On the Job

Fast Drawers

by Steve Phipps

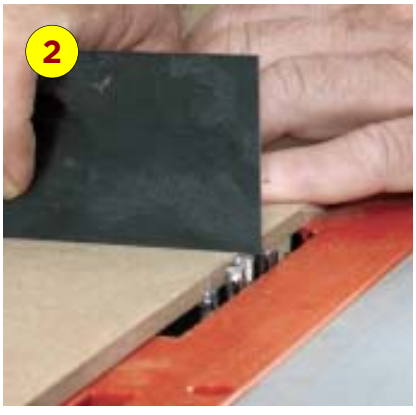
In my shop, I use dado blades a lot. In fact, I use them so often, I keep a dado blade in one of my table saws all the time. And I never go on a job site without making sure I've got dado blades in my truck. I use them for cutting tongues, grooves, rabbets, tenons, and, of course, dadoes. One of my favorite dado-blade operations is making drawer boxes. I call my technique the QQQ method — for "quarter-quarter-quarter." If you ever have to make drawer boxes for cabinets or built-ins — whether in the shop or on site — you may find that this approach saves you some time.

It all depends on precision, starting with the material. I use a ½-inch 9-ply prefinished Baltic birch plywood called ApplePly (States Industries, 800/626-1981, www.statesind.com). Unlike some ½-inch plywoods, it's exactly a half inch thick, and the ApplePly ¼-inch ply is a true quarter inch. This is key to my drawer setup.

When setting up the dado blade, I use a dial caliper (1) to make sure it's cutting a groove exactly ¼ inch wide. I also use the calipers, plus a ¼-inch-thick piece of material, to set the blades exactly ¼ inch above the table (2) and the rip fence exactly ¼ inch from the dado blade (3).

With this triple-Q setup, I can make all the cuts I need to build my drawer boxes without making any changes.

For a typical production run, I first determine how many drawers I need of each height and rip the plywood accordingly. With average-size drawers, I can usually get all four sides from

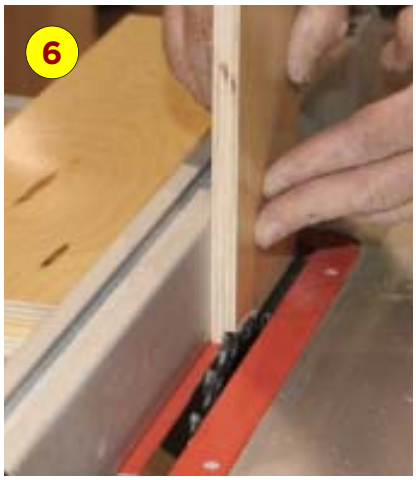


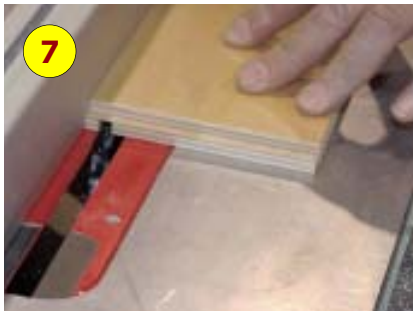
each rip, with maybe enough left for an additional side. I then cut all the sides, fronts, and backs to length.

I generally make the sides 2 inches shorter than the overall depth of the cabinet box (22 inches for a 24-inch-deep cabinet, for example). Figuring the widths for the backs and fronts requires more time: Starting with the cabinet opening, you have to subtract for the drawer slides (typically 1/2 inch per side, or 1 inch total); subtract for the drawer sides (two sides at 1/2 inch, or 1 inch total); and then add back in the length of the two tongues that fit into the dadoes in the sides (1/4 inch each, or 1/2 inch total). This means I end up subtracting 1 1/2 inches from the width of the cabinet opening to determine the cut length for the fronts and backs.

Once the parts are cut, I stack them near the table saw, sides in one pile and fronts and backs in another. I take a side, cut the dado for the joint (4), then turn it around and cut the dado for the bottom (5). I cut all the sides, then move on to the fronts and backs, first cutting the rabbet that creates the tongue (6) and then cutting the slot for the bottom (7).

Finally, I dry-assemble the drawers and measure for the bottoms, adding only 7/16 inch (instead of a full 1/2 inch) to the inside box dimension to ensure a trouble-free fit. Dry-fitting is especially important if you have only one table saw, since you'll have to install a regular saw blade to cut the bottoms and will lose the QQQ setup. Better to make sure everything fits first.





Steve Phipps *is a cabinetmaker and millworker in Woodland Hills, Calif.*

More On the Job *on next page*

Easy Brick Cleanup

by John Carroll

When I'm setting bricks, I like to concentrate on getting full, compressed joints instead of worrying about keeping the brickwork clean. Acid-washing is the usual method for cleaning off mortar, but with some bricks this messy step isn't necessary. I've found that I can usually clean smooth-faced brick using just a nonmetallic abrasive pad, such as Norton's O pad. The trick is to clean the brick twice.

I do my initial cleanup while the mortar is still setting up, typically an hour and a half after striking off the joints. Since the mortar is still soft, I simply rub the face of the bricks lightly with my dry abrasive pad, being careful not to dig into the joints or use any water (above). This step is similar to the initial cleanup of freshly grouted tile.

The following morning, I use the same abrasive pad with plenty of water to get any remaining smears off the brickwork (right). Because the mortar has set up, I can be as aggressive as I need to be with the scouring pad, eliminating the need for further cleanup.

John Carroll is a mason and builder in Durham, N.C.