

Trim Routers

These compact tools are handy for small routing tasks, but most have room for improvement

BY JOHN WHITE

Trim routers make short work of jobs that are awkward to do with midsize and large routers. Not much bigger than a soda can, and with much lower torque than their big brothers, they are easily held and guided with just one hand, leaving your other hand free to hold down stock or to keep the power cord from snagging. I often use one to do a quick roundover or bevel on the edges of trim, decking, or plywood. Because it's easy to control, a trim router is also ideal for quickly cleaning out a mortise for a hinge. Trust

me, once you have one, you'll find yourself reaching for it all the time for jobs that you previously would have done by hand or struggled to do with a bigger machine.

The tools we now refer to as trim routers first appeared years ago as specialty machines called laminate trimmers. They were designed for one specific use: cutting and shaping the edges of shopmade plastic-laminate countertops. But despite the decline in shop-based laminate work, several of the machines I tested for this article still appear to be designed specifically

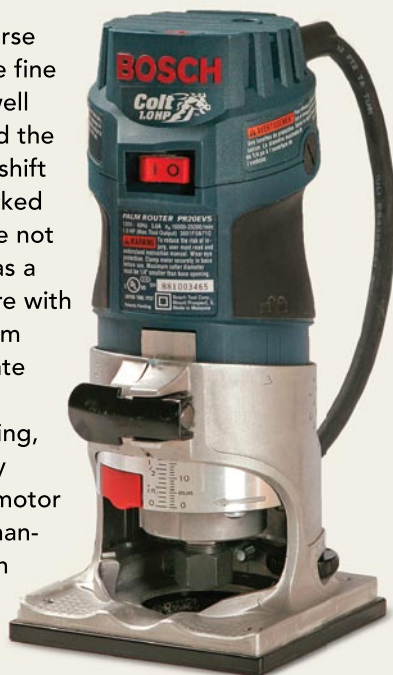
for traditional laminate tasks. They have comparatively large and tall motors, fairly precise depth controls, tilt and offset bases, and trim guides instead of fences. More-versatile trim routers, such as the Bosch, Ridgid, Craftsman, and Makita models, have smaller contoured motor housings that are more comfortable to hold and include conventional fences that make them more useful for shaping work.

John White is a carpenter in Rochester, Vt. Photos by Krysta S. Doerfler.

Well outfitted and driven by a soft-start motor

The Bosch was the only router with both a good fence and a threaded fine-adjustment screw, with the added advantage of a quick coarse adjustment. Although the fine adjuster didn't work as well as I would have liked, and the depth setting tended to shift off the mark as it was locked in place, these traits were not deal-breakers. The bit was a few degrees out of square with the base, but a paper shim under the plastic baseplate squared it. With a contoured, flat-topped housing, this trimmer fit well in my hand, and the soft-start motor made the tool easier to handle. The shaft-lock button required an awkward grip, but the depth-lock lever worked nicely. This router is available as a larger kit with specialty bases for laminate work (about \$175).

AUTHOR'S
BEST OVERALL
CHOICE



Bosch PR20EVSK
www.boschtools.com
\$110

A solid performer with a nice fit and finish

The Craftsman had the sturdiest metal base of all the models I tested, and the plastic housing also had a flat top so that it could be stood on end. The contoured housing was comfortable to hold. Work lights in the motor housing were useful for keeping an eye on cuts, and an indicator light on top showed when the machine was plugged in, although it was hard to see in bright light. An included two-handle base (not shown) is a valuable feature at this price. The bigger base made it easy to keep the tool steady when running along an edge. The depth-lock lever worked well in my tests, but the knob described as a "fine adjuster" did not. The shaft-lock button was difficult to use, too.

AUTHOR'S
BEST VALUE
CHOICE



Craftsman 28212
www.craftsman.com
\$110

A TRIM-ROUTER BUYER'S GUIDE

Here are some features to keep in mind when choosing a trim router for your next project.

A straight fence is a necessity if you want to go beyond edging work to rout flutes and dadoes, for example. Several models come with a trim guide designed to guide the bit along the workpiece edge. Although useful, the guide isn't a substitute for a regular fence. If you prefer a trim guide, the ones with ball bearings work best; simple steel rollers bind quickly.

Good depth adjustment improves precision and convenience. A threaded fine-adjustment screw is a desirable feature because it allows you to dial in an exact depth instead of nudging the motor up and down to reach the correct depth for a hinge mortise or a chamfer.

Quick and **easy bit changes** save time. Surprisingly, the shaft locks on the Craftsman, DeWalt, and Porter-Cable routers actually made bit changes more challenging; I couldn't hold down the lock and grip the router at the same time. I prefer the models that have two wrenches.

Variable speed is primarily a marketing gimmick. Small trim bits need to spin fast to produce a smooth cut, so there's rarely a need to slow them down. But variable speed does create a soft start, which I like.

A flat top is a big advantage with any router. It enables you to set the machine upside down for bit-changing and depth adjustment.

Best-in-class features

BEST FENCE
Festool

BEST BEARING GUIDE
Makita

BEST BASE
Craftsman

MOST COMFORTABLE IN HAND
Bosch

BEST DEPTH ADJUSTMENT
Festool

EASIEST BIT CHANGES
Freud

BEST CASE
DeWalt

FineHomebuilding.com

Look for the Magazine Extras section on our home page to watch John White demonstrate how different trim routers tackle a range of shaping and edging assignments.



Well engineered, but overkill for small jobs

Festool MFK 700 \$510 www.festoolusa.com

The MFK 700 has a fence and depth controls that tested out so precisely they almost made the other machines look like toys. This router comes with a traditional vertical base as well as a horizontal base, both of which can be changed without tools and are compatible with Festool's dust-collection system. This model was bigger and heavier than the others, almost demanding a two-handed grip. And although the depth could be set with an accuracy of $\frac{1}{10}$ mm, the fully enclosed bit had no rough adjustment and only a $\frac{1}{2}$ -in. height-adjustment range (compared to the 1 in. or more found on the other trim routers).



A rounded top makes for difficult bit changes

DeWalt D26670 \$90
www.dewalt.com

With only minor differences, this machine is the same as the Porter-Cable trimmer. The DeWalt comes with some of the laminate-trimming accessories included with the Porter-Cable, lacks a fence, and like its twin, is bulkier than most other machines. The only big difference between the DeWalt and the Porter-Cable is that the DeWalt has a rounded top, which made it impossible to stand on end. With the same price and fewer accessories than the Porter-Cable, this tool offered no real advantages, except for its soft carrying case.



Built for laminate work, with accessories to match

Freud FT750T \$100
www.freudtools.com

The Freud is designed for laminate work, and it comes with a ball-bearing guide and both tilt and offset bases, but unfortunately, no fence. The height-adjustment range was limited, and the small base opening restricted bit size. Although the height-adjustment knob was accurate, it was slow and difficult to turn. Bit changes were a breeze; this router has two wrenches and access on the side of the base that's larger than most other models. Interestingly, the instructions included with this tool covered several models of Freud routers, but not this one.



A nice tool limited by a poor base

Makita 3709 \$140
www.makita.com

This nice, compact, solid tool handled very well. Besides the conventional fence, it comes with a bearing guide that worked well and was sturdier than most. It also has a small guide collar that was hard to install and had some play in it, making it fairly useless. The downfall of this tool was its clear plastic base. It allowed great visibility, but the motor didn't slide smoothly in it. The base also lacked any way to make small height adjustments—a definite drawback. In general, the plastic base looked too weak. In fact, tightening the height-adjuster knob distorted the shape of the base.



Precise depth adjustment, but no fence

Porter-Cable 7310 \$90
www.deltaportercable.com

This machine comes with a full set of accessory bases, including a seam-trimming base that no other router has and a pair of special laminate-trimming bits. The height adjuster made it easy to set a precise depth of cut, but there was no quick release. Also, the height was locked with a knob instead of an easier-to-use lever. A broad, flat top made the router easy to stand on end for bit changes, though the shaft-lock button was hard to use. The lack of a fence was this router's only real drawback, but it kept the tool from being useful for ordinary shop work.



Compact model with solid accessories

Ridgid R2400 \$120
www.ridgid.com

This router excelled in many ways, but its flaws were hard to ignore. It has a sturdy metal base, a smooth soft start, a ball-bearing guide, and the second-best fence after the Festool. Although I would have preferred the rounded top to be flat, the small diameter of the housing made it one of the easiest machines to hold. Unfortunately, the small baseplate had a crown in it that made the machine wobble while making cuts. Also, the fine-adjustment function didn't work well enough to be useful, and removing the motor from the base to change bits was a hassle.



A bargain price, but no fence or bearing guide

Ryobi TR45K \$80
www.ryobitools.com

This tool was comfortable to use and had good visibility, but it went downhill from there. It was the only tool that suffered from vibration and chatter when making cuts, and a slightly crowned baseplate made it wobble a bit. The motor didn't slide smoothly in the base, and slipped even after the lever lock was tightened. With no fence or bearing guide, the tool's usefulness is limited. The kit included a large base with handles, but the attachment screws were too long. Even when the screws bottomed out, the base still wasn't held tight.



A cordless router?

Ryobi P600 18v cordless \$50; battery and charger sold separately

This 18v machine is the only cordless trim router on the market. It handled well and cut smoothly with no noticeable difference in power compared to the corded models. It used the same small base as the Ryobi corded router, but this version offered smoother depth adjustments and depth settings less prone to slippage. The shaft lock for bit changes was the only one I tested that worked comfortably. Like its corded brother, this tool has neither a fence nor a bearing guide. The P600 is sold without a battery or charger, which are sold separately (18v NiCd battery with charger: \$55; 18v Li-ion battery with charger: \$120).