

# Toolbox

Tool-specific cases may be facing extinction thanks to a new species of stackable, customizable boxes

BY KIT CAMP

When I first started working as a finish carpenter, I carried all my tools in the bulky blow-molded plastic cases they came in. I figured that the tools were well protected and that the cases made me look professional and well organized. They also filled my compact truck nearly to overflowing, and made loading and unloading a daily chore I quickly grew to dread.

On my first big project, I met a meticulous stair guy who carried all his tools (other than a miter saw and an air compressor) in four rectangular milk crates and a single canvas bag. He could stack two crates, throw the canvas bag on top, and bring every tool he needed onto the job in two trips. At the time, I thought he would never be able to find anything in his jumble of tools, but over the years, I have found myself moving closer to a simple system like his. At this point, the only blow-molded cases I own are the tiny ones that came with a couple of small pin nailers.

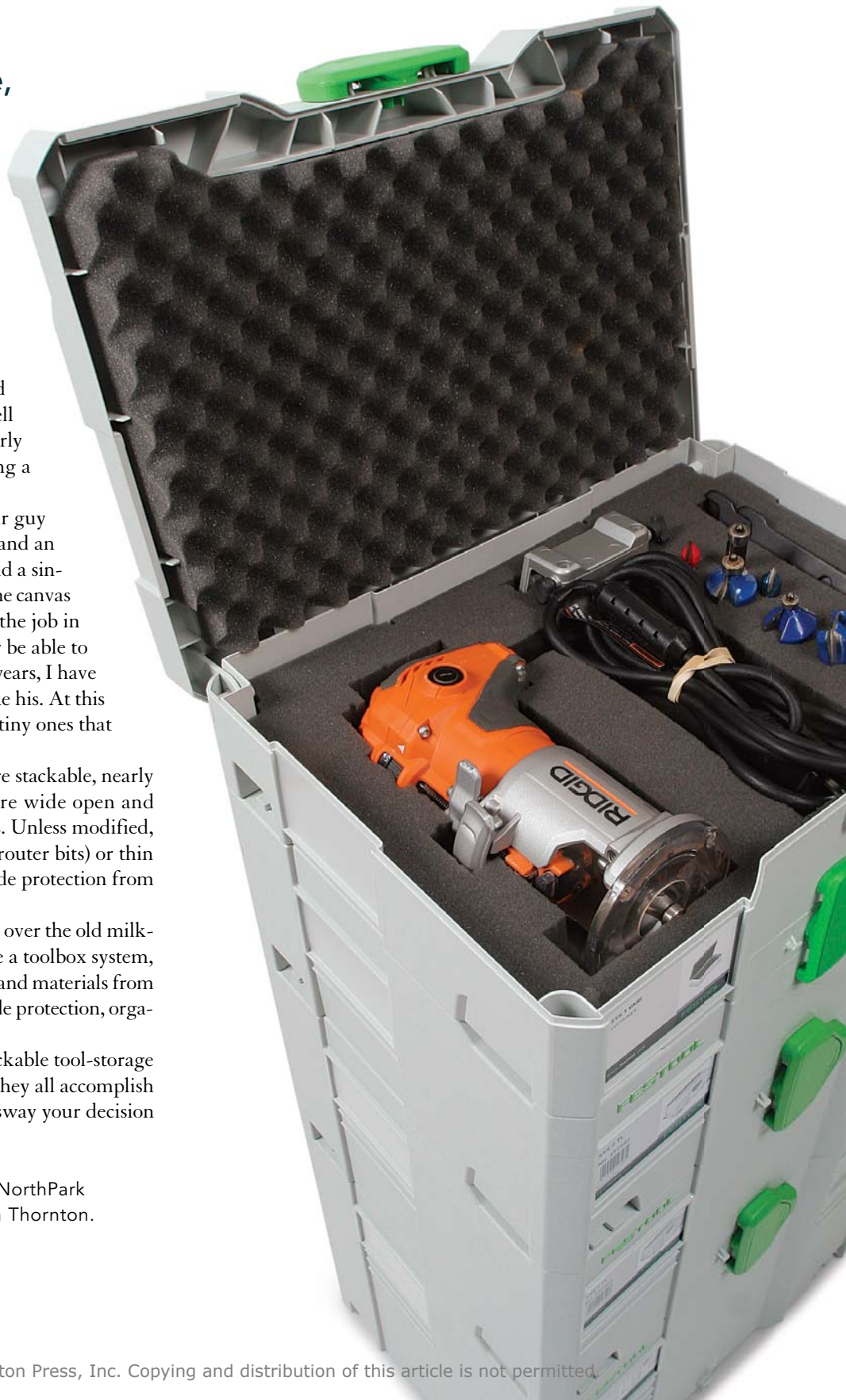
Why not just use milk crates? Although they are stackable, nearly indestructible, and handy as step stools, they are wide open and exposed to dust, planer shavings, and prying eyes. Unless modified, they are not suitable for anything small (such as router bits) or thin and sharp (such as chisels). They also don't provide protection from dirt and moisture.

Today's toolboxes have some specific advantages over the old milk-crate system. Less individual toolboxes and more a toolbox system, these stackable units can be outfitted to store tools and materials from finish nails to 3-hp plunge routers, and they provide protection, organization, security, and easy transportation.

I recently looked at three examples of these stackable tool-storage devices. Each system shares common traits, and they all accomplish the same job. The details, however, are likely to sway your decision about which one is right for you.

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# Evolution



## A SYSTEMS APPROACH

A new concept in the United States, stackable toolboxes have a longer track record in Europe. The concept is simple: Boxes are available in several heights but share the same footprint, allowing them to latch together into an easily movable stack. Because they are often sold empty, you can customize the interiors either with proprietary inserts or with

aftermarket accessories, such as pick-and-pluck foam, Kaizen layered foam (FastCap.com), or homemade inserts.

I like to keep the interiors of each box simple, wasting the least amount of space with bins or thick foam. This way, I'm able either to get more tools into the box or to fit a tool and all its related accessories. Where it makes sense, I

also like to arrange my tools in groups—for example, a dedicated box for finish nailers—rather than individually.

Unlike storing blow-molded cases of all different sizes, packing tools in containers of a standard size makes it easier to store them in drawers in your truck, on shelves in your van, or in cubbies in your shop.



# TOOLBOXES A LA CARTE



## BOSCH L-BOXX

Bosch has started importing the L-Boxx, a European product made by Sortimo. The footprint and interior volume of each L-Boxx is slightly larger than the equivalent Systainer (see below), but Bosch has four sizes instead of Festool's five.

At the moment, these boxes don't have as many stock variations and options as you can get from the Festool lineup, but the Sortimo website shows a wide selection of drawers, colors, inserts, and carts. Time will tell how many of these

products Bosch will import, but the company has started packaging some tools into these cases, an encouraging start. In the meantime, tool-specific inlays and generic L-Boxx accessories can be purchased from European sites such as RALdiy.co.uk.

I also really like the color-coded bins in the L-Boxx1A, designed for sorting small parts or fasteners. The two smallest boxes have a front (briefcase-style) handle, and all four also can be carried by a top handle or with two hands on side handles. I left a box to slam around



## DEWALT TSTAK

To compete with the boxes from Festool and Bosch, DeWalt has built its TSTAK system from scratch. Although the boxes are stackable and somewhat customizable, they don't quite compare directly to the Bosch and Festool systems.

One of the boxes has a longer metal handle and can be placed only at the top of a stack. It has a lid compartment perfect for holding drill bits or similarly sized tools, and a main compartment into which I could just squeeze my 18v drill, two batteries, and the charger. The next box's outside dimensions are about the

same, but it has a single compartment roughly equivalent to the Bosch/Festool #2, about 5 in. deep. This box has a top and front handle, and it easily swallows jigsaws, drills, or random-orbit sanders. The next two boxes feature drawers with full-extension ball-bearing slides. One has a single deep drawer filled with smaller lidded boxes; the other has two shallow drawers with numerous dividers. All the boxes have a small label window, a nice touch for the truly meticulous.

The only big strike against the TSTAK as a do-all system is that no larger sizes are available. These boxes simply won't accommodate routers, circular saws,



## FESTOOL SYSTAINERS

Festool products have always come packaged in plastic boxes called Systainers, made by a company called Tanos. These boxes include a molded insert designed to hold the tool and its optional accessories securely. Systainers are available separately in five sizes. One version, called Sortainers, sports small, medium, and large drawers. Festool also has Mini and Maxi Systainers, for really tiny or really big tools. To tie the system together, the company also offers a small dolly and a hand truck for wheeling stacks of Systainers around and cabinets designed for your shop. The boxes are designed to latch to vacuums as well.

Until trying the boxes shown here, I had used only an older model of Systainer, now referred to as a Classic Systainer. I liked everything about this old style but the small latches used to join boxes together and secure their lids, which proved time and again to be fingernail breakers. Classic Systainers are still available from Festool—and also in a variety of fits and finishes from other woodworking outlets, such as Japan Woodworker (JapanWoodworker.com)—but the new T-Loc models are a huge improvement.

I've been using Systainers on my jobs for the past eight years and have yet to break one despite dropping them, letting them slam around in the back of my truck, checking them as luggage, using



the back of my truck for a month, and it held up well, despite some worries I had about the L-Boxx's comparatively thin sidewalls and the latches' flexibility.

**Pros:** Larger footprint and interior volume than comparable Systainer, and about 20% less expensive; 1-Click system makes for fast, secure stacking and unstacking.

**Cons:** Far fewer generic customization accessories and inserts; boxes require two hands to unlatch from a stack; thin sidewalls allow for a lot of flex, especially in larger boxes.



**One click, but two hands.** Bosch's 1-Click system allows the boxes to clip together simply by stacking them; there are no latches to operate. To separate the boxes, press a release button on each side of the box and lift. Unlike the others, these boxes require two hands to unclip and cannot be opened in a stack.

power planes, or other large tools. I hope DeWalt will start offering some of its smaller tools for sale in these cases, and also expand the line to include larger sizes and more accessories. One big selling point for these cases is their low cost. They range in price from about \$30 to about \$40.

**Pros:** Plastic, heavy-duty latches inspire confidence in longevity; lids can be opened without unstacking boxes from above; each box includes a window for labels; lowest-cost option.

**Cons:** Less customizable than other systems; largest box is still too small for certain tools.



**Rugged and simple.** The DeWalt boxes require two hands to latch and unlatch, but unlike the Bosch boxes, they can be opened while stacked. The boxes also share some features with the familiar cases DeWalt has packaged its tools in for many years, notably the thick plastic sidewalls and heavy-duty metal latches.

them as boxes to ship tools, and occasionally using them as step stools.

This beautifully thought-out system isn't cheap. Prices start at \$63 for an empty Systainer 1, which is about 3½ in. deep—good for jigsaws, drills, and the like. Festool/Tanos offers the most stock accessories (inserts, foams, colored and locking latches, dollies) to customize the boxes.

Systainers are an expensive but excellent quality platform for an infinitely customizable and addictive storage system.

**Pros:** A single latch secures the lids and joins the boxes together; new T-Loc Systainers are backward compatible with Classic Systainer boxes; has the most inserts and accessories.

**Cons:** Expensive.



**One latch does it all.** Festool's improved T-Loc boxes latch together with a simple twist of the same large knob that secures the lid, and they can be stacked atop the Classic boxes as well. Unlike other systems, the T-Loc boxes can be opened while stacked, an attractive selling point.