

Saving Money on Tools Will Cost You

Bobby



I don't miss the money I spent on this. It's truly a set-it-up-and-just-make-stuff tool. I don't have to worry about things being imprecise.

Do you walk into a woodworking store with one hand on your wallet?

When I'm in the shop, and something doesn't work, I'm somehow willing to pay all kinds of money to make everything right again. But when I'm shopping, I get cheap. I think it's because I'm not experiencing the frustrated feelings while shopping.

There are times when buying a cheap tool is ok, but when can you get away with it and not wind up costing yourself more money?

The Cost of Buying Crap

When starting out, I didn't have much to spend, yet I wanted a shop full of tools. I had to narrow things down to the few tools I really needed to get started. So I did the logical thing at the time and bought cheap stuff so I could get a more complete shop out of it. My plan all along was to slowly replace them with better ones.

I bought a lot of low-grade chisels, 7.2V battery powered tools, and a cheap bench plane. All were inaccurate, difficult to work with, and all around discouraging to someone just getting started into woodworking.

Most were half the cost of the good quality one I would have bought if I wanted to spend the money. Much of the time I'd use the cheap tool for a few months, see the awful results, and save up for the high-quality tool anyway. At that point, I would be determined to not make the same mistake, so I would get close to the most expensive one I could find.



I bought this for \$40, but it serves me well. So it's not a high priority to replace it with something more expensive. It's just something that I don't use often enough to justify spending the \$ right now.

So say I paid \$129 for the cheap tool. Got sick of dealing with it, and buy the right one, which was \$279. Now I really spent \$408 total. I suppose I could try to sell the crappy one for at least something, but ultimately it cost me more than if I just saved up for the good one first.

And what if you just keep the junk jig and deal with it, still trying to save money? You'll pay big time in lost time correcting sloppy cuts. I don't know how many times I'd get burn marks after a run through my cheap bench saw, or a step in the cut when the fence shifted. So I had to clean it up with the cheap hand plane, and then correct the cheap

handplane with a sanding block. These scenarios can eat up hours. And make you question your craftsmanship skills. I'm glad I refused to let any deficiencies remain, and I did take the time to correct them with handtools. Since my shop time is limited, and I'm there because I want to make something, certain things I want done fast by machine. And those machines better be good or it's not worth using them.

When to Buy Cheese

If there isn't much of an option, or your future seldom use justifies it, there are times when buying the cheapest thing they sell is appropriate.

My first (somewhat) stationary power tool was a Delta bench saw that cost \$150. I needed something that was easier to use than a circular saw. I didn't know how inaccurate it would be, but I made it work for several years. I had to constantly check and reset the fence with a framing square, and the miter gauge had so much play in it I had to modify it quite a bit. But I got a lot of woodworking done in those years that I wouldn't have otherwise attempted. That made it worth it to me.

My reasoning at the time was I could only afford a few hundred \$, so rather than wait a long time to save up for the cabinet saw I really wanted I opted to start making stuff *now*. Even if woodworking took longer, it was a price I was willing (and did) pay.

I didn't want to compromise and buy a contractor table saw as an in-between. I knew I'd buy a cabinet saw a few years later and thought it was a poor use of \$1000 to spend on a contractor saw that I would only use for a few years and then almost not at all after that (or deal with the hassle of selling it).



I don't mind buying cheap tools if they're going to be heavily abused. These concrete cold chisels have been reground several times, but they work well for how I use them.

However, for my router, I bought a [DeWalt 621 plunge router](#) as my first one, which was amongst the highest rated routers at the time. My reasoning for this was it was only like 200 bucks. To save 50 bucks and buy crap was silly. So this is still my primary router 12 years later.

I still buy inexpensive tools today. I do this for:

- Demolition tools
- [Rubber dead-blow mallets](#)
- [C-clamps](#)
- [Spring clamps](#)
- [Acid brushes to spread glue](#)
- [Foam brushes](#)

I bought a [Skil benchtop Drill Press](#) from a friend for \$40. It does work well, drills accurate holes and all but it lacks some of the features the more woodworker-friendly models today. So I may replace this when the other parts of the shop have been upgraded.

I think you have to have a really good reason to try to save money on your tools. I can't remember EVER missing the money I spent on a quality tool. Never. Even using good masking tape makes me smile.

When to Go High-End

There are times when I like to go fairly high-end. Lie-Nielsen planes are one example. That's all I'll buy after getting my block plane and making awesome shavings straight out of the box. Since handplanes are fussy to begin with, I'll gladly pay more to get one that's a use-it-and-put-it-back-when-done tool.

Tools that I'll use over and over again is where I'll also go high-end. The [DeWalts](#), [Powermatics](#), and [Lie-Nielsens](#) have never let me down so that eliminates a lot of the gamble when I'm first buying.

My [Delta X5 8" Jointer](#) was another purchase that I don't regret. It was highly rated, and I figured I would be disappointed in a 6" Jointer after awhile. So I spent the \$ and got this one. Same with my [Powermatic Mortiser](#) and [General 25" Dual Drum Sander](#). I'd buy all of those again and again.



I paid around \$500 for this several years ago at a woodworking show. It makes beautiful dovetails and box joints. Once you practice a few times, it's easy to use. There are several precision fence systems out there, but I found that the Jointech was better engineered.

When to Go Crazy Industrial

You've all seen it...shops with a European-made combination machine with sliding table, or [CNC machine](#) in someone's small shop.

Are they nuts? Did they waste money?

If there is a tool that is central to what you do every day, I say go for it. I bought a \$4,500 [SawStop Cabinet Saw](#) with 52" rails and other accessories. I use the Table Saw so often that it was worth it to me. I also plan on buying a quality Panel Saw. I know I won't miss the money I spend on those.

However, it would be foolish for me to get a CNC machine, since I wouldn't get much use out of it. I don't make enough projects that a CNC machine is most well suited for, so I'll save that money and buy other things.

If you love turning, maybe getting a super-awesome [Lathe](#), or several, is for you. If you have an interest in wood-drying, perhaps investing in a Kiln is worthwhile. Having hand-finished many projects up to this point I also think that investing in industrial quality spray equipment may be justified by the results and time savings.

WoodChip Tip: *Craftsmanship is still king; an awesome tool won't crank out awesome furniture or artwork automatically. It's just a tool that does certain operations well. You have to be the one to drive the design and form of what you're making. Slow down and be willing to put time into turning what you imagine into something real. And be willing to do stuff over again if you don't get the result you want. Totally worth the time.*

Middle of the Road

Much of the time, there is no reason to buy the absolute most expensive thing they make. My [Jet DC-1100 dust collector](#) does a wonderful job at keeping dust to a minimum and has plenty of suction power at every machine.

Would I like a super cyclone? Sure, but I want to spend that money on higher priorities.



The upper left plane is a Lie-Nielsen, and the bench plane is a Stanley. The Lie-Nielsen was ready to go right out of the box, whereas the Stanley needed quite a bit of flattening and sharpening before it was good to go. And that was reflected in the price. Your choice:
Time or Money.

Why Do They Charge That Much?

Every time they have a Tool Review, people ask why the hell would someone pay \$600 for a benchtop planer? Are they ripping me off with a \$2,000 Jointer?

There are over-marketed and heavily hyped tools out there where you're paying only for the name. Just like with cars, there is a point at which you're not receiving more tool for the money.

However, for the most part, *you truly get what you pay for*. I've found that with tools this is especially true. To justify the price point, quality has to be maintained by the manufacturers. Especially in the age of Twitter and blogs.

Precision costs money. What if someone ordered a picnic bench from you. They wanted it rough sawn out of stock redwood 2X6's and 2X6's. Now what if another customer asked you for a mahogany picnic bench that was finely machined and had joinery (no visible fasteners allowed)?

What would be the difference in price that you'd charge?

Another thing to realize is that quality tools are typically well-engineered. Having good engineering staff does cost money; engineers that work for cheap aren't worth it. Engineering is critical to something working well. I know, I am one.

Cheap knockoffs are designed half-assed, and they cut corners to save manufacturing costs with little regard to the end user. Their goal is to get you to purchase. They have you at first glance at the price.

But these manufacturers that make crap don't understand the *design intent* of the better made stuff, so you'll wind up as the frustrated user.



This dado set gives me precise flat-bottomed cuts and grooves for around 100 bucks. There are super-high end ones but this is just fine for me. I've had wobble-dado blades before to save money but it's not worth it.

Jigs and Fixtures

I do see a lot of manufactured jigs out there that seem overpriced, and think "I can make that, I'll pass..."

But I at least understand that jigs are all about precision. Otherwise I'd just hold the stock with my hands and use a Swiss Army knife. And precision costs money. Any time you decrease the tolerance of the dimensions that something is made with, you increase the price.

Jigs are also about time savings for you; any time I can buy a set-it and forget-it device I'll pay what I need to for it, up to a point. Your time is worth WAY more, usually.

Of course, I enjoy designing and making jigs and fixtures sometimes, so there are times when I dedicate hours to doing that because I want to. But other times, I just want the operation to go smoothly and quickly, so I buy the right tool.

Vote For Quality

With every purchase you are casting a vote for that tool. And the quality level of the tool. When you spend \$ for crap, you are voting for crap. You are telling the manufacturers it's okay to cut corners and make things sloppy.

I don't understand why some magazines keep reviewing the bottom-feeders over and over. I guess it's good to see the contrast. But we as woodworkers should demand more quality and well-engineered products, and at least be willing to pay a reasonable price for it. Of course, the same goes for overpriced and over-marketed things; just don't buy them and force a price drop.



This Joinery Saw from Glen-Drake Toolworks was an investment in my desire to make large hand-cut dovetails, and not be able to blame the tool if they didn't turn out right. This saw has no teeth on the first part and last part of the blade so you can more easily follow your scribe lines and not skip around like other saws.

Buy As You Need

I've always bought major tools as I needed them. In the meantime, I work around what I don't have. For example, as I write this, I'm in the market for my first bandsaw. 12 years into woodworking. Yeah. But I've been using a jigsaw for curved cuts and cleaning it up with hand tools or an [Oscillating Spindle Sander](#). It's been ok even though it takes longer. I feel that since I'm doing some small resaw work and I've secured a number of other quality tools already, it's finally time for a bandsaw. Just don't buy a shop full of tools because you think you *might* need them.

Remember, the tools you drool over now will still be there a few years from now; no need to hoard them now. Plus, they'll get better as time goes on so waiting is a good thing sometimes. But buy good stuff. Listen to that sick feeling you get when you walk out of the store and into the parking lot with a low-end tool, and that excited feeling you get when you get a premium tool.

More Links:

[Glen-Drake Toolworks](#)

[Wild West Joinery Saw](#)

[Freud 6" Dado, SD-206](#)

[SawStop Review](#)

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