Tips & Techniques

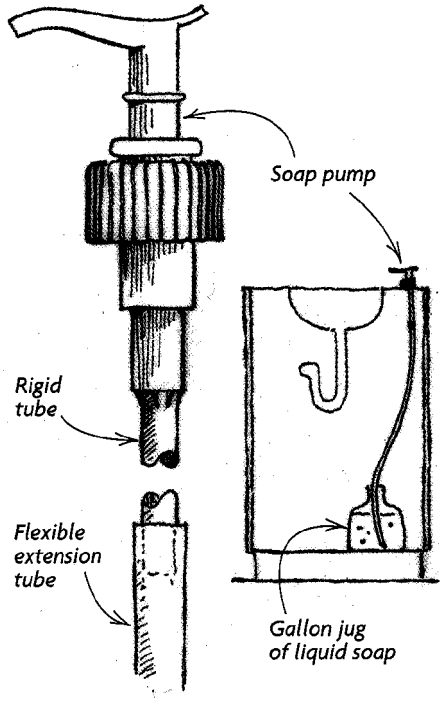
edited and illustrated by Charles Miller

Tips & Techniques is a forum for readers to exchange information about methods, tools and jigs they've devised. We'll pay for any we publish. Send details to Tips, Fine Homebuilding, *P. O. Box 5506, Newtown, CT 06470-5506.*

Endless soap dispenser

The sink-mounted soap dispensers in our home get plenty of use. But filling these dispensers is a pain. You either struggle under the sink to retrieve the bottle, or you have to fill them from the top, which isn't easy to do accurately. So what's my solution to this dilemma?

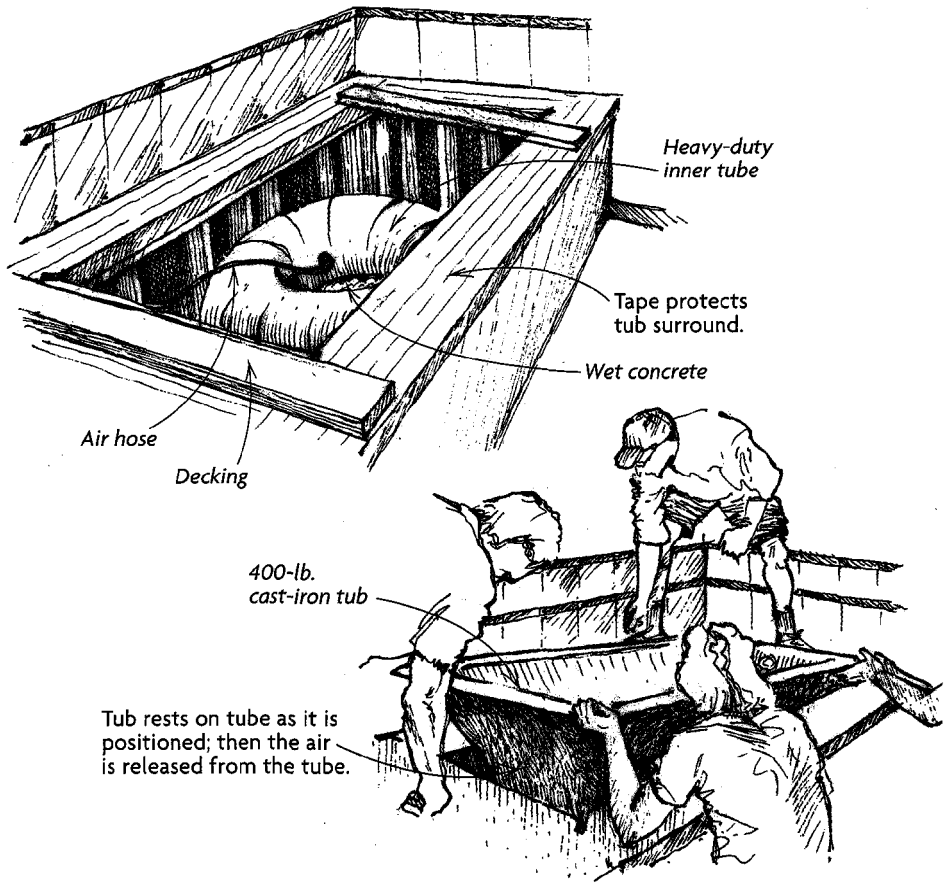
What I've done is to toss the bottle and extend the pump's rigid tube with a piece of clear, flexible hose that reaches into a gallon jug of soap under the sink (drawing below). I've found that ¼-in. or ⅜-in. I. D. hose works just fine. It should be a snug fit, and so far, hose clamps haven't been necessary. If the pump's tube is the flexible variety, use a short piece of rigid copper tubing with an I. D. that matches the tube's O. D.



as a coupling to link the tube with a length of hose. Make the hose as short as possible—24 in. should do it—and leave the lid off the gallon soap jug so that a vacuum doesn't form inside it.

Take a peek under the sink from time to time to check the soap level. At our house, a gallon should last, oh, forever.

—J. Kaye, Phenix, VA



Pneumatic-assist tub placement

On a recent job, we had to place a 400-lb. cast-iron tub into a tiled tub surround on the second floor of a house. To lessen the chance of crushed fingers and hurt backs, we used some tried-and-true techniques, along with a method brand new to us.

We delivered the tub to the second floor with a crane and set it on a deck. We then rolled it on some steel pipe into the house. From there, we used a piano dolly to move it next to the tub opening. We taped off the tub surround to protect it from being scratched. Then we placed two pieces of scrap decking across the tub opening.

Here's the new part. As shown in the drawing above, we placed a 24-in. dia. heavy-duty inner tube from a hay bailer on the subfloor in the center of the tub surround. We hooked up an air hose to the tube's valve stem and ran the hose through the wall behind the tub. There, we hooked the hose to a splitter, with the leg of the Y going to the compressor and the other branch of the Y going to a hose with a blow gun we had in the bathroom.

We inflated the tube, then mixed a bag of concrete and poured it into the middle of the tube. We used the concrete, which we mixed pretty wet, to create a solid base for the tub to sit on and to conduct heat from the hydronic floor to the tub.

When installation time came, five guys hoisted the tub onto the two pieces of decking. Then we lifted one end of the tub, removing the deck board under it, and lowered that end of the tub onto the tube. Next, we lifted the other end, removed its board and set the tub fully on the tube. We were concerned that the tub might quickly flatten the tube or that the tub might roll to the side. Neither thing happened. The setup was very stable.

We also were worried that once we started to let air out of the tube, the tub might come down too fast, leaving the wrong reveal around the edges of the surround. That didn't happen, either. The tub came down so slowly that I uncoupled the blow gun and used my thumb to control the air release. By the way, the compressor was turned off at this point.

We pulled the tape just before the tub settled onto the surround. Then we all stood in the tub to press it into the concrete. No hurt backs, no broken fingers. And yes, the tube and its hose are still under the tub.

—Mike Nathan, Hailey, ID

Leveling long pieces of lumber

When it comes time to level a lengthy piece of lumber with a spirit level, I've seen carpenters resort to all kinds of attachment methods to anchor the level to the workpiece. Bungee cords and tape are typical. But bungee cords aren't always the right length, and tape can be messy and leave sticky residues.

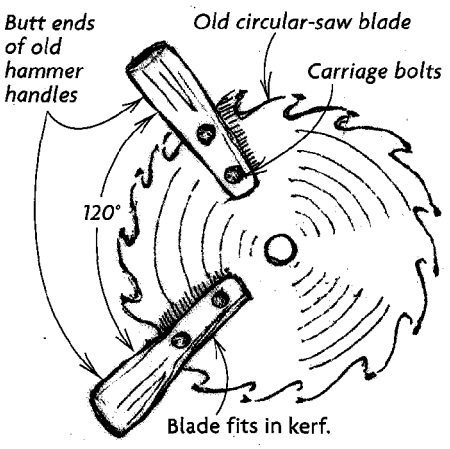
I've found that the best solution to this problem is a couple of Velcro strips wrapped around the beam and the level. The Velcro holds the level firmly to the work while I make my mark. The strips are easily removed with one hand and roll up into a small ball that can be used forever. And they cost only about a buck a strip.

—Tor Stave, Boston, MA

Site-made grout saw

I'm repointing the foundation of our 1915 farmhouse. The mortar in the foundation is in pretty bad shape, so I'm digging out as much of it as I can. After using tools such as an old screwdriver and various pieces of bar stock, I hit on an easy-to-make, effective tool for removing the old mortar in my house.

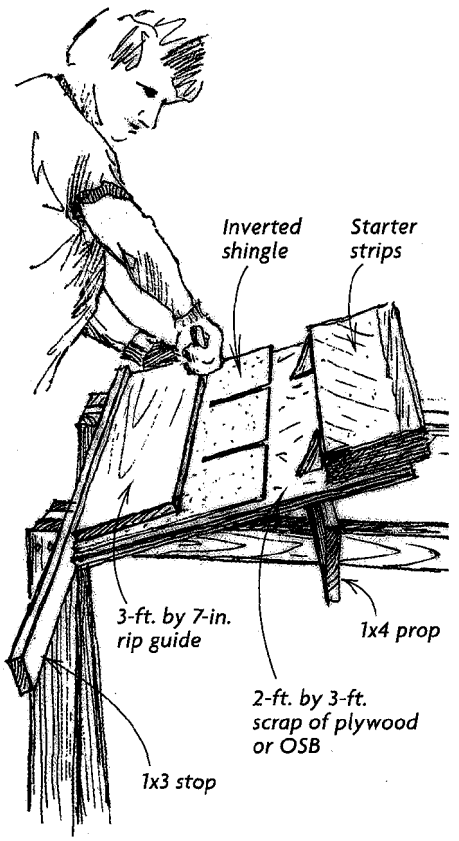
As shown in the drawing below, I affixed a couple of handles to an old carbide-tipped sawblade with carriage bolts. The handles are about 120° apart, and they are



kerfed down their middles to allow them to slip over the blade.

Held in both hands and used with a rotating motion, this tool allows me to dig out the old mortar to a depth of about 4 in. After the teeth are worn down, I remove one of the handles and reattach it in a different position until the blade is used up.

—Ethan B. Eikrtsen, Berthoud, CO



Shingle cut table

While my brother is framing, roofing, siding or otherwise building something, I'm usually the one who takes care of all the prep and cutting. On a recent roofing job, he asked me to cut several bundles of shingles into starter strips for use along the eave and rake edges. To make short work of the task (and to keep me off my knees), I quickly made a simple cut table. As shown in the drawing above, I nailed a 1x3 along the bottom edge of a 2-ft, by 3-ft, scrap piece of ¾-in. oriented strand board (OSB). With the table set on a pair of sawhorses, I could work with the cut table at a comfortable height. I added a 1x4 prop on the underside to tilt the table for a better position and cut a 3-ft. long by 7-in. wide strip of ½-in. OSB as a rip guide for cutting the shingles.

I set a pile of inverted shingles against the 1x3 stop. Then I adjusted the blade on my utility knife so that it just scribed the surface of one shingle when I ran it along the 7-in. guide. I was done cutting the starters in half the time it ordinarily takes me.

I found other shingle-cutting uses for the table, too. By resting a 12-in. triangular framing square (sometimes called a Speed Square) against the stop, I could accurately make repetitive crosscuts for rake starters or trim shingles for ending courses at walls.

We even dragged the table to the roof and hooked the bottom leg over the ridge to have a workstation closer to the action. I've tried one of those $350 commercial shingle-cutting tables only once, but I think my little table made of job-site scraps has them beat.

—Bruce Guertin, Coventry, RI

Toolbox slippers

I'm a finishing foreman for a large building company. One day, I walked into a house where my boss was doing a punch-list inspection. When I set my metal toolbox down on the new hardwood floor, my boss was not amused. He scolded me for doing such a stupid thing. No damage was done to the hardwood floor, but my humility factor went way up.

Later that day, I came across a carpet remnant in the trash, and an idea occurred to me. I flipped over the carpet (pile side down) and zigzagged some construction adhesive onto it. Then I placed my toolbox onto the carpet and trimmed its perimeter to fit. Now I can put the box on a floor or countertop without worrying about scratching the finish.

—Sandy Pollock, Nepean, ON, Canada

Dialing in nail placement

Finish nailers sure have come a long way from the old clunkers I grew up with. They even include a padded tip so that they won't dent surrounding wood. But rookie users often have a hard time seeing exactly where the nail will be driven through that fat padded tip.

Here at Seattle Central Community College, we remove the rubber or plastic tip and spray it with white paint. A fast-dry primer such as Kilz works well. After the paint has dried, the tip is remounted on the nailer, and the student carefully fires a nail into a piece of wood. By holding the tool steady after it has fired, you can mark cross hairs on the fresh white paint to show where the nail ends up in relation to the tip. We use a fine-tipped permanent marker for this. Now all you have to do is line up the cross hairs with your target, and the nail always goes where you want it to.

—Dave Borgatti, Seattle, WA