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, or visit our Web site, www.finehomebuilding.com

Paint-free doorknobs

When I do painting in my home, the work area for stirring, filling trays and cleaning up is in the garage. Because I have to make several trips back and forth, I cover the door handles with a disposable latex glove to keep them clean and free of paint. It's easier than me changing gloves all day.

—Pam O'Connell, Solana Beach, CA

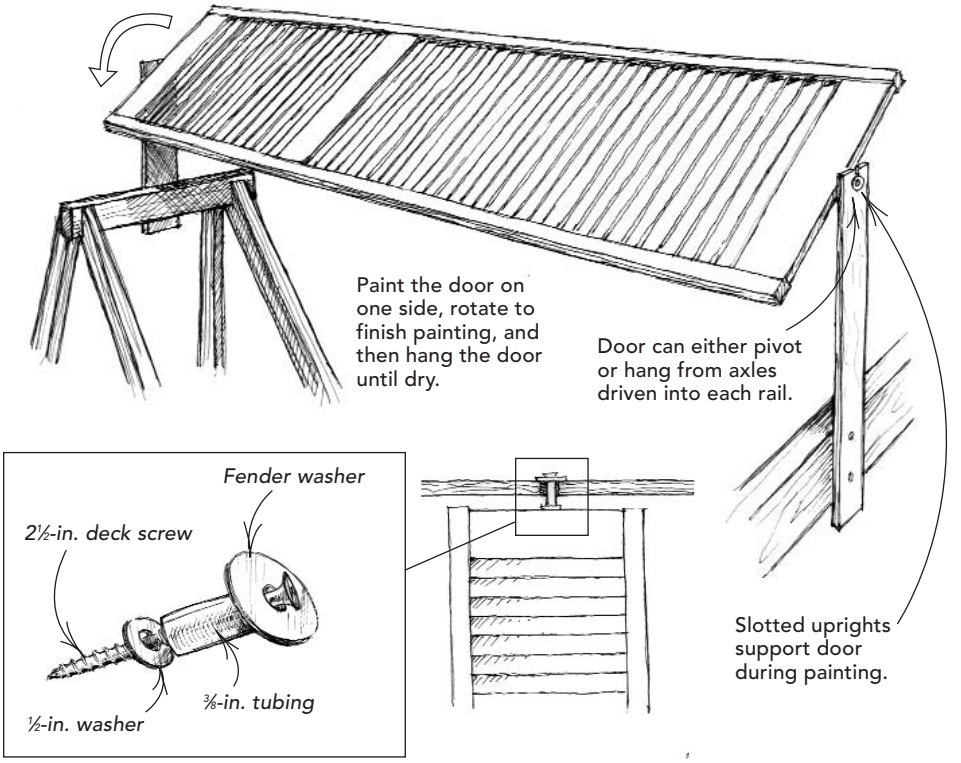
Caulk-gun holder

A caulking gun can be a clumsy thing to deal with when your hands are full, especially if you're on your way up a tall ladder. The drawing below shows how I deal with



the problem. I appropriate a hook from a shower curtain and thread it through one of the belt loops on my pants. Now I have a sturdy hook to run through the hole in the handle of my caulk gun. Job done, the hook goes back to its job holding up the shower curtain.

—R. B. Himes, Vienna, Ohio



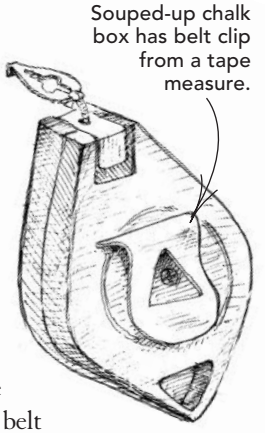
Hassle-free door painting

Painting doors—especially louvered ones—can be a tedious, messy project. To make the process go as smoothly as possible, you need comfortable access to both sides of the door, and you need to put the door in a place where the paint can dry without getting in the way of other work. The method I use solves both problems.

The key to this tip is a pair of axles upon which the door can rotate. The axles are made of a 2½-in. deck screw, a washer, a short length of ⅜-in. tubing and a fender washer. As shown in the drawing above, each axle is driven into the center of the door's top and bottom rails. The tubing portion of the axle rides in slots cut into vertical uprights, which are affixed to a pair of sawhorses. Arranged horizontally, it's easy to paint one side of the door, then rotate it to paint the other. I leave a couple of unpainted areas along the sides of the door for handholds so that I can lift it out of the cradle. Then I hang the door from one of its axles, which are tucked into a slot in a 1x nailed to the ceiling joists in the garage. Now I can touch up any areas that need attention and leave the door to dry out of the way.

—Don Mathis, Macomb, IL

Putting a belt clip on your chalk box



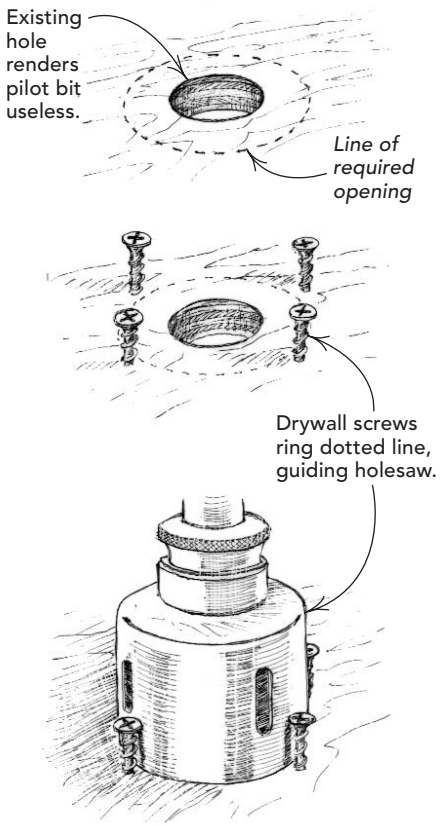
I've worked construction for years, and chalklines have always been hard to keep in a nail pouch or pocket. Now that the size of the chalklines is larger, it is that much harder. To solve the problem, I took the belt clip off an old tape measure and screwed it on the back of the chalkline (drawing right). Now I can keep it on my tool belt and out of the way.

—Anthony La Rose, Cedar Springs, MI

Centering a holesaw with drywall screws

Occasionally, I am faced with the challenge of enlarging an existing hole in the basement or crawlspace subfloor for electrical or plumbing services. In the past, I have screwed a piece of ¼-in. plywood over the hole so that the pilot drill would have a place to center and stabilize the holesaw until it became embedded in the wood. I have noticed that once the saw is started in the wood, there is no need for the pilot drill. On my last job, though, it was 10:30 p.m., and there was no ¼-in. plywood in sight.

Considering the limited need for a pilot drill, I decided to try to solve my problem with something I had in abundant supply: drywall screws. First, I traced the diameter of the larger holesaw outside the existing hole, as shown in the drawing below. Next,



I ran four drywall screws partway into the subfloor just outside the new layout. I then placed the holesaw within these screws and drilled the larger hole. The drywall screws guided the outside of the holesaw, eliminating the need for the pilot drill.

—M. Diener, Franklin Park, IL

Trimming a drywall patch

Recently, I had to finesse a small piece of drywall into place as a patch. As I began fitting the drywall into its opening, it became clear that I needed to trim a bit off one corner. Normally, I use one of those cheese-grater gizmos for this task, but mine had gone MIA.

Rooting around in my toolbox, I found an old reciprocating-saw blade. I dragged the tooth side of the blade across the edge that needed trimming. The teeth cut shallow grooves in the drywall. Dragging the back side of the blade across the grooves knocked down the ridges between the grooves. It went fast and was precise, perfect for small patch applications.

—Frank DuBois, Deale, MD

Compressed air to clean a drain

I had a drain whose flow was, at best, about ½ gal. a day. I opened the cleanout and ran a snake down the drain line. The snake would go about 10 ft. and hit a dead end. So I resorted to drain cleaner for a week. That didn't get it done either.

Fortunately, the clog was in a seldom-used sink. Unfortunately, it started to look like one of those knock-out-the-wall-plaster-and-replace-the-pipe kind of repairs. But before I resorted to that route, I decided to try one more approach to the problem. Here is how I opened the drain in just a few minutes.

I found a 12-ft. length of vinyl tubing that was just large enough in diameter to slip over the snake. I left about 3 in. of the tubing protruding past the nose of the snake. Then I ran the snake, tubing and all, down the drain until it encountered the obstruction. In effect, the snake acted as reinforcement to deliver the tube to the blockage.

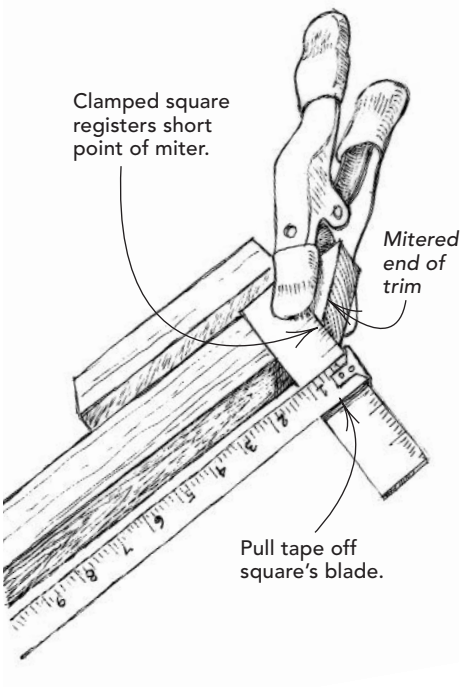
Next, I turned on my compressor, set the air-pressure gauge to 35 psi and inserted the tip of my blow gun into the free end of the vinyl tubing. I pulled the trigger on the blow gun, sending a blast of air down the tube. In seconds, the sound of swirling water going down the drain filled the room.

You might ask, "Doesn't this run the risk of damaging the drain lines?" My reasoning was that because the pipe is open to the atmosphere by way of the roof vents, no real pressure build-up takes place in the overall pipe system. It's very important, however, to put a rag over any nearby drain opening and over where the snake enters the drain line to trap any sediment that might blow back. Taking this step is especially important if you've used any corrosive drain cleaners, which can burn skin and eyes. Protect yourself with goggles and gloves.

—Peter F. Lott, Kansas City, MO

Short-point measurement

Any piece of mitered trim has two points on its end. The acute angle at the very tip of the workpiece is called the long point; the short point is the obtuse angle on the inside edge of the trim piece. Measuring from the short point is a recurring problem: There is no place to hook your tape.



The next time you need to measure from a short point, try this trick. As shown in the drawing above, use a spring clamp to affix a square to the end of the workpiece. It can be a speed square, a combo square or a tri square; just make sure to align the blade of the square with the short point. Now you can hook your tape measure to the square's blade and rest assured that you are measuring from the right point.

—Bruce Guertin, Coventry, RI.