'
Brake	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Loudness	102 dB	102 dB	103 dB	104 dB	102 dB	103 dB	117 dB	104 dB
Price	\$140	\$155	\$124	\$130	\$170	\$180	\$150	\$109

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and the new generation of dense structural panels like Advantech. We put all these saws to the test on the job and, as it turned out, power was not an issue for any of them: They all had plenty to spare. Most were also up to the task of cutting through 1³/₄-inch LVL at steep compound angles. The only real shortcoming was with the Porter-Cable, which despite what its literature says would not cut all the way through a 1³/₄-inch LVL at a 45-degree bevel.

What made the real difference between the saws was the ergonomics — how the saw felt in the hand for hours at a time, bevel scale and capacity, and other innovative features.

Weight and Balance

Weight plays a big role in how a saw feels by the end of the day. The majority of the saws fall in the 11¹/₂- to 12¹/₂-pound range. The DeWalt 364K is the heaviest, at 13 pounds 4 ounces.

When weighing the saws, I found that they were generally heavier than the manufacturers' literature claimed. My measurements included the blade, which might explain the discrepancy. While the lightest of the group was the Porter-Cable, at 11 pounds 2 ounces, the DeWalt 369CSK felt the best balanced, making it the most comfortable to use for long periods. The Porter-Cable was a close second in the comfort-and-balance category, followed by the Milwaukee, Bosch, Hitachi, Ridgid, and DeWalt 364. The least comfortable was the Makita. I found this saw to be all motor and no base; it had a top-heavy feel, almost as if the base wasn't big enough to support the saw.

Bevel Capacity

In working with these saws, I found that I gravitated toward tools with bevel scales graduated by single degrees. Those included the Bosch, both DeWalts, and the Milwaukee. Wider intervals, like the 5-degree marks found on most of the saws, left me wasting time on test cuts to get the right setting.

For roof framing, extra bevel capacity is a real plus. The DeWalt 364, the Milwaukee, and the Porter-Cable bevel to 50 degrees, the Ridgid goes to 51.5, and the Hitachi to 55. The Bosch and DeWalt 369 both go all the way to 56 degrees. The Makita has a maximum of only 45 degrees.



Power-tool cords are never long enough and they're usually the first part of a circular saw to show signs of wear. Milwaukee's can be replaced in seconds, thanks to their Quik-Lok cord (top). The 25-foot version means you often don't need an extension. Bosch (above) got rid of the cord altogether on the CS20. You plug an extension cord right into a male plug on the tool.



Bosch is the only maker to include a rafter hook on its sidewinder. It's a great feature that other makers should add.



Porter-Cable's Quik-Change blade bolt (top) eliminates rounded bolts and searching for a blade wrench. A slide-out handle provides leverage for your fingers and a serrated nut and corresponding washer grip the blade. Milwaukee (above) and Ridgid store a hex-style blade wrench right on the housing, so you don't have to waste time rummaging in the truck.



Milwaukee, DeWalt (left), and Bosch (right) graduate their bevel scale by single degree marks, so it's easier to get the right bevel setting for rafter cuts. Bosch's white-on-black markings are the easiest to see, but the marks can be scraped off with a utility knife.

Other Features

A comfortable padded grip provides better control and reduces fatigue when you're cutting framing all day long. The most comfortable handle-trigger combinations belong to Porter-Cable, Bosch, Milwaukee, Hitachi, and Ridgid (in that order), which all have padded handles.


Brake. With the exception of the Bosch and the Ridgid, all the saws have an electric brake, which is a safety feature I think every saw should have. It enables me to perform plunge cuts for stringers and birdsmouths more safely.

Visibility. While all of the saws provided a similar view of the cut line, some did a better job of clearing sawdust. The saws that did the best job (in order) were the Bosch, both DeWalt saws, the Hitachi, the Makita, the Ridgid, and the Milwaukee. Porter-Cable has a design flaw; I found that the dust exhaust port almost immediately clogs with debris, rendering it useless. After clearing it several times, I gave up and forgot it was there.

The Winner

Although it has no brake, I still chose the Bosch saw as my favorite. I hope the manufacturer will consider adding this important safety feature. The Bosch's cord attachment and rafter hook make this tool great for framers. The tool is well balanced and was comfortable to hold throughout the course of the day. The bevel scale is broken down into 1-degree marks and the saw bevels all the way to 56 degrees. As for performance, the tool doesn't bog down under strain, and it clears sawdust from the cut area in an efficient manner.

My second choice was the DeWalt 369CSK, which I found very comfortable to haul around all day long. The saw is well balanced and powerful, gives good visibility of the cut line, and has a 1-degree bevel scale. My only complaint is with the arbor lock button, which I found to be the least comfortable of all — not a huge problem, just a minor irritation.

My third choice was the Milwaukee, which surprised me because I haven't seen too many of these circular saws on jobs in my area. But I thought the tool was well designed with easy depth and bevel adjustments. Single degree demarcations on the bevel gauge, good power, and the quick-change cord make this saw a good choice. 

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