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 at our Web site, www.finehomebuilding.com.*

Corner-clamp system

Whenever I need to glue up a frame, I reach for my corner blocks and my wife's sewing kit. As shown in the drawing below, the blocks are simple wooden circles with a 90° notch. I put a block at each corner and apply clamping pressure with a loop of mason's line. Staples at the tangent points of each block keep the line in the right place.

One end of the line is tied to a steel ring, and the other end runs through a big button from the sewing kit. In use, I adjust the position of the button to end up close to the steel ring. I loop the line through the ring and pull back on it to apply pressure to the blocks. Then I loop the line around the button a few times, securing the tension.

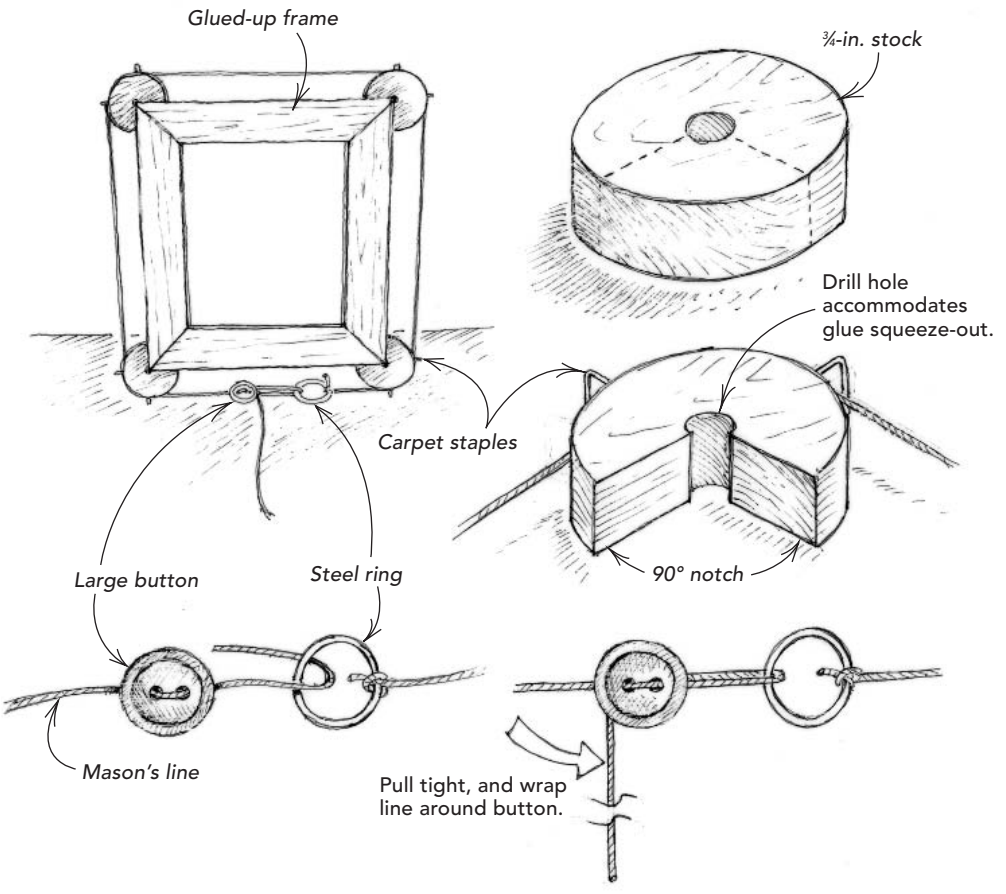
This system works so well that I no longer use my commercial corner clamps. I've cut blocks of all sizes for different applications, from temporary clamping of cabinet carcases to typical picture frames. By using wedges, shims, and other fixtures, I've even clamped oddball shapes with success. The only drawback seems to be that my wife can no longer keep her sewing kit supplied with large buttons.

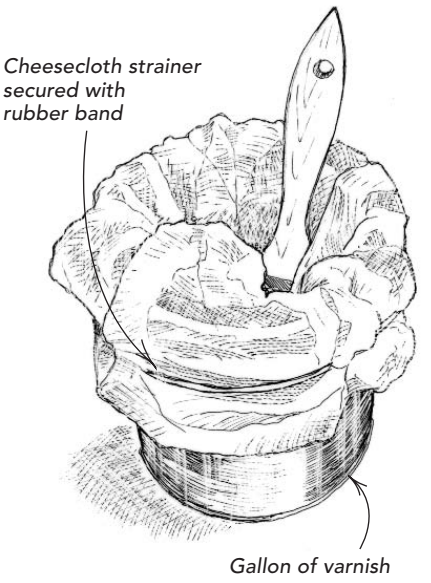
—Robert W. McKinney, Houston, TX

Soap scoops on the job

My wife won't let me do laundry (which is fair, because I won't let her run my saw), but what I can do is collect the scoops that come in each box of laundry soap. These expendable cups make ideal containers for holding paint or varnish, soaking small parts in solvent, or cleaning small brushes. They also make good bins for organizing small parts during a repair. The uses are endless, and the price is certainly right.

—Steve Thomas, Columbus, OH





Straining paint for touch-ups

By the time a gallon of paint or varnish has been around long enough to have been opened a half-dozen times and still not completely consumed, you can be sure it has collected enough dried gunk to leave an unsightly surface. It's time to strain the paint. But straining the entire contents of the can is messy and time-consuming if you're just doing a little touch-up work. As shown in the drawing above, I take a different approach. Instead of pouring the paint through the strainer, I put the strainer in the paint.

I stretch the cheesecloth strainer over the can and secure it with a rubber band. The cloth hangs in the paint or varnish, and the finish that accumulates above the cloth is free of contaminants; it's just right for touch-ups.

—Don Mathis, via email

Moving strike plates

When I am hanging doors or adjusting doors, the strike plate occasionally isn't ideally located, causing the door latch to have play at the strike or, if too tight, making it difficult to latch without slamming or pushing hard.

Some carpenters remove the strike plate, plug the screw holes with small-diameter dowels (matchsticks are a time-honored plug), and then drill new holes for the strike-plate screws.

As a longtime professional residential carpenter, I've used another method that is a

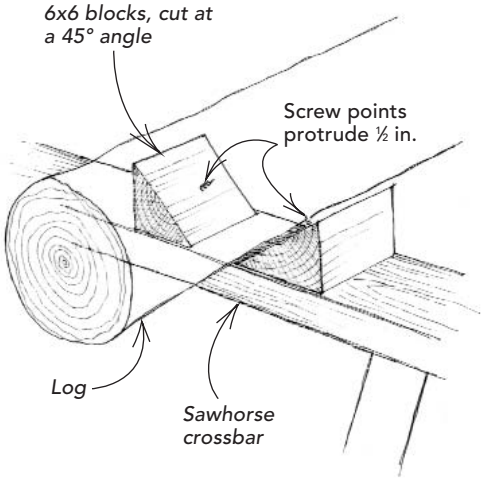
lot simpler and works just as well. First, I determine which way the plate has to be moved, either toward the jamb-stop molding or away from it. I remove the strike, I put a 5d finish nail in my drill, and I create a new screw hole to the side of the existing one in the direction I want to move the strike plate. I use a nail because it doesn't drill a new hole but instead separates the wood fiber, essentially moving the screw hole to one side or the other. I then reinstall the strike plate, and the screws hold as if it were a new hole.

If a 5d nail isn't available, use a 4d. The smaller-gauge nail works better than the next size up.

—Ron Gay, Pontiac, MI

Working with logs

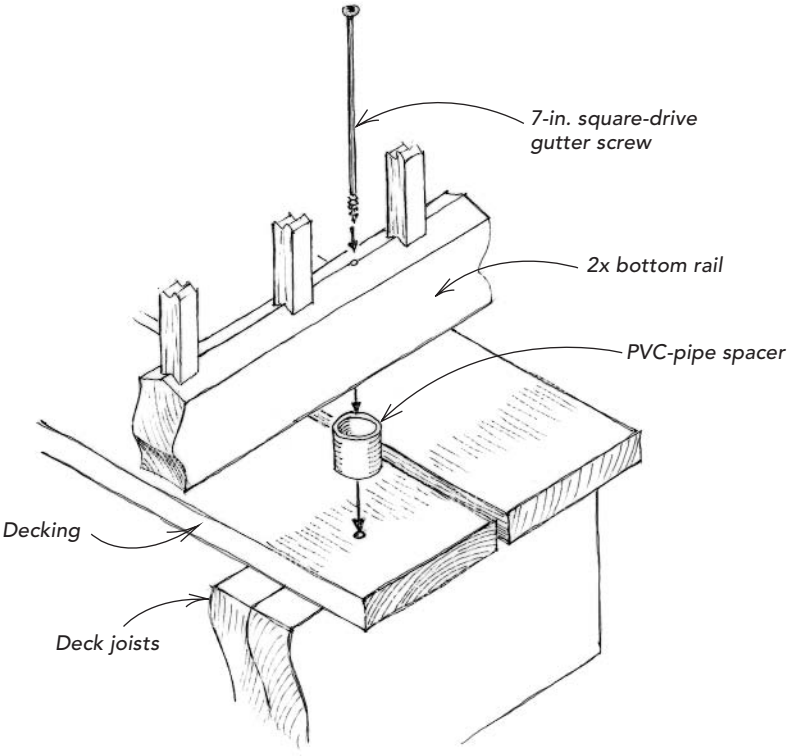
Anyone who has ever done log work knows the problems that come along with peeling and cleaning logs. They are round, which means that they tend to roll off a pair of sawhorses. The drawing below



shows my setup for securing a log while I work on it.

On each sawhorse, I affix a pair of beveled blocks. The blocks are 5½ in. long and are made from a 6x6 ripped down the middle at a 45° angle. The pointy end of a 3-in. screw protrudes about ½ in. from the face of each block. The screw points are just enough to grab a log and hold it where you want it until you're ready to spin the log into its next position.

—Jon Sherman, Steamboat, CO



Deck-rail support

If a deck rail spans more than 5 ft. or so, I think it's important to support the bottom rail, using something that won't rot. I've tried various approaches to this problem. The drawing above illustrates my favorite solution. Instead of wood, I use short lengths of PVC pipe, cut with a chopsaw into little cylinders.

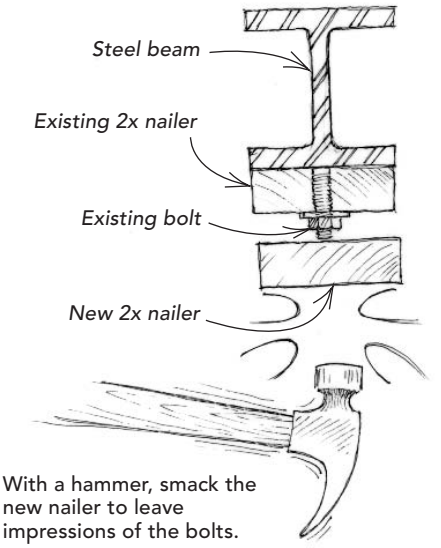
For a 2x bottom rail, I use 1¼-in. O. D. (outside diameter) pipe, cut into lengths that fit snugly under the rail. To hold them in place, I run a 7-in. square-drive gutter screw through the bottom rail, through the PVC cylinder, and well into the deck, burying the screw head. This works particularly well because I use a minimum 3-in.-deep bottom rail.

The PVC cylinders are strong and unobtrusive, they hold paint well, and they won't deteriorate or wick water into the rail.

—Forrest McCanless, via email

Doubling a nailer

The other day, I was retrofitting a wall beneath a steel frame that included a 2x nailer that was bolted to the bottom of a steel I-beam (drawing right). I needed to double up the existing nailer with another 2x, and to do so, I had to drill some holes to accommodate the bolts. Rather than spend the time measuring the location of the bolts, I applied a time-honored trick that framing carpenters use to locate foundation-bolt holes in mudsills. I instructed my assistant to hold the new 2x right against the bolts in the existing nailer (drawing below). Then I hit the 2x with a hammer. This created a series of impressions in the wood that exactly matched the location of the



With a hammer, smack the new nailer to leave impressions of the bolts.

bolts that were in the existing nailer. I then used my 1½-in. drill bit to cut the holes in the new nailer, enabling it to fit flush against the old one. Total time: just about five minutes.

—Cesar Camorlinga, Redwood City, CA