The Eight Best Power Planers

Whether you're hanging doors or framing walls, here are the top picks from a crowded field

BY ANDY BEASLEY



Power planes excel at trimming extension jambs ...



... fitting and beveling doors ...



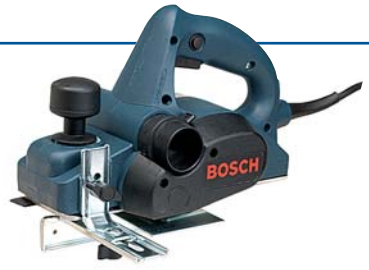
... straightening studs and other framing lumber

8 top picks

After putting all the planers through their paces, I've concluded that eight models are clearly superior. Whether you're looking for a rough, powerful framing tool or a finicky, precise finish planer, one of the following should fit the bill.

—A. B.

BOSCH 3365



This $115 tool's short length and light weight made it maneuverable and easy to handle. Cutting smoothness and dust collection were excellent. The motor was a good match for the maximum cutting depth and pushed the tool through wide (3 in.) stock without significantly bogging down. The second-least-expensive tool among the finalists, this planer offered the best combination of value and performance.

Pros: Fast, accurate blade-changing process. The standard fence was one of the best fixed models tested (a beveling fence is also available).
Cons: Sensitive depth-adjustment knob; park rest wouldn't fold out of the way on horizontal surfaces.
Best use: Light-duty work.

Planer review photos: Sloan T. Howard

When my wife and I built our new home, the first thing I completed was the workshop. I overcame her skepticism with the promise that getting the shop set up and running would make me far more efficient at finishing the house. But what I didn't expect was that it also would make me tired. On the frequent occasions when a piece of trim didn't fit perfectly, I trudged back to the shop's stationary machines to shave off the proverbial hair. I was dreaming of a less strenuous existence when the UPS driver dropped off 15 planers (and four cordless models; see sidebar, p. 75) for this survey. That's when it dawned on me: Having a 400-lb. jointer is nice, but a handheld planer can save me a lot of footwork. So with the energy of a lazy person seeking a shortcut, I put each tool through its paces.

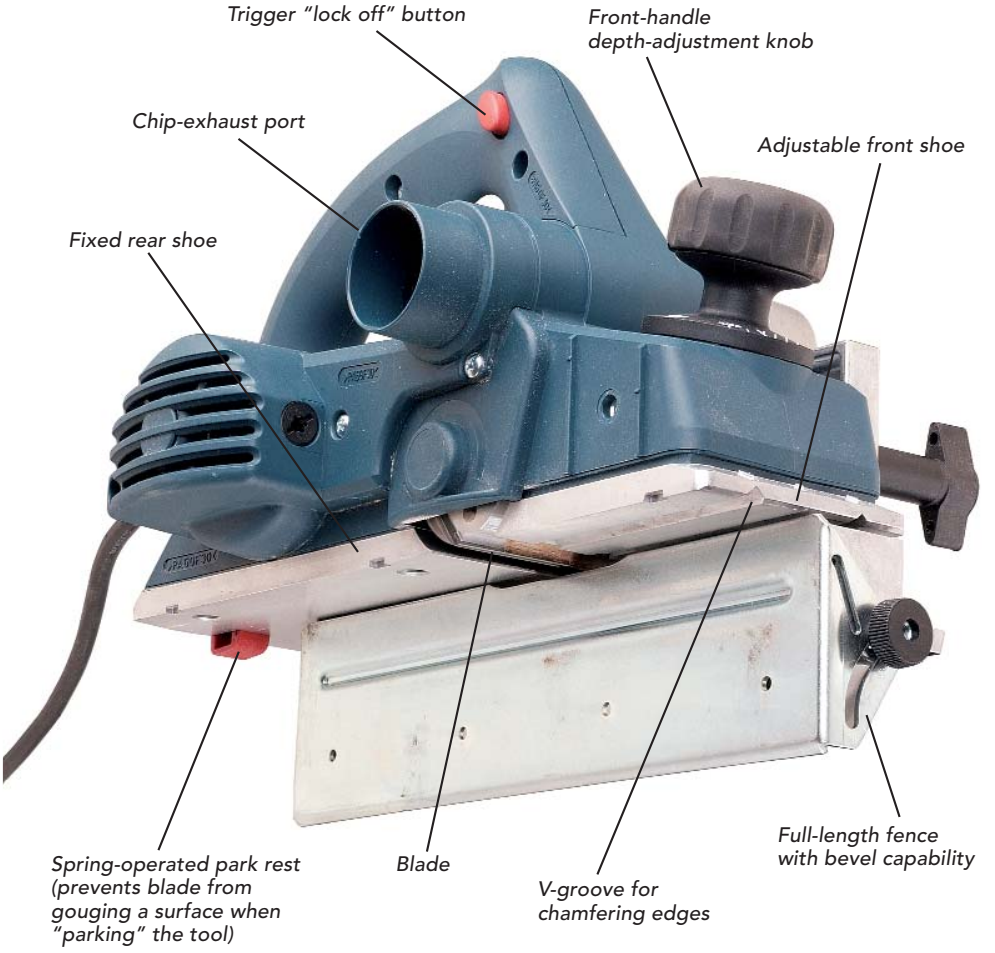
Every planer got a full workout

As each tool arrived, I studied its operator's manual, then logged its vital signs: size, power, flatness of shoes, factory blade setting, and general out-of-the-box quality. I took each tool as it came to me and didn't try to improve it by making any adjustments beyond what the manual specified. After these checks, I started making shavings. I plowed through hardwood, softwood, and plywood. I evaluated each tool's ability to straighten rough framing stock as well as to put smooth edges on finish work. I continually fiddled with the depth controls, changed all the blades at least twice, and carved enough rabbets to populate a petting zoo. Finally, to minimize any personal bias, I loaned out the planers to a crew of seasoned builders and collected their impressions.

By the time the dust settled, I found that eight of the tools were clearly superior to the

AN INDISPENSABLE TOOL

Powerful, precise, and loaded with features, a power planer makes quick work of a variety of carpentry tasks. The best ones have comfortable handles, easy-to-change blades, and accurate cutting-depth adjustments. A dust-collection port, a long fence, and a powerful motor are other traits shared by the top tools. Get a good one, and you'll wonder how you ever worked without it.



BOSCH 1594K



Bosch's newest corded planer is an excellent all-around performer. Its cutting performance was impressive, yielding extremely smooth surfaces. The standard beveling fence was easy to set at various widths and angles. Dust collection was efficient, and the vacuum hose could be attached to either side of the tool. The 1594K came in a sturdy case with plenty of room for the fence, wrench, and even that thing some manufacturers forget about: the cord. Although not my first choice, this tool's excellent features and $170 price make it the one I'd probably buy.

Pros: Simple blade-changing procedure, easy depth-control adjustment.
Cons: Handle position not as ergonomic as other planers.
Best use: General carpentry (finish or framing).

FESTO HL 850E



This planer excelled in virtually every aspect of testing, except that its larger size limited its use in tight quarters. With its well-designed handles, it was a pleasure to operate. Although some of the plastic levers and switches might not survive rough handling, this machine pretty much did it all. My only complaint with this tool is that I don't own it. Oh, and its $395 price tag.

Pros: Wide depth-of-cut range, simple blade-changing procedure, efficient dust collection, plastic carrying case included.
Cons: Expensive, beveling fence must be purchased separately.
Best use: Woodworking shop, finish carpentry.

TOP PICKS



The plane facts

Model	Contact	Weight	Amperage	Cut
BOSCH 3365	www.boschtools.com 877-267-2499	5 lb. 9 oz.	5 amps	3¼ in. wide, 1/16 in. deep
BOSCH 1594K	www.boschtools.com 877-267-2499	6 lb. 9 oz.	6.5 amps	3¼ in. wide, 3/32 in. deep
FESTO HL 850E	www.festool-usa.com 888-337-8600	9 lb. 7 oz.	7.4 amps	3¼ in. wide, 9/64 in. deep
HITACHI P20SB	www.hitachi.com/powertools 800-706-7337	6 lb. 10 oz.	3.4 amps	3¼ in. wide, 1/32 in. deep
MAKITA 1912B	www.makitatools.com 800-462-5482	9 lb. 8 oz.	7.5 amps	4⅜ in. wide, 1/16 in. deep
METABO Ho 0882	www.metabousa.com 800-638-2264	8 lb. 6 oz.	6.5 amps	3¼ in. wide, ⅛ in. deep
PORTER-CABLE 125	www.porter-cable.com 800-487-8665	7 lb. 4 oz.	6 amps	3¼ in. wide, ⅛ in. deep
PORTER-CABLE 126	www.porter-cable.com 800-487-8665	9 lb. 10 oz.	7 amps	2 13/32 in. wide, 3/32 in. deep
Craftsman 27716	www.sears.com 800-349-4358	7 lb. 8 oz.	5.5 amps	3⅝ in. wide, 1/16 in. deep
DeWalt DW680K	www.dewalt.com 800-433-9258	6 lb. 15 oz.	5.2 amps	3¼ in. wide, 3/32 in. deep
Freud FE-82	www.freudtools.com 800-334-4107	7 lb. 10 oz.	5 amps	3¼ in. wide, 3/32 in. deep
Grizzly 9003	www.grizzly.com 570-546-9663	5 lb. 13 oz.	5 amps	3 3/16 in. wide, 1/32 in. deep
Grizzly 9004	www.grizzly.com 570-546-9663	11 lb. 8 oz.	5 amps	3½ in. wide, 1/16 in. deep
Makita 1900B	www.makitatools.com 800-462-5482	6 lb. 8 oz.	4 amps	3¼ in. wide, 1/32 in. deep
Virutex CE24E	www.virutex.com 800-868-9663	13 lb. 12 oz.	11.5 amps	3⅛ in. wide, ⅛ in. deep

8 top picks

Continued

HITACHI P20SB



The $100 P20SB's light weight made for a maneuverable tool that made taking multiple passes and straightening crooked stock easier. Both front and rear shoes were exceptionally flat, and the smoothness of the cut was definitely above average. I liked the comfortable grip with its rearward tilt. This was a very good, no-frills planer for a bargain price.

Pros: Least-expensive tool among the finalists.
Cons: Complicated blade-changing procedure, short fence, no dust-collection port, lacks safety features such as blade guard and park rest.
Best use: Light duty.

Standard blades	Street price	Comments
One mini-carbide reversible	$115	An excellent, relatively inexpensive tool
Two mini-carbide reversible	$170	Best combination of performance and price
One spiral carbide	$395	Best performer overall
Two steel	$100	Good planer, bargain price
Two carbide	$219	Powerful, wide cutting swath; best choice for framing
Two mini-carbide reversible	$193	Excellent finish planer
Two mini-carbide reversible	$165	Comfortable grip; one of the best all-around performers
Two spiral carbide on single cutter	$430	Best planer for doors
Two steel reversible	$140	Imprecise depth-of-cut control with no maximum limit
Two mini-carbide reversible	$160	Powerful motor; well-suited to framing uses but too rough for finish work
Two mini-carbide reversible	$110	Difficult to change and align blades, but good all-around performer
Two steel	$40	Underpowered motor; wobbly front shoe impedes accurate depth control
Two steel reversible	$80	Wobbly front shoe impedes accurate depth control; difficult blade leveling
Two mini-carbide reversible	$145	Underpowered motor; complicated blade-changing; wimpy depth of cut
Two steel reversible	$340	Powerful but heavy; good for industrial or horizontal uses

others, and they are the ones I've chosen to recommend here.

Top picks have all the best features

The most important parts of a planer are the shoes: a fixed shoe in the rear and an adjustable shoe in front that determines depth of cut (top photo, p. 71). To ensure precise results, the blades must be installed flush with the rear shoe, and both shoes must be parallel with each other. Using a straightedge and a feeler gauge, I checked both shoes for flatness and alignment throughout their depth-of-cut range. Although few of the tools could claim absolute perfection—a 0.005-in. cup here, a 0.009-in. twist there—in practice, I found that except for the Grizzly tools, all were close enough for fine trim work. Out-of-the-box blade settings, however, were surprisingly poor: 11 of the 15 tools tested required adjustment to correct obvious misalignments.

Depth-of-cut control. The best planers had accurate, easy-to-read scales and reliable knobs that spanned the machines' full cutting ranges in one turn or less. The designs that required multiple revolutions wasted time because I had to remember if I was currently one turn or two turns from the depth I was looking for.

Blades. Festo and Porter-Cable's model 126 both used proprietary, carbide-tipped spiral cutters. All other planers had some form of straight blade mounted in a revolving cutterhead. A couple of these planers used high-speed steel blades that lost their edge sooner than the carbide variety but were resharpened easily. Among the carbide blades, I preferred the reversible mini-carbide style (photo top left, p. 74), which had a cutting edge on both sides and was easily replaceable.

Blade-changing. Unless you're the type who trades in a car when the floor mats get dirty,

MAKITA 1912B



Although its cutting width was the greatest of all the tools tested, this planer moved briskly through wide stock at its maximum cutting depth. That depth was rated at 1/16 in., but the depth-of-cut knob was able to rotate another full turn to permit an actual maximum of 7/64 in. A deep, wide cut really churned out the shavings, so it's unfortunate that the machine had no provision for dust collection. This workhorse excelled at straightening rough framing lumber.

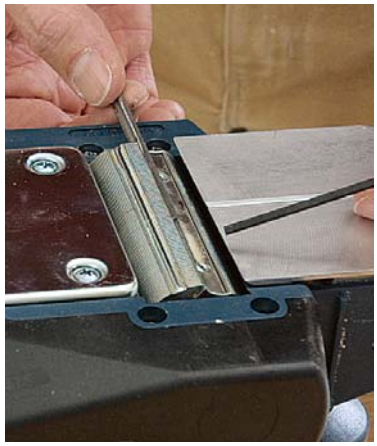
Pros: Powerful motor, cutting smoothness among the best in this survey.
Cons: No dust-collection port, short fence, no blade guard or park rest.
Best use: Wide boards, framing.

METABO Ho 0882



This planer cut beautifully in all materials and balanced well on narrow stock. The good balance comes from its excellent front grip, which was also one of the best depth-of-cut controls in the group. My only complaint was that the tool's handle was too horizontal, and my wrist soon grew tired of its awkward feel. An excellent all-around planer that's particularly suited for finish work.

Pros: Simple process for changing and aligning blades, excellent standard fence (beveling fence available), effective dust collection.
Cons: Sharp leading edge of shoe sometimes "hung up" when planing rough framing lumber.
Best use: Finish work.





Changing blades shouldn't have to take all day. *Changing blades on newer planers such as the Bosch 3365 (photo right) is a fast process: The retaining screws are loosened, and the blades slip in and out.*

you'll eventually have to change planer blades. The best machines required a minimum number of tools and needed only to have the old blade pulled out and a new one pushed in (photo top left). I didn't appreciate the planers that required an arsenal of wrenches and a good dose of luck just to put in a new blade.

Handles and switches. The best handles had a rearward cant that closely approximated that of a traditional hand plane (photo top right). Ideally, the trigger switch should have a safety "lock off" button (top photo, p. 71) that prevents the planer from starting up if the trigger is accidentally contacted.

Fence quality. Many of the tools came with short, fixed fences. Because they didn't extend to the rear shoe, these short fences left the work unguided for an inch or two at the end of the run; more important, they also left the cutterhead exposed. The best fences extended well beyond the cutterhead and covered the unused portion of the blades (bottom photo above). For door planing, a fence with bevel capability is a must.

Dust collection. For outdoor work or new construction, the option of connecting a planer to a shop vacuum (photo left, facing page) probably isn't important. But if you're working in an occupied home, it's a critical consideration. Unless the home's residents are a family of gerbils, they're not going to appreciate the way that a planer can spew out the shavings.



If you plane long boards, choose an ergonomic handle. *The rearward-canted grip on the Porter-Cable 126 planer (photo above) makes it easier to push that tool over long distances without wrist fatigue.*

Some manufacturers protect your fingers better. *Whereas older planer designs offer little protection from spinning blades, many new models, such as this one from Metabo, include a fence that shields the unused part of the blade.*

If I had to choose a favorite

On a typical project, planers are put through a wide variety of applications—from rough framing to intricate woodworking. No one tool can do everything perfectly, thus no planer can be singled out as the best.

But if I had to reveal my overall favorite, I'd have to go with the Festo HL 850E. Although out of my price range, this planer excelled at trim work and sported the best depth-adjustment knob, safety features, and overall design of the bunch. The Festo isn't for everybody, however. All eight planers that we decided to feature were excellent performers. Framers, door hangers, and budget-minded consumers might be better-served by one of the other models. □

Andy Beasley, a retired Air Force instructor pilot, lives near Hillside, Colo. Photos by Tom O'Brien, except where noted.

8 top picks

Continued

PORTER-CABLE 125



This superb planer's cutting performance was accurate enough for immaculate finish work and fast enough for the roughest framing jobs. The standard fence made rabbeting and beveling a cinch, although the fence would have been even better if it included a degree scale and had knobs instead of tiny wing nuts. If it had dust-collection capability and a slightly better fence, this would be the best all-around planer of the group.

Pros: Ergonomic handle, powerful motor, beveling fence, and plastic carrying case included.
Cons: No dust port, depth-of-cut knob required three revolutions to span full range.
Best use: General carpentry (framing or finish).

Fine Homebuilding has arranged with the manufacturers to donate the planers in this test to Habitat for Humanity.



Gather your chips at the source. *Planers are among the messiest of power tools. If you do much work in occupied spaces, choose a model that accommodates a vacuum attachment.*

PORTER-CABLE 126



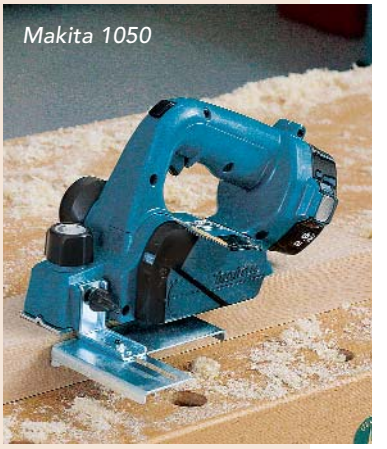
This relatively specialized tool isn't for everyone. But for those who need to bevel the edges of doors or put a glass-smooth edge on long stock, this is the one to have. Cutting quality was excellent. The integral fence is adjustable through 60° of travel. A must-have for door hangers, this tool is an excellent all-around finishing plane, but its high cost ($430) means you wouldn't want your brother-in-law to borrow it.

Pros: Sturdy metal carrying case, extralong fence and shoes ensure wobble-free operation. Unique spiral cutter makes blade changes quick and easy.
Cons: This "old school" tool lacks modern safety features and a dust-collection port, and it's expensive.
Best use: Finish carpentry, door-hanging.

Power planers cut the cord

The cordless planer is a successful niche machine. It's ideal for intermittent shop work, as well as for light-duty use by homeowners or trim carpenters—especially if the battery is compatible with tools they already own.

Makita has two models: the 12v 1050, which has a street price of $280 (photo top right), and the 14.4v 1051, which sells for $320. Both are small tools, offering less than a 2-in. cutting width and only a 1/64-in. maximum depth of cut. They cut smoothly, they worked well with dust collection, and the running time on their 2.6-amp/hr Ni-MH batteries was exceptional. I was able to plane more than 300 lin. ft. on the edge of a 1x pine board at the 12v tool's full (1/64 in.) depth of cut.



Bosch recently entered the cordless-planer market, and I tested a prototype of an 18v model, the 53518 (photo bottom right). This model—as well as a 14.4v version (model 53514)—is now available for purchase; it sells for about $250. Unlike the Makitas, this tool is full size, able to plane 3¼ in. wide and 1/16 in. deep. The model I used was equipped with a 2-amp/hr battery, but the production version features a more powerful 2.4-amp/hr pack. Even with the smaller battery, the cutting results were excellent in all materials. Blade-changing was a breeze, and the tool accepted a vacuum for clean work. The only drawback to this machine was its handle position, which was too horizontal for my liking. Using the 2-amp/hr battery, I set the tool at its full (1/16 in.) depth of cut and planed about 80 lin. ft. on the edge of a 2x4; this equates to almost twice the stock removal per charge than the smaller Makita tools.



—A. B.