



Block Planes

With a basic design that hasn't changed in over a century, these shaping and smoothing specialists pick up where power tools leave off

BY GARY STRIEGLER

A well-honed block plane still earns a spot among the tools I keep within reach. When I'm doing trimwork, I use a block plane more often than my tape measure. It's perfect for tasks like tuning a miter joint, removing saw marks, tapering trim, and even sharpening shims.

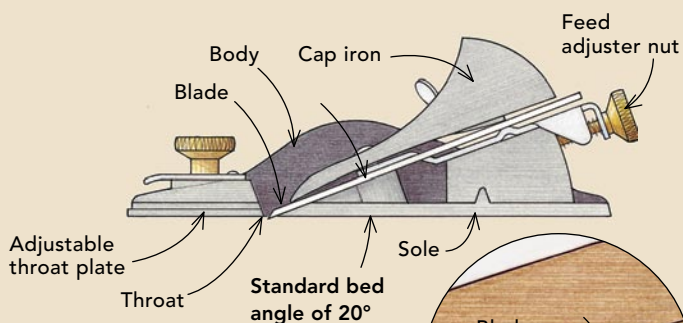
The planes I've chosen to highlight here stand out for a variety of reasons. Neither the Stanley nor the Groz is in the same league as the best planes on the market, but they are both solid, well-built tools. After an initial tune-up, each should provide years of dependable use.

The Veritas and Lie-Nielsen planes are exceptional. The Veritas is a great general-purpose block plane with a standard bed angle (sidebar below). If I did more woodworking, I would use it more. The Lie-Nielsen low-angle planes are expertly made and perfectly designed for my work as a finish carpenter. Finally, the Stanley trimming plane wows me by how well it works for a tool with such a reasonable price. □

Gary Striegler, a frequent contributor to *Fine Homebuilding*, is a custom-home builder in Arkansas. Photos by Krysta S. Doerfler, except where noted.



STANDARD VS. LOW ANGLE



A standard bed angle of 20° (drawing above) is good for general-purpose shaping and smoothing work. A low bed angle of 12° is designed for planing end grain. The lower cutting angle allows the blade to shear end-grain fibers more effectively. Conversely, when planing with the grain, a low bed angle is more likely to cause tearout, so a standard bed angle is preferable. With either type of plane, using an adjustable throat plate (available in some planes) to minimize the opening in front of the blade (called the throat) also helps to minimize tearout.

THE FIRST PLANE I EVER OWNED

Purchased at my local hardware store, a version of this Stanley rode in my tool apron for 10 years. The new plane I tried for this review is about the same as my old one. It's small enough for me to use with one hand and comfortable to hold. The adjustment levers feel sturdy, if a little rough. Unfortunately, the thin blade was distressingly dull out of the box, and the sole surface needed to be smoothed with superfine sandpaper before I could use the tool. Expect to invest an hour tuning up this tool before you can use it.

Stanley 12-920

Price: \$40

Size: 6¼ in. by 2 in.

Weight: 1.75 lb.

www.stanleytools.com

THE ONE I CARRY

Ten years ago, when I finally got off the farm and went to a trade show, I saw the Lie-Nielsen rode in my tool apron for 10 years. I bought it on the spot. Its low-angle design is perfect for trimming and tuning miter and butt joints, which is what I use it for 90% of the time. While it lacks an adjustable throat, its extrathick blade provides sure, stable cutting action. Cast from manganese bronze, the plane's body is compact and lightweight, almost unnoticeable in my tool apron. A cast-iron version is available for \$10 less.

Lie-Nielsen 102

Price: \$95

Size: 5¼ in. by 1¾ in.

Weight: 1 lb.

www.lie-nielsen.com

for Builders



A STANLEY KNOCKOFF FOR \$10 LESS

I've seen some bargain-priced "contractor-grade" block planes that wouldn't be worth using even if they were free. However, the Groz is an economically priced plane that I would hold on to. Made in India, this low-angle plane is almost an exact knockoff of Stanley's version, but with slightly better fit and finish. The size and weight felt comfortable in my hand and in my tool apron. The major flaw with this plane is that the adjustable throat plate doesn't move close enough to the blade to aid in taking a super-thin shaving.

Groz BP/605

Price: \$30

Size: 6¼ in. by 1¾ in.

Weight: 1.5 lb.

www.groz-tools.com

EXCEPTIONAL COMFORT AND CONTROL

Made from manganese bronze, the large, rounded cap iron on this low-angle plane made it more comfortable to hold than any other model. When you combine exceptional machining with an extrathick (3/16 in.) blade, you get a tool that provides unmatched control in removing material. While lateral blade adjustment is not quite as easy as on the Veritas plane, I like the way the feed nut is tucked under the cap iron. Together with the narrow profile, this feature makes this plane easy to use with one hand and easy to carry in my tool bag.

Lie-Nielsen 60-1/2

Price: \$150

Size: 6¼ in. by 1¾ in.

Weight: 1.6 lb.

www.lie-nielsen.com

CLOSE TO DRIVING A CADILLAC

If it were smaller, this plane would rank among my favorites. Out of the box, the blade needed little to no work before use. The fit and finish and the adjustment mechanisms are excellent. This plane combines blade feed and lateral adjustment, which allowed me to dial in a blade setting quickly and precisely. Although it has a solid feel, the plane's weight makes it harder to use with one hand. It's also too hefty to carry in my tool apron. For trimming miters and butt joints, the 1½-in. blade width is more than I need.

Veritas Standard Block Plane

Price: \$130

Size: 6½ in. by 2½ in.

Weight: 1.85 lb.

www.veritastools.com

THE PERFECT PLANE IN THE RAIN

There's no way I'm going to take one of my better planes outside when the weather is bad. For these situations, Stanley's smallest plane works surprisingly well. It has a simple body of bent metal and a thumbscrew that secures the blade. If kept sharp, this mini model is fine for trimming shingles, shaping shims, and other basic tasks. There is no replacement blade, so if you sharpen the blade beyond usability, you'll have to chuck the body as well. But by that time, this plane will have paid for itself many times over.

Stanley 12-101

Price: \$10

Size: 3½ in. by 1¾ in.

Weight: 0.25 lb.

www.stanleytools.com