Smooth Operator

Chalk-Rite Gear Drive
Tajima Tool
888/482-5462
www.tajimatool.com
Street price: $24

All the years I worked as a carpenter, a chalk reel was just a chalk reel, and the chief virtue I sought in any chalk reel was that it be cheap; they're so simple it was hard to imagine an improvement to the basic design. Consequently, I put up with a lot of inconvenience.

Some filler doors were hard to open or opened on their own to fill my tool bag with chalk. The twisted string, when pulled, would exit the reel in a fountain of chalk, and all too often would fray and hang up in the nose of the reel. The string wouldn't be fully chalked, the retrieval was slow, and the resulting snapped line seemed as broad as a highway centerline.

Now that I mainly hammer the keyboard, manufacturers send me carpentry tools all the time to try out. In a sort of retrospective way, this frustrates the heck out of me. For example, Tajima's Chalk-Rite has addressed every complaint I didn't realize I had with my old chalk reels. To provide access for filling, the nose of the Chalk-Rite simply unscrews, and a barely noticeable detent has so far prevented the Chalk-Rite from opening unexpectedly. A thumb catch locks the reel, easing solo line snapping. The Chalk-Rite's gear-drive retrieves the line astonishingly quickly, which brings me to the best feature of this tool.

The string is thin and braided, and a snap leaves a thin, sharp line of chalk. I've had the Chalk-Rite for a few months, and it's seen use on several projects with no evidence of the string wearing. In my experience, no string wear means no snags or snarls. Pulling the line from the reel still creates a chalk fountain, but it's much, much smaller than was typical from my old chalk reels. — *Andy Engel*

Countersink for Deck Guys

Smart-Bit
Starborn Industries
800/596-7747
www.smart-bit.com
Street price: $15

Despite the onslaught of hidden fastener systems, whole forests' worth of hardwood decking (and, I suppose, whole oil fields' worth of synthetic decking) are still being top-screwed to the underlying joists. The best outcome is obtained by pre-drilling and countersinking, which add a considerable amount of labor to what's really a straight-ahead task.

The Smart-Bit should ease the tedium of drilling and countersinking in a couple of ways. First, its rotating stop collar delivers consistently drilled countersinks. And because it rotates, there's scant chance the stop collar will mar your client's expensive decking.

A set screw that bears on a flat machined on the drill bits helps to keep the bit in the assembly when being withdrawn from hardwoods. The tool's hex shank is milled with a detent to work with quick-release drill chucks.

The Smart-Bit is made in three sizes to work with # 7 trim-head screws, # 8 trim-head screws, and #10 flat- and bugle-head screws. Replacement drill bits cost $13 for a pack of five. — *A.E.*

Adjustable Square Measures Angles

Pivot Square
C.H. Hanson
800/827-3398
www.chhanson.com
Street price: $85

If all you do is build decks, this tool's price tag makes sense mostly if you're also a serious tool junkie, but it does have some applications for a deck builder. The Pivot Square functions as a speed square that can also accurately measure and transfer angles. It's got a place in stair work as well, as the integral level vials make it possible to measure pitch.

The Pivot Square's main purpose is to lay out roofs. In that vein, perhaps as valuable as the tool itself is the included roof-cutting manual, written by John Carroll. Carroll is a hands-on contractor who mainly works alone, and who has figured out more ways to work both solo and efficiently than anyone else I've met. He has also been writing on construction topics for as long as I can remember. Few people are better able to describe and demystify carpentry, and he continues to prove that with this manual.

Any deck builder who also does roofs probably doesn't do many of them, and so likely struggles with anything more difficult than a simple shed roof. If you've got a roof more complicated than that in your future, you might consider laying out the cash for a Pivot Square and its manual. — *A.E.*

New Sidewinder

C7BMR 71/4-inch Circular Saw
Hitachi
770/925-1774
www.hitachi-koki.com
Street price: $120

I live in sidewinder country. That doesn't mean rattlesnakes are a problem, just that I'm east of the Mississippi where we favor relatively light sidewinder circular saws over heavy worm-drive saws. The magnesium-cased C7BMR is a prime example of a light sidewinder. Weighing in at a well-balanced 10 1/2 pounds, this is one saw that won't aggravate my tennis elbow.

One often-warranted criticism that worm-drive users have of sidewinders is that they lack power. That didn't seem to be a problem with this 15-amp Hitachi. Set at its maximum 55-degree bevel, the saw had no trouble ripping a soaking-wet treated southern yellow pine 2x6. And though many circular saws have bevel or depth adjustments that don't work smoothly, this one has about the smoothest adjustments of any reasonably priced pro-level saw I've used.

I often use a circular saw in conjunction with an edge guide, particularly for ripping; this saves me from dragging out a table saw every time the need for a rip arises, and it more easily allows for tapered cuts. For a circular saw to work best with a guide, though, the blade must be parallel to the edge of the saw's base, which rides against the edge guide. In my experience, most are not.

This was the first thing I checked, measuring with a digital caliper, when the C7BMR came out of the box. The blade was within two thousandths of an inch of parallel, which is the sort of precision one expects of table saws, not circular saws. I was impressed.

The only complaint I have about the C7BMR is that, as tested, it doesn't come with a case or a rip guide. — *A.E.* ❖