

Innovative Products 2006

by Patrick McCombe

Our annual pick of products designed to help you work smarter, faster, and better

Every day, *JLC's* editorial mailbox overflows with press releases for new building products. We sift through them for our monthly products columns, and once a year we select the most promising ones for this collection. We look for items we think will improve the quality of your work, increase your efficiency on the job, or make your business more profitable.

We hope that if you try out any of our product picks, you'll let us know what you think. Many are too new to have a track record, so we rely on your feedback. And if you come across a product on your own that changes your business, we want to hear about it. Maybe we'll add it to next year's roundup.

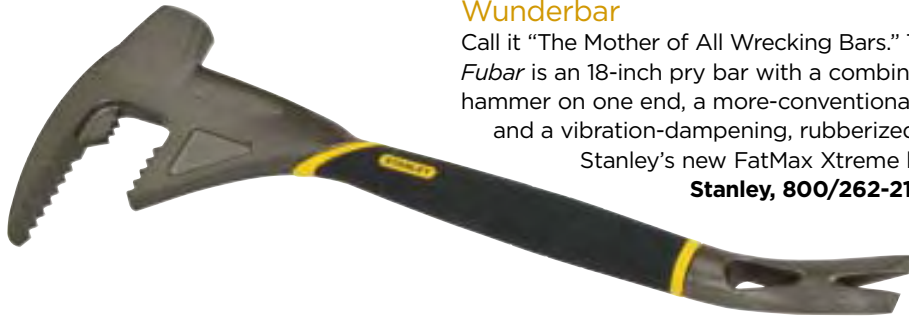
Tools & Equipment

Better Edger

Hate iron-on edge banding? Take a look at the *Burgess Edge*, developed by lifelong carpenter Mike Burgess. This tool consists of two profile-matched 1/2-inch router bits; the first makes a D-shaped groove in the plywood's edge and the second carves out a piece of solid stock to fill it. Kits include shims for adjusting the cutters to nominal-thickness plywood. The 3/4-inch-bit set costs \$130; the 1/2-inch set, \$120 — or you can buy both for \$200. A similar setup is available for spindle shapers.

Burgess Edge, 802/233-1489, www.burgessedge.com.





Wunderbar

Call it “The Mother of All Wrecking Bars.” The lethal-looking, four-in-one *Fubar* is an 18-inch pry bar with a combination board-gripping/demo-hammer on one end, a more-conventional flat bar on the other end, and a vibration-dampening, rubberized grip in between. Part of Stanley’s new FatMax Xtreme line, it sells for about \$45.

Stanley, 800/262-2161, www.stanleytools.com.

On the Level

In the past, setting up an extension ladder on uneven ground usually required propping up one of the legs with bricks, scraps of lumber, or the like. No longer. Werner recently introduced *The Equalizer*, a new aluminum extension ladder with integrated leg-levelers that adjust in $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch increments. It comes in Type II (225-pound capacity) and Type I (250-pound capacity) versions in lengths of 16 to 28 feet. A small spirit level built into the bottom rung makes setup easier. Prices for Equalizer ladders range from \$180 to \$250. I just wish the company offered Type IA and fiberglass versions.

Werner Ladder, 888/523-3370, www.wernerladder.com.



Dust-Free Cutter

Remodeling is messy work — and we all know customers hate messes. Luckily, Fein’s *MF 12-180 Dustless Construction Cutter* allows you to cut new openings, make holes and channels for new mechanicals, and do exploratory demolition “virtually dust-free,” the company says. With its depth-adjustable ($2\frac{3}{8}$ -inch maximum) 7-inch diamond blade spinning at 7,000 rpm, this specialty tool cuts plaster, concrete, drywall, ceramic tile, and metal studs. I found it on the Web for as little as \$1,200 (www.waltertool.com), which includes one blade and a metal case.

Fein USA, 800/441-9878, www.fein-us.com.



Site & Foundation



Silt Stopper

Increasingly, local regulators are expressing concerns about erosion-control measures on residential construction sites. Many erosion-control products rely on synthetic netting and other materials that can hang around for years, snaring lawn-care and gardening equipment. *BioNet* erosion-control blankets, however, are made entirely of biodegradable natural materials. Depending on the model, they feature straw, coconut, or straw-and-coconut fibers stitched with cotton thread to jute netting. Prices range from 75 cents to \$1.30 per square yard.

North American Green, 800/772-2040, www.bionetblankets.com.



Superior Building Blocks

Most concrete blocks don't generate a whole lot of excitement, but *Omni Blocks* may be the exception. In addition to offering the usual benefits of masonry construction — insect, mold, and fire resistance and excellent storm performance — the uniquely shaped blocks contain interior insulation for better thermal performance; according to the manufacturer, they boast an R-value of 13. Available in two colors and several face styles, they allegedly cost about \$2.34 more per square foot than conventional CMU construction in comparable wall assemblies.

Omni Block, 866/740-6664, www.omniblockgroup.com.



Slab Monitoring

Installing finished flooring on a concrete slab without proper moisture testing is a huge gamble. If the slab proves to be too wet, you're facing a very expensive callback. A new electronic instrument, Wagner's *Rapid RH*, allows you to get accurate data on a slab's relative humidity and temperature with a mere push of a button. The manufacturer says the $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch probe — which installs directly into the slab — is faster and more accurate than conventional moisture-testing methods. A kit containing five Rapid RH probes, two drill bits, a cleaning brush, and an analog moisture meter — plus a carrying case — costs about \$800.

Wagner Electronics, 800/585-7609, www.rapidrh.com.

Framing & Structure

Sheathing Seam Tape

When roofing blows off in a hurricane, tornado, or other high-wind event, interior damage is often caused by water leaking through seams in the sheathing. Seal the seams effectively and you prevent most of the damage. That's the rationale behind Huber's *Zip System Roof Sheathing*, which combines 1/2-inch-thick moisture-resistant OSB panels and high-performance gun-dispensed seam tape. In addition to preventing water entry during roof-damaging storms, says Huber, the product protects the building's interior until the finished roofing is installed. The company also claims the Zip System is faster and easier to work with than felt and more durable as a temporary roof. Once labor costs are factored in, pricing purportedly runs about the same as for conventional OSB and felt.

Huber Engineered Woods, 800/933-9220, www.huberwood.com.



Space Lift

Need a fast and easy fix for bouncy floors and sagging joists? Check out the *Joist Jack*. This 8-foot light-gauge-steel strap increases the effective depth of any solid lumber member or I-joist accessible from below.



Installing the device takes only minutes, the maker says — much less time than is required for sistering joists or adding solid blocking. The jacks sell for about \$50 apiece; the maker says five or six are usually sufficient to correct problems with a “standard-sized” living room. Check the company Web site for other cool structural fixes for floors.

Ridgway Structural Systems, 970/596-1787, www.ridgwaystructuralsystems.com.

Blocking Tackled

Installing blocking for cabinets, fixtures, and railings is one of the slowest parts of framing walls with light-gauge steel, but *Danback Wood Backing Plates* can speed things up — by 90 percent, claims the maker. Precut and fire-treated, the plates are suitable for commercial spaces and fire-rated assemblies. They sell for about \$6 each.

Dricon, 866/873-3789, www.dricon.com.



Exteriors



No-Drill Deck Screws

Ever try to run deck screws into an exotic hardwood decking like ipe without predrilling? If so, you know it can't be done — unless you're using *Deckfast Razorback Screws*. With their serrated threads and super-sharp point, these screws can't be stopped by any decking I've found. They come with brown trim heads (1⁵/₈- and 2¹/₄-inch #7s; 2¹/₂- and 3-inch #8s), uncoated trim heads (1⁵/₈- and 2¹/₄-inch #7s; 2¹/₂- and 3-inch #8s), and uncoated flat heads (2¹/₂- and 3-inch #10s). Prices range from about \$45 to \$145 per 1,000 screws.

Starborn Industries, 800/596-7747, www.headcote.com.



Outdoor Hot Water

Imagine washing the car or filling the hot tub with warm — not freezing-cold — water. A new outdoor faucet from Moen allows homeowners to do just that. Unlike most other hot/cold hydrants, this model has a single handle, like a shower valve, making installation and operation easier. The frost-free design includes a built-in vacuum breaker and comes in 8-inch (\$64) and 12-inch lengths (\$68).

Moen, 800/289-6636, www.moen.com.

Smart Soffit

Using sheets of AC plywood or MDO for soffit material means spending extra time ripping the 4-foot-wide panels to fit and resigning yourself to regularly occurring seams. A promising alternative is *SmartSide* cut-to-width soffit. Available in 12-, 16- and 24-inch widths in both vented and unvented versions, it eliminates rips and — since it comes in 12- and 16-foot lengths — results in fewer seams. The maker gives the product a 30-year warranty, including labor coverage for the first seven.

LP, 888/820-0325, www.lpcorp.com.



Thin-Brick Mortar

Conventional ready-mix mortars simply don't have enough grab for thin-brick and manufactured stone; the masonry tends to creep down the façade while the mortar sets. That's why Quikrete — prompted by numerous requests from commercial masons working with thin-veneer products — developed *Veneer Stone Mortar*, which contains extra lime for better water retention and increased grab. The manufacturer claims the new formulation makes working with thin-brick products much easier. It's sold nationwide in 80-pound bags and 3,000-pound "super sacks"; the 80-pound bag costs between \$5 and \$6.

Quikrete, 800/282-5828, www.quikrete.com.

Interiors

Fast Access Panel

Producing a site-built access panel isn't difficult, but it sure can suck up a surprising amount of time — plus most designs are notorious for air leakage. *Stealth Access Panels* from Wind-Lock — which come with an energy-saving gasket — make the process quicker and look considerably better than most other ready-made access panels. They're available in two residential and six commercial sizes. Prices start at about \$90 for the 22-inch-by-30-inch model.

Wind-Lock Corp., 800/872-5625, www.wind-lock.com.



Rock On!

Sound-attenuating drywall is a great way to keep noisy spaces in check, but it can be pretty tough to work with. In fact, most such products require power tools for cuts. A notable exception is *Quiet Rock 525*. According to the maker, the $\frac{5}{8}$ -inch-thick material — which comes in 8-, 9-, 10-, and 12-foot sheets — cuts just like regular drywall but delivers an STC rating of 53 when used on both sides of 2x4 stud walls. Prices range according to region from \$2.20 to \$2.75 per square foot.

Quiet Solution, 800/797-8159, www.quietsolution.com.



Corner Trim Adapter

Wrapping base trim around bullnose outside corners commonly involves copious amounts of caulking or the tedious assembly of a three-piece corner — but a little gizmo called the *Squarz It* can simplify the job. The $4\frac{1}{2}$ -inch-tall plastic adapter attaches to the existing bullnose with adhesive and can be finished with either conventional or setting-type compound. A box of 50 sells for \$60.

Tuffy Co., 866/369-9479, www.squarzit.com.

Easy-Align Balusters

Given the many variables in stair layout, it's often difficult to align the top baluster blocks using factory stair parts. A great solution to this problem is the *Tru-Line Balustrade System*. These balusters have an adjustable top block that allows alignment regardless of stair angle or rail height; they come in four $1\frac{3}{4}$ -inch and three $1\frac{1}{4}$ -inch styles in virtually any species of wood. Tru-Line balusters

cost about \$3 apiece more than similarly styled conventional balusters, but because the system eliminates the need for a plowed handrail, the extra expense may be offset by savings of \$1.50 to \$3 per foot of rail.

Coffman, 276/783-7251, www.coffmanstairs.com.



Insulation & Energy Conservation

Breeze Blocker

You don't need special workboxes or expensive spray-foam insulation to prevent air leakage through receptacles and other electrical devices. *Energy Blocks* work with readily available — and inexpensive — plastic or metal workboxes. Sealed to the framing and wires with latex caulk, the expanded-polystyrene blocks take less than two minutes to install, says the maker. They come in 4-inch round and one-, two-, and three-gang versions. A 74-piece assortment designed to cover all the outlet boxes in a larger home costs \$140.

Pine Ridge Builders, 701/320-1111, www.energyblock.com.



Tough Enough

Some insulation baffles are pretty flimsy, but here's a brand that I believe really does perform better than the rest. Made from 100 percent recycled high-density cellulose with a mold- and water-resistant additive, *TuffVents* are exceptionally sturdy and vapor-permeable. As an added bonus, they come not only in standard 43-inch lengths, but in 10-foot lengths too. A 10-foot, 16-inch version costs about \$4; a 10-foot, 24-inch model, \$5.50.

Weidmann-Industrial, 800/242-6748, www.weidmann-industrial.com.



Baffle-Free

Although insulation baffles are one way to achieve a ventilated roof assembly in a cathedral ceiling, a lot of conventional baffles are neither sturdy nor airtight. Many carpenters therefore opt for rigid insulation in the rafter cavities, but until recently there wasn't an easy way to fasten it. Now there are *Clip-Vents*. These plastic extrusions staple to the sides of the rafters and receive 1-inch rigid insulation to create sturdy, airtight vented cavities. The manufacturer claims this is also a great technique for directing heat upward in wood-frame radiant-heat applications beneath a subfloor. A 48-count box of 10-foot Clip-Vents sells for about \$120.

TMF, 800/889-0818, www.clip-vent.com.

Kitchen & Bath

Way Better Backer

Not only does *Nycore Tile Backer* make good use of some of the waste carpet that takes up about 3 percent of the nation's landfill space; it also bends for curved walls and cuts with conventional woodcutting saw blades and hole saws. Made entirely from recycled carpet, the water-proof product comes in 1/4- and 1/2-inch thicknesses in 3x5, 4x4, and 4x8 sheets. Although ASTM testing isn't quite complete, it appears that the product performs better than conventional backers, especially at 19.2- and 24-inch joist spacing. The company says pricing runs about 45 cents per square foot.

Nycore, 770/980-0000, www.nycore.com.



Trim-Out Timesaver

Want your plumber to speed up your trim-outs? Suggest *SureConnect*. The rather conventional-looking quarter-turn shut-off valves install without tools on the manufacturer's preformed stub-outs. Stub-outs are slotted so the valve can be oriented for the best appearance; they're available in elbow, straight, and short configurations for connection to PEX, CPVC, and copper. List prices for shut-offs start at about \$11.50. Straight stub-outs for copper and PEX start at about \$2.20. CPVC stub-outs start at \$3.35.

BrassCraft, 248/305-6000, www.brasscraft.com.



Clean Drawers

Two dishwashers in the space of one! The Fisher & Paykel *Double DishDrawer* allows homeowners to wash their heavily soiled pots and pans and their delicate crystal in separate drawers. Or, they can assign one drawer to clean items and the other to dirty ones — meaning no one ever has to put away dishes. Each independently controlled drawer accommodates six place settings and uses 2.4 gallons of water during a standard cycle. Prices start at about \$1,000.

Fisher & Paykel, 888/936-7872, www.usa.fisherpaykel.com.

