

Some tools I don't use

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I've been asked by friends why at this point in my journey I'm passing up all the modern 'improvements' to woodworking tool technology in favor of more and more hand work. The short answer is that I like quiet, don't like noise and fine dust and really enjoy having a tactile relationship with the wood. The more complete answer to that question is longer, as follows:

The first few times I set up shops, my range of choices as to tools was limited. Sometimes, such as when I was newly married with our first kid on the way, the limitation was imposed by a tight budget. In that 'shop,' I built my first set of cabinets for a Habitat for Humanity house on the garage floor, my arsenal limited to a circular saw, an electric router with six bits, a screwdriver, straightedge and my wife's red handled claw hammer. The collection expanded to include a scroll saw and a few other items over time as I tried my hand at craft work. I built a couple of kid-safe, icebox style end tables for our house but that was the extent of my exploration beyond small, sellable craft items.

My next shop was the back half of a shotgun two car garage and was a more respectable, if not lavish, example of a woodworker's lair. With a drill press, benchtop band saw, a cheap table saw and a plate joiner, I felt like I'd hit the big time. I turned out some furniture items, including my daughters' first 'big girl beds,' an entertainment center for a neighbor, a portable puppet theatre for the kids' school, Cinderella's pumpkin carriage for a high school musical, and so on. Good times. But no sooner had my shop begun to resemble, you know, a shop, than we were hit by a burglar with a penchant for cheap tools. Cleaned me out.

Then, before I could begin the task of spending insurance money on new tools, I got stupid on a ladder one day and broke my back, which imposed an extended hiatus on my woodworking activities.

In our next house we had a small 'third car' extension on the garage which allowed me to start over and owing to limitations imposed on me (by me) as a result of the ladder incident, I recognized that my days of building roof trusses and large cabinets were over. Accordingly, my attention was drawn to the hand tool methods I'd always wanted to try. This coincided with a resurgence of hand tool woodworking in this country and with the exponential growth of the 'Maker' movement. The conditions were thus created in which it made economic sense for companies to turn out decent hand tools at affordable prices (after several decades of relative schlock aimed at the indifferent homeowner and occasional hobbyist). At the same time and not coincidentally, the burgeoning realm of social media put lots and lots of instructive videos within my reach.

We lived in that house long enough for me to learn a great deal more about setting up a functional woodworking shop in a small space and on a limited budget. Those two years also allowed me to come to understand that my disability need not be limiting so long as I was smart about shaping my goals and planning how I went about achieving them.

Long story short, our selection of our current and, we hope, final house included consideration of shop space. I wanted a space large enough to build real projects, mostly hand work, but small enough to allow Mary to park in the remaining space during inclement weather. The 'small enough' requirement further cemented my transition to hand tool work and also forced me to think long and hard about what

I really needed in terms of tools and equipment. And I found myself moving away from some tools that were once mainstays of my work.

Some decisions never needed to be made. For example, I'd never been entirely comfortable with router bits whirring at insane speeds, creating both screeching noise and billowing clouds of fine dust. So, while I still have my electric router, I haven't used the thing in years. Instead, I have gradually built a library of hand-powered planes and have set about restoring and learning to use them. And I find I don't miss the supposed convenience of the whirling terror machine one bit (lame pun intended).

This seems like a good time for a side-step into the philosophy of work that drives my approach and therefore, my decisions on tools. I am and hope to remain an amateur woodworker. Which, contrary to inaccuracies of common word usage, does not in any way imply a lesser quality to the work. It simply means that I hope never to allow deadlines or the vagaries of the marketplace to influence what I do or how I do it. It means I don't have to seek out efficiencies at cost to my enjoyment of the craft.

Some tools I eschew on safety grounds. I have rid myself of my radial arm saw and do not intend to replace it. Argue all you want; they are obscenely dangerous for any use other than cross-cutting, a chore more readily and safely accomplished with a miter saw (powered or un-). Similarly, you will never see me employ an angle grinder for carving or hogging out waste. Those evil finger-eaters are rapidly climbing the leaderboard in tool-induced injuries. The list goes on.

Other 'cool tools' are absent from my wish list simply for lack of interest. To no one's surprise, it has become almost de rigeur these days to try to use a computer for – well, anything. And I get that. It's the new and exciting toy of our times. But if you feel the need to spend the money on a CNC machine, spend the time learning to program it and then use it to make all your difficult cuts, I'm not sure your hobby is woodworking. More like programming. Which I'm sure is a very enjoyable pursuit but it's not woodworking, is it? And I'm not being a purist here. Each to her own. It's just not of interest to me.

My amateur status frees me to enjoy aspects of the work that have little to do with getting done and everything to do with immersion in the process. It is a gross understatement to say I much prefer the gentle snick of a hand plane to the jet-plane-taking-off racket of several of my former go-to implements. So, along with the router, my retired list includes my dovetail jig (hand cut dovetails are easy with practice and both sturdier and more attractive), my plate joiner and my thoughts of someday owning a shaper or a wide platen sander.

Dowel, 'biscuit' or loose tenon joinery are short cuts for which I have little respect and no compelling need. If you can't lay out and cut mortises and tenons, bridles, and such, and do not want to develop facility with hand tools, perhaps you should choose another hobby.

To be fair, I have to admit that here, I'm exposing myself to the danger of being branded a throwback. Not a problem. Rest assured that throwback, anachronism, and Crusty Old Fudd are all monikers I would proudly emblazon on my tee shirt.

Finally, it is the nature of the Internet that anyone can claim to be a master. But I've found that many – perhaps, a majority – of the self-proclaimed teachers out there are better at presentation than content. So, when I see words and phrases such as 'fast and easy,' 'woodworking hacks' and 'the ultimate...' in the video title, I generally move on without viewing.

There are some wonderful mentors out there and their knowledge is to be had with a couple of clicks. People like Paul Sellers and Mary May, Marc Spagnuolo and James Hamilton, Lisa Ramlow and Cindy Drozda and Carl Jacobsen, Stuart Kent and Tim Yoder. These are by no means all the folks I'd recommend but they're a great sampling. Please watch at least one video by each of these folks before you let the You Tube algorithms decide your woodworking curriculum for you. That way, you'll have a taste of what the real deal looks like before you expose yourself to the schlockmeisters.

Remember, woodworking, by its nature, involves sharp tools. Taking advice from the wrong people can get you hurt, quickly and forever.

Be safe and have fun. Preferably, in that order.