

Best New Tools of 2006

THE WINNERS

- ★ Bosch
- ★ Delta
- ★ Freud
- ★ General
- ★ Gramercy
- ★ Grizzly
- ★ Laguna
- ★ Lie-Nielsen
- ★ MicroFence
- ★ Panasonic
- ★ Powermatic
- ★ Rikon
- ★ Steel City
- ★ Veritas



I've been attending tool shows to see new woodworking machinery and hand tools for 10 years now, but the 2006 vintage will be remembered as a very good one for years to come. In fact, we typically honor 12 tools every year, but this year we expanded it to 16 tools and we still had to fight to keep it from ballooning to 20 tools (or more).

Tool manufacturers have been a busy bunch. For proof of that, you need look no further than Steel City Tool Works. I could be wrong, but I doubt if I'll ever get to see another woodworking show where a new company launches an entire line of truly new machines all at once.

And while the machines are new, the people behind the company are not. Steel City was started by men and women who have worked in the woodworking machinery industry for decades. They have the contacts in the Far East to build the kind of machines they always wanted to sell. And it looks like they've succeeded.

The other pleasant surprise was the appearance of two table saws on the market that have riving knives (one from Powermatic and one from Grizzly). Saw-Stop's table saw already has a riving knife, and other manufacturers are testing the waters right now. As a woodworker who has worked on table saws with and without this safety feature, I can tell you this without hesitation: You want one. If you can get a saw with one, do it. You'll be glad you have it the first time that some case-hardened stock tries to pinch your saw blade.

And on the hand-tool side, things continue to blossom into a full-blown renaissance. There are so many good new hand tools out there now, I could almost write an entire separate story on the Best New Hand Tools of 2006. But let me call your attention to one in particular. It's not obvious. The new Veritas plane irons are a big deal. They are so simple to set up and sharpen it could be the tool that launches many an adventure into the world of handplanes.

— Christopher Schwarz,
editor

★MicroFence Three-Axis Mill

You don't hunt squirrels with an elephant gun, and you don't always need a large plunge router. This router base is the tool I reach for when precision and visibility are more important than brute power. With the Bosch Colt router motor and the Microfence edge guide you can make extremely precise adjustments in any direction. It is a joy to use, and extremely well made. I had so much fun testing this tool that I found myself looking for any good excuse to use it. I've even made inch-deep mortises for face frames, as well as shallow mortises for hinges.

In addition to the precise adjustments and smooth operation, the ability to see what is happening is another feature I've come to appreciate. Used without the edge guide, I can see the bit well enough to waste the background in a carving or between the pins of half-blind dovetails. The small LED light is quite effective, as is the dust collection shroud.



Swiss-watch precision and smooth operation are combined in a package that is easier to compare to fine German sports cars than to other woodworking tools.

800-480-6427 or microfence.com

★Bosch I-Driver

The I-driver from Bosch proves that good things come in small packages. In testing this 10.4-volt lithium-ion battery-powered driver, I put it through the same daily tasks that I would use a 12v cordless drill for.

It did everything I asked of it with as much power and battery life as the larger drill I'm used to. In addition, the drill head pivots from a right angle to an inline driver with three stops in between, allowing it to reach places a larger drill can't. Its ergonomic design, reliable power and light weight make it one of the best small drills ever.

877-267-2499 or boschtools.com



★Powermatic PM2000 Cabinet Saw

When we first caught wind of the Powermatic PM2000 cabinet saw, we thought there was no way that the company would be able to improve on the design of the venerable Powermatic 66. After all, dozens of table saws have passed through our shop, but the 66 has remained at the center of the *Popular Woodworking* shop for more than 11 years.

Right now, when I walk into our shop I can see two table saws: our beat-up 66 and the still-shiny PM2000. They're facing each other in the shop, and things are likely to stay that way for many years to come.

The PM2000 isn't a replacement for the 66, it's a different saw for a different kind of woodworker. First, it has a riving knife (a splitter that moves with the arbor) which makes it ideal for the furniture maker who has to change the configuration of the saw many times during a project. The riving knife keeps you safe. While the PM2000 is flexible, the 66 excels at ripping all day without a hiccup.

The PM2000 also has an integrated caster system that allows you to move the

saw at a moment's notice – a good feature for those who might have to move machines around a lot. The casters are moved by the wheel that also controls the blade tilt.

The PM2000 also has a nice oversized table, a smooth-sliding T-square-style rip fence and a decent guard.

We've had the saw in our shop for more than six months and it has really earned its keep. It has yet to show any signs of bogging down in the heaviest rip cuts. And the saw has remained in adjustment, just like its older brother. We think they're an excellent pair.

800-274-6848 or powermatic.com



★ Steel City Tools Machinery Line

We've never given a "Best New Tool" award to a company's entire line of machinery, but this is an exceptional year, and these are exceptional tools.

To be fair with you, we haven't gotten to build any furniture with these tools yet, but after four editors inspected the tools at the company's headquarters and at an August woodworking show, we were impressed.

These tools are serious, as evidenced by the close look we gave the company's table saws. The trunnions on the company's three styles of cabinet saws look like the trunnions on older beefy machines we're familiar with. The T-square-style fences on the saws glide smoothly across the table—thanks to some clever engineering. And what is also nice is what the saws don't have: a lot of bells and whistles. Instead, the company's engineers upgraded what was important, such as the optional titanium nitrite coating for the top, which reduces galling and rust.

This was the same level of attention to detail throughout the line. The 15" planer comes standard with a clever Wixey-brand digital depth gauge—the only upgrade a machine like this needs.

The Steel City steel-frame band saws (a 14" cast-iron saw is in the works) are thoughtfully designed with a tensioning



system that uses two springs. Plus, on the band saw as well as all the other machines, many of the handles are metal instead of the plastic we've come to expect.

And the prices? You'll be pleased. The machines aren't a low-price leader, but they do seem a lot of machine for the money.

Of course, the proof will be in how these machines perform, and we're making plans to test several of the tools in the line. But after inspecting the machines like a customer would in a store, I can honestly say I was ready to get out my checkbook and plunk some serious money down on these tools. And after 10 years of seeing more new tools than I can count, that is saying something.

615-225-9001 or steelcitytoolworks.com



★ Veritas Pullshave

Scooping out a chair's seat can require several hard-to-find or expensive tools. And even with the right tools, it's a task that requires some strength and dexterity.

Now Veritas, the manufacturing line of Lee Valley Tools, has developed a new tool for saddling seats that is ergonomic, easy to adjust and a good value. Veritas calls it a Pullshave, and it looks like a paint scraper that was wedged to a curved-sole spokeshave. The shape of the tool and its handles allow you to pull the tool toward your body, which increases your strength and control. The traditional travisher, on the other hand, requires more wrist and thumb action and it isn't always easy to press



the tool down against the work as much as you'd like.

The Pullshave uses the same robust blade-adjustment mechanism found on the



company's spokeshaves, which is a welcome feature. Vintage travishers can be tricky to adjust properly. And finally, one of the greatest things about the tool is that it's available. Chairmakers have long had to search (or save) for a good tool. Now a phone call and \$130 is all you need to get scooping.

800-871-8158 or leevalley.com



★ Rikon's Newest 14" Steel-frame Band Saw

When the Rikon 10-325 arrived in our shop, we thought we had a winner on our hands. When we started putting it to work, we knew we were right. This saw won an Editor's Choice award in our November test of steel-frame band saws (issue #158), and our enthusiasm for this 14" machine has yet to peter out.

Rikon redesigned this saw for 2006 and added many important upgrades. We're quite fond of the saw's guide system, especially the way the thrust bearings are mounted. Changing the saw's blade is easy with the slot in the table up front instead of on the side. And we really liked this saw's tension-release lever. But we were really impressed with the machine once we started resawing with it. This thing has some real guts and was able to handle 11"-wide oak with ease.

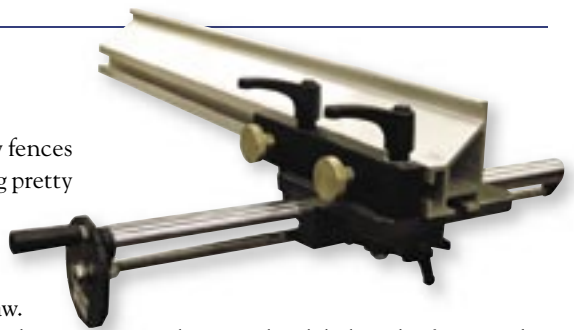
Priced at \$750, the Rikon 10-325 is an excellent value for a tool with this sort of resaw capacity and fit and finish.

781-933-8400 or rikontools.com

★ Laguna Drift Master Band Saw Fence

With so many premium band saw fences to choose from, it takes something pretty special to catch our eye. Laguna Tool's new Drift Master fence was obviously designed by someone who demands a lot of their band saw.

There are three standout features that make this fence a winner. First, you can make repeatable resawing cuts with great ease (and without having to face-joint your stock after every cut). The fence's micro-adjustment lets you move the fence in exact increments toward the blade after each pass. Second, the way you adjust the fence for blade drift is the easiest I've ever seen. You



simply turn a knob below the fence and it pivots left or right to compensate quickly for any blade or tension setup—no tools required. And the third feature is the aluminum fence itself, which can be locked in two positions, high or low, much like a Delta Unifence.

The fence costs \$295. Contact Laguna for details as to which band saws it fits on.

800-234-1976 or lagunatools.com



★ Grizzly's 12" Cabinet Saw with Riving Knife

Most home woodworkers think a 12" cabinet saw is out of their reach. I thought that too until I encountered this saw at the International Woodworking Fair in Atlanta.

Less than \$2,000 will get you a ton (actually .375 ton) of cast iron, welded steel and (wait for it ...) a quick-release riving knife—our favorite safety accessory.

A riving knife is a splitter that travels up and down with the arbor. The bottom line is that you almost never have to remove the saw's safety equipment for non-through cuts, such as rabbeting. It's standard equipment on European saws, and it should be here.

The G0605X offers a 5-horsepower motor that runs on 220-volt household current (the G0606X, shown above, is the

7½ hp three-phase version). Both saws come standard with an outfeed and extension table, and there are specially designed toolboxes that can be purchased as an accessory that fit neatly below the tables.

The saw also includes a nice T-square rip fence and a digital gauge that indicates blade tilt. Grizzly officials had to redesign the interior of the saw's cabinet to accommodate the riving knife and indicated that the feature could start trickling down to the company's 10" table saws in time. Until that happens, we recommend you look closely at this big-boy saw, which costs just a few hundred dollars more than a comparably equipped 10" Delta Unisaw.

800-523-4777 or grizzly.com

★ Panasonic Lithium-ion 14.4-volt Drill/Driver

We test a lot of drills. But there are two brands we really like: Festool and Panasonic. So when Panasonic showed us a new 14.4v cobalt lithium-ion drill (the EY7440LN2S), we were eager to try it. The drill is light at 3.5 lbs. and compact at 7½" long. And with Panasonic's battery technology (the cobalt lithium-ion batteries run cool with high output), we know it will be a winner.

800-405-0652 or panasonic.com/cordlessools



★ Freud Premier Fusion Blade

In the world of table saw blades, the Forrest Woodworker II has long been the blade to beat. Many tooling manufacturers have tried to capture that carbide-tipped crown, but we don't think they've succeeded.

However, this year could be the year. This summer Freud demonstrated its new Premier Fusion blade, a 40-tooth blade with a novel combination of high-quality carbide, a high alternate-top-bevel grind and a secondary bevel on the sides of the teeth. Company officials demonstrated the blade with rips, crosscuts and work in veneered material. The resulting cuts were as clean as any I'd seen. The \$99 blade is headed for our shop now for an extensive round of tests. If the blade cuts as well as the dem-



onstration blade, I think we can guarantee that our arbor wrench will see a lot less use when it comes to changing blades.

800-472-7307 or freudtools.com

★ Veritas Plane Irons

With many toolmakers switching to long-wearing A2 steels, why would we honor an old-fashioned high-carbon blade? Simple. These aren't your ancestor's O1 blades.

Veritas has developed a way to lap the unbeveled side of the blade dead flat—it took me about 60 seconds to polish each of the four blades I tested. That's a big deal because that process is the worst part of setting up a new blade and is the place where an error can ruin a blade. Some woodworkers prefer this old-fashioned steel, saying it's easier to sharpen and takes a keener edge (though it's less durable than A2). These blades are available for the Veritas planes and other bench planes and block planes.

800-871-8158 or leevalley.com

★ General's Hoverpad

When I first saw this mobile base in action, I went into denial. With the turn of a switch, Arra David made the shaper, shown at right, float on a cushion of air. And then he pushed the machine around with one finger.

The Hoverpad is probably the highest tech mobile base ever. You need only a pancake compressor to run it, and you can cut either size of Hoverpad down to fit most machines. While it won't work on all floors (shag carpet, for example), the Hoverpad can float an 800-pound cabinet saw with ease. Priced between \$169 and \$249, it's not cheap, but it is amazing.

514-326-1161 or general.ca



★ Bosch RA1171 Benchtop Router Table

Most woodworkers want the features of a full-size router table, but they don't have the space or money for one.

Bosch has just introduced a new \$170 benchtop router table that seems to be the best of both worlds. The RA1171 has a convenient switch up front for controlling the router. The aluminum insert plate appeared very well-made and flat on the model we inspected, and it's drilled at the factory to accept many popular routers. The

fence has all the nice features you expect on a full-size table (including adjustable fence faces), and the cabinet even has a port for dust collection. Bosch got everything right with this design.

877-267-2499 or
boschtools.com



★ Delta's New Drill Presses For Woodworkers

Delta unveiled three new drill presses this summer that were designed for woodworkers instead of machinists. All three models (a 17", the 17-959L; and two 20", the 20-950 and 20-959LX) share features that will be welcome in the woodshop.

First: the table. It tilts in two directions instead of one. (If you make chairs, you can start drooling now). Plus there are T-slots, a replaceable wooden insert in the center and the edge of the table is easy to clamp stuff to. The second nice upgrade is the stroke of the quill. Instead of a typical 4" to 5" stroke, these go to 6".

You can buy either size machine with lasers. The 20" machines let you change speeds without belts or pulleys. We're testing one in the shop right now.

800-223-7278 or deltamachinery.com



★ Lie-Nielsen's Brian Boggs Shave Horse

I've gotten to work on a lot of shave horses at chairmaking classes and at other woodworkers' shops. This one is the most comfortable, easy-to-use and versatile one I've ever straddled.

Designed by Kentucky Chairmaker Brian Boggs, this shave horse lets you quickly move the head up and down for different stock thicknesses. And the leather on the head grips the stock with remarkable tenacity—it is almost impossible to pull your spindle stock out of the jaws, even in a heavy cut with a drawknife. The sculpted seat, which is nice for long spindle-shaping sessions, adjusts back and forth with ease so you can apply just the right amount of pressure to your work without straining your legs.

There are many plans for making your own shave horse out there, but if you'd rather just giddyap and get on with chairmaking, this shave horse belongs in the winner's circle.

800-327-2520 or lie-nielsen.com



★ Gramercy Tools Bowsaw

The problem with most contemporary bowsaws is they are bulky and the blades are poorly made and difficult to change. So when I picked up the new Gramercy Tools bowsaw, I was immediately delighted.

The sparrow-like saw weighs but 12.4 ounces and its hickory frame is thin and refined. The saw's three blades are precisely made, sharp and properly set. And they attach to the saw's frame with pins built into the blades, like on a coping saw. These and a hundred other details conspire to make a saw that seems to anticipate your next move. It is worth every single penny of its \$140 price tag. **PW**

800-426-4613 or toolsforworkingwood.com

