

Flex Power 8 1/4-Inch and 10-Inch Table Saws

BY MARK CLEMENT

Flex has been on the ground—as Lowe’s house brand (available at other tool retailers, too)—for nearly three years, a century or so less than the brands it competes with. Every Flex tool I’ve reviewed has made an effort to be different with some best-in-class results. Here, I do a side-by-side review of the Flex 8 1/4-inch and 10-inch cordless table saws. I can’t help but also compare the two units against their sister table saw (same parent company, Chervon), the Skil TS6307-00 15-amp saw, the best saw (in my opinion and for the work I do) in the category. By far.

I looked at portability, power, controls, squareness, dust management, and “storability” and used the saws to cut pressure-treated 2-by, composite trim material, typical framing, 1-by trim, and super-knotty spruce furring strip. I looked at special features, too, and thought about users whose daily tasks differ from mine.

OUT OF THE BOX

The first thing to check is that the blade is parallel to the fence and set square to the table at 0 degrees. Both saws’ blades were 90 degrees and 45 degrees to the table out of the box. The 10-inch unit needed the fence adjusted only a hair.

The 10-inch saw kit comes with a monster 10-Ah battery and the 8 1/4-inch with a 6-Ah battery, both on the company’s new (read: more energy, faster charging, longer lasting than Gen 1—which I found accurate) Stacked Lithium power plants. I’m not a lab, so I didn’t run boards for hours testing numbers of cuts. I did forget that both saws were cordless. On projects like a basement remodel where

ripping isn’t a full-time job, battery life is measured in days. If you deal mostly with composite materials—low load—the battery life may still be days. I ripped oodles of Acre by Modern Mill for column wraps, and the battery had plenty of power.

Both saws have an LED strip in the fence (charged separately). I build a number of decks and, when it’s dark at 4:30, I’ll take any light source I can get.

The 8 1/4-inch saw is compact with a folding, extra table section to the left of the blade that claims best-cut capacity in its class for ripping sheet goods. I’m not a big ripper of sheet goods with table saws, but I hoped the fold-out section would be a good base on which to store the saw in my service body truck. It wasn’t. The saw tipped easily off its side. I don’t use the fold-out much, but it’s there if you need it and out of the way if you don’t. Hardware works well, but it adds weight to the 50-pound unit. For the material I rip, the cut capacity of the 8 1/4-inch saw works on 95% of what I need ripped with less blade plate resistance.

The 10-inch saw has a feature called CutSense, a Flex innovation in which pressing a button before activating the saw will shut it off after a rip is made. The blade senses pressure and, when it doesn’t, it shuts the saw off. The intention is to save battery life. However, it requires the extra step of pressing a switch near the start button before each use. If you make a rip and leave the saw long enough to install the item and want CutSense to be active on the next rip, it isn’t.

Fence locks. I need to give a shout out to the fence lock on the 8 1/4-inch saw. I’m not saying I like it; my years-long muscle memory



The Flex cordless table saw is available in 8 1/4-inch (on stand, at left in photo) and 10-inch (on table, at right in photo) models (1). The stand can be configured for either model. The author operates the fold-out support of the 8 1/4-inch saw (2).

Photos by Mark Clement

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of reaching under the table doesn't like it. But mechanically, it is an easier reach. The 10-inch tool has the comfort-food edition of an under-table fence lock. Both saws lock hard and snap into place. Engaging the locks does take some oomph; the lock on the 10-inch is actually loud.

Power. There are two ways I “measure” power: Everyday stuff—2-by, 1-by, composite-by—and the oddball we all run into. On this job, I had to thin 2x3, very knotty, spruce furring strips (strapping), and I'll be darned: The saws weren't happy.

I can feel the saws plowing through a KD fir 2x4. This is true of all saws, to a degree. However, with the blades all the way up into this material, the battery electronics shut both saws down as (I suspect) they heated up—and the batteries were bottoming out their electron exchange. With fresh batteries, the units were fine.

I didn't notice anything atypical in the materials I sent through the saws. Both saws cut smoothly, and the battery life on a cordless table saw still surprises me. That said, I ran out of juice with no real warning. The saws either start struggling or stop altogether, depending on the load, and I had to go to my battery farm to get back in the game. Should that be a chafe for you, like it is for me, you can buy the company's AC/DC adapter. It's unwieldy-ish (as is every other one I've seen) and takes up truck space. With its (sometimes maddening) fan-whirring transformer one-third of the way along, its otherwise generous 20-foot lead cord provides ample reach.

Dust. The Flex 10-inch saw includes a 22.5-degree angled chute that channels sawdust down. Genius. It should be tool building code. It rarely clogs. Instead of exiting the unit in a plume, most tailings “chute” down into a drywall bucket or empty box.

Switch. The 8 1/4-inch unit has a pull-tab type switch I really like. Flick on, bump off. The 10-inch has the same switch as the Skil, adapted from more stationary saws. It works, but it is just a hair more work. Press on, paddle off.

Stand. Both units use the same folding X-stand, which has one configuration for the 10-inch saw and another for the 8 1/4-inch saw. Assembly is required. Dragging from truck is also required. Both saws weigh about 50 pounds but feel way heavier than the Skil unit I have (also about 50 pounds), which has its stand built in. The Skil is *much* easier to set up, store, and manage.

Storability and portability. While I have a bowling alley in the back of my e350 service body, that room is not infinite, and I need to travel through it. Both saws must be stored on their bases—not on their sides like their sister Skil can be—and, being separate, the stand takes up more room. The Flex saws also require two extra trips to and from the truck for setup and break down compared with the Skil. On the plus side, unlike saws tangled up in fancy collapsible stands and wheel kits, the Flex saws can be moved in and out of a jobsite, through a door, and upstairs by one person.

CONCLUSIONS

Both saws perform as promised. Neither, other than their cordless-ness, lived up to my simple Skil. They share some features: switches, fences, likely motors.

The batteries alone are impressive in delivering giant energy. The saws that are built around them (Flex isn't sure if it is a battery company that builds tools or the other way around) do the work we need done well and hold their own on jobsites from decks to new homes and basement remodels, where running cords isn't convenient.

The Flex table saw kit (saw, battery, and charger) costs \$800 for the 10-inch saw and \$600 for the 8 1/4-inch saw; the stand (\$100) and the AC adapter (\$200) are sold separately.

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Both saws have a lighted fence (3). Shown in photo (4) are a 10-Ah battery (foreground, at left), included with the 10-inch saw; a 6-Ah battery (foreground, at right), included with the 8 1/4-inch saw; and an adapter (behind), sold separately.

Festool Systainer ToolBag

BY TOM O'BRIEN

When I'm working in occupied houses, my Festool dust extractor follows me from room to room like a puppy on a leash. By the end of the day, its top will be littered with loose tools and fasteners. It was always my intention to build a toolbox that could empower me to use the vac as a mobile tool cart, but now maybe I won't have to. Festool's new Systainer³ ToolBag (1) is a soft-sided tote with a hard plastic base that mates with all the company's mobile dust extractors and both generations of Systainers.

The toolbag features two full-length tool trays on the interior, a zippered pocket on each exterior side, and a few open pockets of various sizes on the ends. Otherwise, the interior is a blank slate, with only a pair of Velcro strips to which interchangeable, pocketed inserts can be affixed. Included with the bag are two T1 inserts, which have four large and eight small, soft-sided, bottomless pockets; one T2, which has four large, soft-sided, bottomless pockets; and one T3, which has three tight, hard-plastic-lined pockets (2). The T3 insert is designed to provide safe storage for sharp tools such as chisels. A small, T4 individual toolbag and a padded shoulder strap are also included. Additional inserts can be purchased separately.

For testing, Festool provided me with four samples of each of the inserts, which allowed me to experiment with layout. For the carpentry work that I do, the winning setup proved to be a T1 and a T2 on each side of the divider and a pair of T3s, one on each sidewall. The T1 offers the most storage options, while the T2's low profile affords more open space for hammers and saws. What impressed me about the T3 was the tight fit that kept my short screwdrivers and

utility knives from dropping to the bottom of the pocket (more on that later). It's nice to have the option to shuffle the inserts around, remove them completely, or outfit spare inserts with tools for specific tasks and swap one for another, depending on the job.

One thing I'm not entirely sold on is the bottomless "pocket" concept. Essentially, what the T1 and T2 inserts have for tool holders are not pockets but sleeves. The manufacturer touts this feature as an advantage because sharp objects simply drop in and sawdust is easily sucked up. In my experience, long tools and those that were widest on top were a good fit for the bottomless pockets. But short, skinny tools fell down the well and had to be rescued (3). Although my ability to employ an extra T3 insert made this a non-issue for me, I wonder if it might have been possible to taper the small pockets.

My other concern was that the toolbag's dark blue interior sometimes made it difficult for my aging eyes to find what I was looking for. But that was solved by clipping a flashlight to the handle.

Despite these minor quibbles, I would gladly put up real money for the Systainer³ ToolBag and pay extra for another T3 insert. As someone who struggles with organization, I appreciate the ability to strap this toolbox on top of a dust extractor or another Systainer and move about the jobsite, knowing that everything I need is within arm's reach when I need it, and that I can return it to its rightful place when I'm done. Cost is \$200. festoolusa.com

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Photos by Tom O'Brien