

10 Essential Hand Woodworking Tools

By Aaron Henderson

I am writing this on the premise that you are just getting started in hand tool woodworking or traditional woodworking and are looking to create a basic kit of tools that will get you started making projects. It is a bit of an oversimplification to say you can do traditional woodworking with only 10 tools. The title would do a better service if it was called “10 Essential Hand Woodworking Tool Categories” as even this list will exceed 10 tools in total. I will try to keep the total tools listed to a minimum for the beginning woodworker, but keep in mind, this is a starting point not the destination and over time if you remain interested in traditional woodworking, you will most assuredly acquire more tools and more tool categories.

You don't have to spend a ton of cash getting started in woodworking. Tools made in the late 1800's and early 20th century are the best mass produced tools ever made. A few tools can get you a long way. You will probably add tools as your skills grow. To start out, you will want to concentrate on the essentials and learn how to use them correctly. Most of these items can be found at flea markets, garage sales and on Craigslist or other similar websites. Some of these finds may need to be refurbished or tuned up to work correctly. Make sure to look for signs of abuse and repair as you will want to pass on those. Also, spread the word to your family and friends and let them know you are interested in hand tool woodworking, you will be surprised by how many of them have tools just laying around not being used.

One more item about money and tools. One axiom about tools does hold up over time “**Do not buy cheap tools**”. That does not necessary mean you have to sell your blood plasma to get cash to buy woodworking tools, just look for bargains for old well made tools and you will be a much happier woodworker. If you buy a cheap tool, you will buy the tool twice. You will be frustrated with the cheap tool and then you will go out and buy a well made tool to replace it, so skip the first step and just get the well make tool to begin with.

There are several tools everybody will agree needs to be in the beginners tool kit. But as with all things, different people have different opinions on what is “essential”. From my experience and what I have found to be most useful, I have create this list to aid you in choosing the tools that you will use most often when getting started.

Top 10 Essential Tools

10. Sharpening System – This is the gateway to your successful woodworking hobby or career. It is essential that you learn to sharpen your tools and keeping them sharp. This should be the first skill you master before attempting to saw that first board. Add to any system mentioned below a strop and honing compound because you will definitely need it.

Some different types of sharpening systems:

a) Sandpaper -

Pros: Cheap in the short run, readily available

Cons: Can get expensive over time, Not very Durable with short replacement turnaround, a pain to change paper when it wears out.

b) Water stones -

Pros: Very effective, good longevity, easy to use, fast working

Cons: Moderately expensive, some water stones have to be soaked before use, have to true stones often to keep flat, water and high carbon steel are natural enemies if steel is not dried and cared for (oiled after being dried) properly

c) Oil Stones –

Pros: Arkansas stones are a pleasure to use, they wear slowly, they put a keen edge on any steel, oil and high carbon steel are good buddies,

Cons: The most expensive of the three, slow working, messy

d) Electric sharpeners and Grinders– Out of scope for a hand tool discussion, but many people like these so I am including them for completeness. You may want to buy a hand cranked grinder or power grinder as some point but I am deliberately limiting the discussion to just the 3 sharpening systems (a,b and c) above. There are many web resources to research these.

9. Straightedge or ruler – You cannot be a woodworker without a way to make straight markings and cuts. You can make your own Straightedge and that is what I recommend. A long steel ruler would also be a good addition to your tool kit.

8. Drill and Bits – You cannot find a better drill than an old eggbeater drill. They require no batteries and are a pleasure to use. They are still relatively inexpensive and will last you a lifetime. You may want to buy a nice set of twist bits and a set of brad point bits as you will be using them a lot.

7. Marking Knife – I use my marking knife on all my projects. I have a chip carving knife I use for everyday marking as it has a double bevel, really good steel and is easy to keep sharp. You can use a lot of different knives for marking. Everyone has their own preferences, just be careful of the bevel to make sure it does not affect your accuracy. Practice with as many

knives as you have to see which one make the best line and is easy to sharpen. You can even sharpen a box cutter on a strop and that will work fine if that is all you have.

6. Marking Gauge - Marking gauges are important for accurate processing and working of wood. They allow you to have very high precision when thicknessing and laying out a project. These can be made by you and they do not have to cost very much money. You will probably want to either make or purchase 2 or 3 of these as you may have different settings during a project.

5. #4 or #5 Vintage Stanley Plane – Planes are definitely an essential woodworking tool. I cannot imagine trying to work without one. Keep a lookout for an old #4 or #5 plane. Either one will do 90% of the work you want to do and one of each will give you even more versatility. Learning to refurbish and restore an old plane is a great way to get acquainted with these wonderful old tools. Collectors have driven the price of the “Like new!” planes, but franken-planes (planes made from different plane parts) and ones that have hang holes in them are perfectly good users and cheaper because collectors do not want them.

4. Combination Square – These may not be considered “Traditional Tools” but I cannot think of a project I have not used my combination square on. I have both a 6” and 12” and I use my 6” most of the time. These things are so versatile and can be used for several different operations. I use Starretts, they are pricey but worth it, you can also use an old square, just make sure it is square and tight with no movement when it is locked down.

3. Bevel Edge Chisels and Mallet – A set of three chisels is a good start. A 3/4”, 3/8” and 1/8” are good starter sizes. The steel from the late 1800’s is very good in the good brands like Stanley, Buck Bros., Whitherby and Swan (they also made bad tools back then too so watch out for off brands) . Sharpen them to 25 Deg and you will have great users. Modern makers of the same name are not the same quality. One modern maker, Lie-Nielsen makes superb chisels, but they will cost you, but they are very fine tools and worth every penny. Use only with a good wooden mallet not a hammer.

2. Saw – The same as Chisels, late 1800’s steel was very good and they made a lot of them. The ones you find may be a bit rusty (just remove the rust and clean it up, handles usually do not need any work unless they are broken), but as long as there is not much pitting, you’ll probably be in good shape. You will want a crosscut and a rip saw to do cross grain cuts and with the grain rip cuts.

1. Workbench – This can be the kitchen table or a Roubo style monolithic wooden slab, but a strong work holding surface is the most essential tool in your shop. You can make one from about any wood, but wood that is light in color and medium hardness, to moderately hard as rated in the Janka hardness scale and should be readily available (inexpensive) in your area will be a good choice. You will need some way to clamp your work, but that is a topic all to itself. A simple Hold-fast and a couple of bench dogs will hold the work for several tasks. You will want to make some bench appliances like a bench hook, as these make sawing a lot easier.

What next in tools

You will want to add more bench tools like a good Mallet, back saws, turning saws, sliding bevels, larger planes like a #7 or #8, Hammers (I did not include this as a top 10, because just about everyone has a hammer) slotted screwdrivers, brace and bits and clamps, lots of clamps in various sizes. The saying “You can never have too many clamps” is very true.

A word on Pencil and Paper – This is an important and often overlooked tool. Before making drawings and plans for your projects you get a better understanding of what you are going to build and the pencil will come in handy later on the actual project. I use regular #2 lead pencils (with old school pencil sharpener), a drafting lead holder with various leads and a .7mm Pentel pencil as my go-to pencils.

Supplies

Wood glue, I like hide glue for so many reasons.
Denatured Alcohol
Shellac
Boiled Linseed Oil
Paste Wax
Paints, Milk Paint is really nice to use
Bees Wax for your saws
Oil – Jojoba Oil works good for your high carbon steel tools
Sand Paper – In various grits 80, 150, 300, 600

First projects

Making wood projects for your shop is a natural first step in your woodworking path. It builds your confidence and gives you useful appliances you can use to store your tools. When you make mistakes and you will make mistakes (I still make them almost every day), step back and take a look at your project and ask yourself, what went wrong and how do I avoid making the same one next time.

Simple Tool Box – You need a place to store your tools. This was my first woodworking project and I still use it almost every day.

Tool Chest – I really love my Dutch Tool Chest, but you may like a more traditional English Tool Chest.

Tool Rack – As you acquire tools you might want to store your specialty tools in a tool rack for easy access.

Saw Bench - These have a multitude of uses and are easy to make.