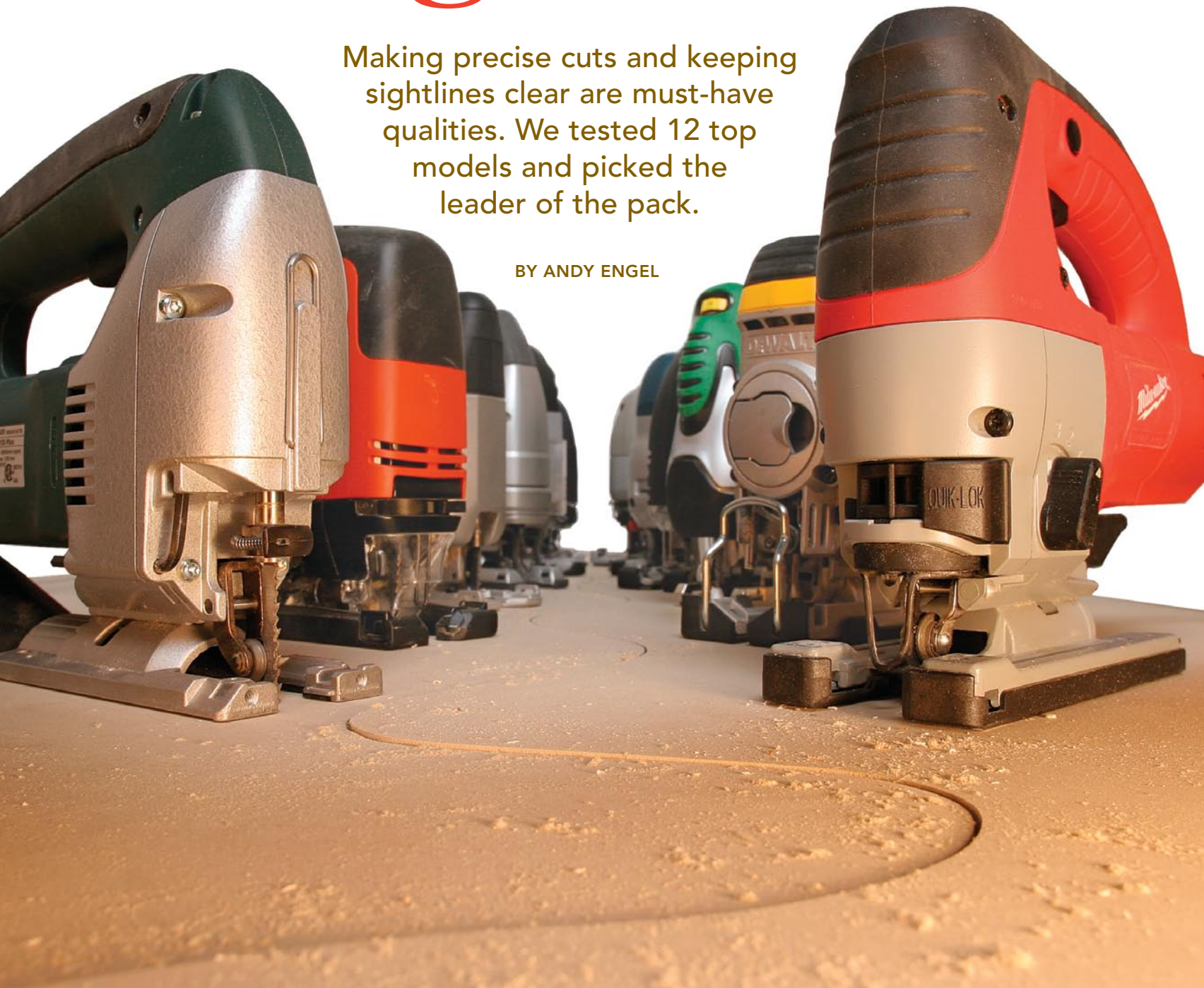


A Better Breed of Jigsaws

Making precise cuts and keeping sightlines clear are must-have qualities. We tested 12 top models and picked the leader of the pack.

BY ANDY ENGEL



The last time I gave much thought to jigsaws was in 1999, when I edited an article on them for this magazine. The chance to write this new article allowed me to view the tools in a kind of full-circle perspective.

Several generalities struck me. Today's field is smaller, and some of the best tools from 1999 aren't made anymore. Most surprising, however, was how those models from seven years ago didn't seem so spectacular today. Generally speaking, the manufacturers that redesigned their tools in the interim have surpassed the best of the old guard. What was innovative then is de rigueur today.

I focused this article on D-handle models as opposed to barrel grip; according to manufacturers, D-handles are by far the most widely sold. The ones I tested in this go-round incorporate toolless blade-changing, a variety of orbital settings, and either toolless bevel change or onboard wrench storage (with one exception); and they all use T-shank blades. Comfort has improved, and most important, the blade on even the cheapest saw didn't wander far from plumb when making curved cuts in thick material. All the saws now rely on a dial to control speed, which makes consistency far easier than trying to feather the trigger.

Vibration remains a factor that separates my favorite saws from the rest. The best saws hardly rattled my knuckles at all, and the poorer models made it clear that these tools were ones you wouldn't want to use all day long. On the other hand, the rattlers in the bunch were the less expensive tools, and how long do you use a jigsaw most days, anyway?

There were a couple of gimmicky add-ons as well. Several saws offered LEDs that lit up the cut.

I first used a jigsaw around 1975, and I'd gotten along fine until now without headlights. Maybe encroaching middle age has dimmed my eyesight, though, because it turned out that I much appreciated those LEDs.

Dust-collection systems make sightlines difficult to follow

I was pleased to see that more than half of the saws I tested offer some means of collecting dust. The reality check, however, was disappointing. All the saws with dust-collection hookups did a decent job of collecting dust from the top of the cut but missed most, if not all, of the dust below the workpiece. This isn't surprising; it's probably impossible to capture dust effectively when the blade isolates most of it from the suction source.

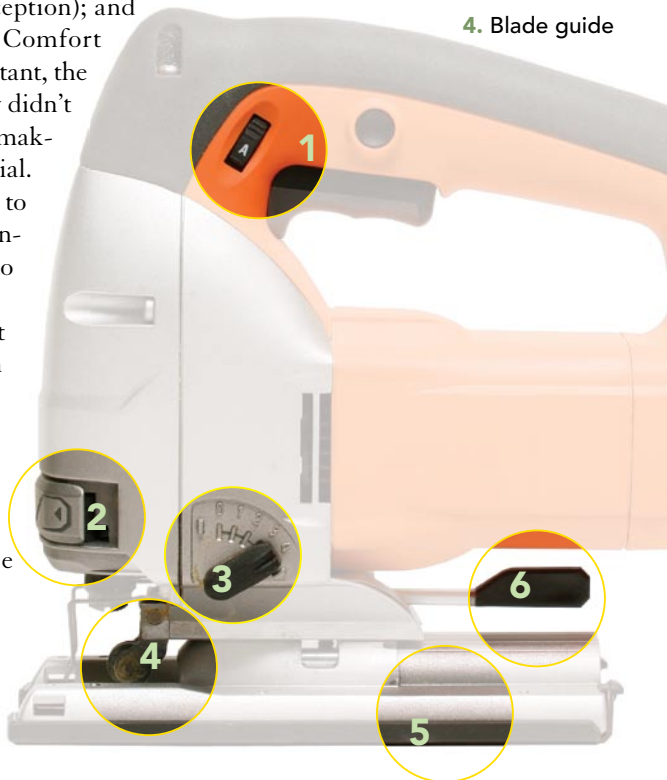
Hilti's jigsaw stood out in the crowd because of its unique onboard dust-collection system. Attaching a compact dust receptacle to the back of the saw engages a secondary fan with the motor's driveshaft. The system's dust-collection performance proved every bit as effective as my shop vac. On the downside of dust-collection systems, plastic shields must be

HOW I GRADED THE SAWS

All 12 saws in this review qualify as pro-level tools, offering degrees of power, control, and cutting versatility that you won't find in less expensive entry-level jigsaws. But tough standards still apply within this category. Testing involved a variety of cuts in 2x framing lumber, medium-density fiberboard, and laminate countertops.

Features

1. Speed control
2. Toolless blade change
3. Orbital settings
4. Blade guide



5. Plastic no-mar base
6. Toolless bevel adjustment

Not shown

Dust-blower control switch



LED feature



Feel

Saws were rated for good balance and low vibration in different cutting operations, as well as easy operation of controls and adjustments.



Cutting

Ratings were determined based on how plumb the blade remained when cutting 2x framing lumber, on the smoothness of the cut, and on chip-free cuts in laminate countertops.



Blade change

Ratings were based on how easy it was to insert and remove blades, and how durable the feature seemed.



Extra credit

Saws earned extra credit for added features like flush-cutting ability, built-in lights, cords longer than 8 ft., toolless bevel adjustments, and removable base covers.



Demerits

Saws lost points for subpar performance like dust covering the cutline or blowing dust in the operator's face. Other minus factors included no onboard wrench storage and cases that cost extra.

in place for dust collection to work. I found that these shields quickly clouded with dust so that the cutline was difficult to see, and the dust trailing from below the workpiece made me question the value of dragging around a vacuum hose as I cut.

However, considering that most of us use a jigsaw fairly infrequently and that these saws don't produce much sawdust to begin with, I decided that I just don't care whether a saw has dust collection.

On the other hand, keeping dust off the cutline is an important feature, and if you could see past the saws' plastic dust shrouds, it would be a huge advantage of dust collection. The best alternative is a built-in blower that directs a stream of air at the blade. All models but the Freud earned passing marks here.

Toolless blade change is here to stay

Without a doubt, my favorite innovation in jigsaws is toolless blade change. My first jigsaw was a vintage 1970s Makita, and although it

was a good tool, changing the blade meant fumbling around with its Allen wrench, blade, and blade keeper. This procedure drove me batty and occasionally burned my fingers on a hot blade. Those days are gone. In fact, I've become spoiled enough to complain about some toolless blade-change setups.

Toolless blade-changing has two broad approaches. My favorite uses a lever on the front of the saw. A quick tug on the lever, and the blade drops out. The lesser approach uses a lever on the plunger, and it's just a little harder to get your fingers in there, particularly if you're wearing gloves.

Within each of those approaches to toolless blade-changing are better and worse examples. The Hilti and the Bosch saws have the *crème de la crème* of these lever releases; they actually spit out the blade. While all the tools release the blade well, installing a new blade sometimes is more challenging. On a few saws, it's possible to install a blade crookedly. Others require pushing the blade into the plunger with a

CRAFTSMAN 27719

STREET PRICE: \$150

This saw is behind the times. Although it offers a great line of sight and front flush-cutting capability, its toolless blade change is primitive and frustrating. The blade didn't track well on curves, and it was one of the worst countertop chippers in the trial. The orbital settings and blower controls are located conveniently, though. www.sears.com/craftsman



- Feel: B-
- Cutting: C
- Blade change: D
- Extra credit: Good sight-line; flush-cutting capability

Overall grade: C

DEWALT DW331K

STREET PRICE: \$160

A nice, handy saw with the best flush-cutting ability of the three saws that offer this feature. The thing that stood



between it and the second-highest-scoring group of saws was its relatively short cord. Still, for the same money as the Bosch, I'm leaving this saw on the shelf.

www.dewalt.com



- Feel: A
- Cutting: B
- Blade change: B
- Extra credit: Toolless bevel adjustment; flush-cutting capability
- Demerit: Short cord

Overall grade: B+

FESTOOL PSB 300 EQ

STREET PRICE: \$280

- Feel: A
- Cutting: B+
- Blade change: A-
- Extra credit: Long cord; additional blade guide

Overall grade: A-



Had the Festool included either a toolless bevel change or flush-cutting ability, it would have been my favorite. It's the smallest saw I tried, cuts smoothly, and handles like the expensive sports car it is.

Its blade is only 1¼ in. from each edge of the base, an occasional lifesaver when cutting countertops for sinks. Unique to Festool is the "Plug it" cord system. It's a good saw, but overpriced for its features. www.festoolusa.com



FREUD FJ85
STREET PRICE: \$110

- Feel: B-
- Cutting: B
- Blade change: B
- Demerits: Dust over cutline; thin blades

Overall grade: C+

Although the price is reasonable, the performance wasn't up to par with the other saws. This saw won't accept some thicker, heavy-duty blades, and the cutline becomes covered with sawdust when the removable no-mar plate is used. The sliding dust guard is a nice feature because there isn't any chance of losing it.

www.freudtools.com



HILTI WSJ 850-ET
STREET PRICE: \$240

- Feel: A-
- Cutting: B+
- Blade change: A-
- Extra credit: Onboard dust collection; long cord
- Demerit: No wrench storage

Overall grade: A-

Hilti's first jigsaw was the smoothest-running tool in the test. Like the Bosch, it ejects spent blades, which can save you from burning your fingers. But blades aren't as easy to insert as in some other saws. The saw's large size, poor blade visibility, and lack of onboard wrench storage are disadvantages. The unique dust collector worked as well as an attached shop vacuum.

www.us.hilti.com



Keeping the sightline clear is more important than keeping the site clean

Many saws come with attempts at dust collection, but it's rarely a completely effective system. For one, the blade isolates some of the dust. Add to that the clear guards necessary to encapsulate the dust, and you can't see the sightline to make an accurate cut. The built-in blower action is much more useful for

most applications. Its effectiveness is related directly to the speed of the blade. Slow, precise cuts are a good time to use a combination of the dust-collection and dust-blower features. Keep the clear plastic guards off, dial down the speed, and the cutline will remain clear, which is ultimately all you really need.



MAKITA 4340FCT
STREET PRICE: \$150

A solid performer whose LED pleased my fortysomething eyes. Its middle-of-the-road pricing is attractive, and the saw's size and agility would make it a good choice for those with smaller hands. The removable no-mar base is a nice feature, as is onboard tool storage.

www.makita.com

- Feel: A-
- Cutting: B
- Blade change: A-
- Extra credit: LED

Overall grade: B+

METABO STEB135
STREET PRICE: \$160

The Metabo was one of the smoother saws in my hand. It shares Festool's narrow side clearance, and the line of sight to its blade was the best tested. However, its cuts in laminate were disappointing because it tended to chip the laminate surface. Couple that fact with a cantankerous blade-changing arrangement, and it's clear that there are better saws for the money.

www.metabousa.com



- Feel: B+
- Cutting: C
- Blade change: B
- Extra credit: Long cord; good sightline

Overall grade: B

MILWAUKEE 6268-21 STREET PRICE: \$160

The Milwaukee is among my favorites after the Bosch. This saw's large size and the Bosch's blade-ejection feature prevented a tie. The LED headlight on this saw is really nice, though, and its competitive price makes the choice even harder. Extra-credit features make the Milwaukee a really good alternative.

www.milwaukeetool.com

- Feel: A-
- Cutting: B+
- Blade change: A-
- Extra credit: Toolless bevel adjustment; LED; long cord

Overall grade: A-



distinct force to seat it correctly. In doing so on the Porter-Cable, for example, I sacrificed a little blood to the tool gods.

Detents make bevel adjustment more accurate

Again, this feature has improved marvelously in the time I've been using tools. Changing the base bevel on my old Makita required an Allen wrench that rattled around the saw's box, unless it had fallen out. And because the base had no detents, it usually vibrated to some random angle anyway.

All of the saws in this test had positive detents at the angles that you would expect to find. My favorites loosened up with the flick of a lever. Even the other saws were an improvement, having onboard storage for a dedicated Allen wrench. The only glitch I found here was that when the Hitachi was set to 45° left, it wasn't possible to store the wrench.

The Bosch and the DeWalt saws allow for the base to be shifted forward, but only at the 90° setting. This puts the blade within about 3/8 in. of the front of the saw, making it possible to cut nearly perpendicular to a surface. With DeWalt's special blade, you can make a flush cut.

Aiming for smooth cuts and a slick base

All the saws cut aggressively on their higher orbital settings, which rock the blade forward and back in addition to the standard up-and-down movement. While orbital action enables you to cut faster, it also causes more splintering along the cutline. I didn't attempt to make a measured comparison of cutting speed because I think that jigsaws are valued far more for their ability to cut precisely along an irregular line than for their speed. If I want to make a fast cut, the jigsaw is pretty far down on the list of tools I reach for.

Most of the saws come with a plastic base, or a no-mar plate, which is less likely to damage the workpiece than the stock metal base. No-mar plates come already attached to the base's bottom or as a separate snap-on attachment. I like them, particularly those that snap on and off.

The test ride

I tried these saws over the course of several weeks. I cut Douglas-fir 2x material to check how aggressively they cut and to see how straight the blades would stay when cutting curves in thick material. I cut MDF to challenge dust collection. I cut up a laminate countertop to see how much the saws chipped the surface.



PORTER-CABLE 9543

STREET PRICE: \$160

Its venerable American lineage

made me want to like the Porter-Cable. But this saw just doesn't do it for me. It blew dust into my eyes, even past my safety glasses. Its blade change is the second worst in this comparison, and its bevel change is cumbersome. The blade guide works well to keep the blade plumb, though not nicely enough to make up for the other negatives.

www.portercable.com

- Feel: B-
- Cutting: B+
- Blade change: C-
- Extra credit: Toolless bevel adjustment; long cord
- Demerit: Blows dust in face

Overall grade: C+

RIDGID R3120 STREET PRICE: \$140

Made by Metabo and sold in The Home Depot,

the Ridgid beats its pricier cousin. For example, Ridgid's blade change is far superior to Metabo's. The saw is a bit heavy and blew some dust in my face (although not as much as the Porter-Cable). The lever-action bevel adjustment was among the best I used. www.ridgid.com

- Feel: B-
- Cutting: B
- Blade change: A-
- Extra credit: Toolless bevel adjustment; long cord
- Demerit: Blows dust in face

Overall grade: B+





HITACHI CJ110MV

STREET PRICE: \$100

The LED headlight goes some distance to make up for the lack of a case (all the other saws come with one) and the fact that you have to buy the no-mar base separately. My only real complaint is that the only positive detent in the base is at 90°, with stops at 45° in each direction. This saw cuts and handles well—for \$60 less than top-rated models. www.hitachipowertools.com

Besides these more or less objective tests, I was evaluating vibration and the way the tools felt in my hands. I also was looking to assess the tools' balance and agility. Vibration and heft were at odds with one another in many cases. The bigger, heavier tools vibrated less, but they lacked agility. Several bigger saws that overcame this quality ended up as my favorites. Bosch, DeWalt, Festool, Milwaukee, and Makita all make saws that don't rattle my knuckles.

In addition to developing grades for feel, cutting, and blade change, I indulged myself by awarding extra credit and demerits for features that either pleased or annoyed me. For example, saws gained a point for such things as long cords or lever-controlled bevel changes. Demerits were levied for a lack of bevel-wrench storage,



- Feel: A
- Cutting: B+
- Blade change: A-
- Extra credit: LED
- Demerit: Case costs extra

Overall grade: A-

a propensity to blow dust in my face, and so forth.

Finally, I considered price. If you're like me, you'll spend more for a great tool that you intend to use regularly.

And the answer to the \$64,000 question? While all the saws I tested scored passing marks in all categories, several stood out. I chose the Hitachi as the best value because for the price; it's an excellent saw. But my best-overall choice is the Bosch 1590. This saw was the most solid performer in all the areas tested, a real joy to use. □

Andy Engel is a carpenter and writer in Roxbury, Conn. Photos by Krysta S. Doerfler.



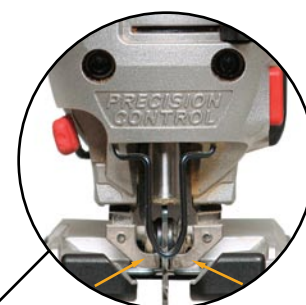
BOSCH 1590EVSK

STREET PRICE: \$160

My favorite saw. A little big, but it handles like a dream. This saw had the best blade change in the test, ejecting spent blades and allowing easy insertion of fresh ones. It offers front flush-cutting ability, toolless bevel-changing, and a blade guide that's more effective than the standard wheel-type guides on most other saws. www.boschtools.com

- Feel: A-
- Cutting: B
- Blade change: A
- Extra credit: Toolless bevel adjustment; flush-cutting capability; long cord; additional blade guide

Overall grade: A



With precision control engaged, fingerlike guides prevent the blade from wandering out of plumb.



Tension dial above the base allows fine-tuning of the bevel adjustment.