

23-ga. Pinner Change Everything



These pneumatic trim guns are compact and lightweight, and fire nails so small that they barely leave a trace



BY GARY STRIEGLER

I saw my first 23-ga. pin nailer at a tool expo almost a decade ago. Only a few companies were making pinners then, and they all were marketing to big furniture makers and other large production-style operations, partly because the average Joe couldn't afford to buy one. The features on those old models were limited, but the least-expensive pin nailers back then still cost more than the priciest ones on the market today.

Now, this specialized tool is becoming more mainstream. Prices have dropped, and features have improved. I wouldn't be surprised to see more of the big tool companies jumping on the 23-ga. pin nailer bandwagon, aiming their campaigns at a wider audience.

The typical pinner is light and maneuverable, so it easily fits into spaces that make an 18-ga. brad nailer feel too big. Narrow-gauge pins allow me to fasten the most-delicate moldings without fear of splitting the wood. My painter loves me because the nail holes are typically so tiny that they don't need to be filled; a single coat of paint makes the holes just about invisible.

My crew and I tested eight pin nailers for this tool review, and as always, there were some minor complaints as well as some crowd



Nikle NS2340

\$220

www.nikletools.com



One of two guns tested that fire both 23-ga. pins and 23-ga. slight-head brads

This pinner holds two racks of headless pins or slight-head brads in lengths up to 1 $\frac{1}{16}$ in. and is certainly the most compact tool with such a large capacity. Headless pins are not for every application, and I like to have the option of using this tool to fire slight-head brads rather than swapping it out for my 18-ga. brad nailer. The Nikle has an adjustable air exhaust and a nice long nosepiece to get into tight places. My only complaints with this gun are that it doesn't have an anti-dry-fire feature and that there's just a small hole to check how many pins remain. Still, for me, the Nikle has a nearly ideal combination of size, weight, capacity, and power.



Bostitch HP118K
\$120
www.bostitch.com

Good basic features for a great price

Unlike a few of the other models in this price range, the Bostitch comes with a sturdy carrying case and 1500 pins to get you started. It holds two full racks of pins up to 1 3/16 in. in length, which is adequate for most jobs, and doesn't incorporate a lot of extra features that seldom are used. The model we tested jammed occasionally, but I'm convinced that this was a fluke. I talked to several people who own the gun, and none reported the same problem. The pinner has a long nosepiece to get into tight places and an adjustable power level meant to eliminate fussing



The adjustable power level (depth of drive) was largely unnecessary.

with the compressor. We never needed to turn down the power. The only complaints were minor: The viewing slot in the track is a bit too small, and the trigger safety is a bit too large. The latter might seem like a good thing, but after a while, it wore on our trigger fingers and became uncomfortable.

Cadex CPB23.50
\$330
www.cadextools.com

Pricy, but loaded with features

If you're dead set on maximum fastener length and capacity, this pinner is the one for you. The Cadex shoots fasteners up to 2 in. in length, holds two full racks of either headless pins or slight-head brads, and is also the lightest model of the bunch. My crew liked the swivel air-hose fitting, but I guess I'm old-fashioned because I thought hooking up the tool took too long. This gun also has a thumb-operated dust blower, intended to remove the sawdust from a surface before fastening. Interesting idea, but when the blower started leaking air, I found it to be just another thing that can break.



Swivel air-hose fitting and rear exhaust

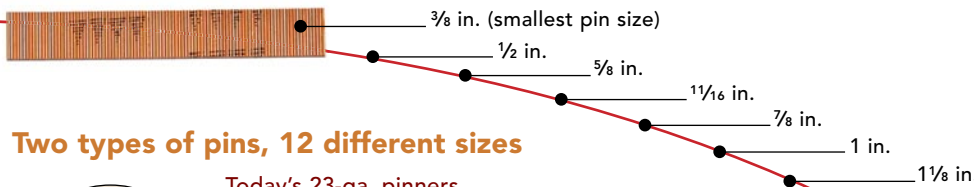
Grex P635
\$190
www.grexa.com

A convenient belt hook, but lower-than-average nail capacity

This pinner can drive pins from 3/8 in. to 1 3/8 in. in length, but Grex recently released a model that shoots 1 3/4-in. pins as well (model P645; \$310). I appreciated the onboard wrench for clearing infrequent jams—much more convenient than a wrench that rides in the carrying case. This is the first pinner I tried that has a pivoting belt hook. Like the pocket on my shirt, I don't need it all the time, but it sure is a handy thing to have. This pinner was a close second for best overall; it fell short because it can't shoot slight-head brads and because it holds fewer pins than the Nikle.



Onboard storage for jam-clearing wrench



Two types of pins, 12 different sizes



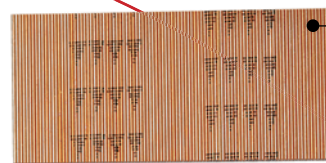
Slight-head



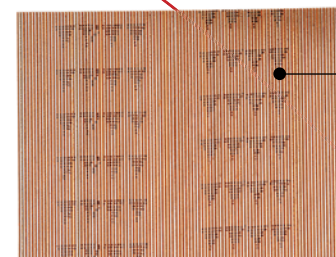
Headless

Today's 23-ga. pinners shoot headless pins from 3/8 in. to 2 in. long. Using the longest pins might seem like a good idea, but once you get much beyond 1 1/2 in., the pins are more likely to bend, especially if you're firing at an angle rather than head on.

There are no differences in collation for 23-ga. headless pins, so fasteners are interchangeable regardless of brand. Some pin nailers shoot 23-ga. slight-head brads, which offer a bit more holding power but are available in fewer lengths. The difference is pretty subtle, but in a place where I typically might use four or five headless pins, I would feel comfortable using just three slight-head brads. A good place to shop for both varieties of pins is www.floydtool.com.



I've found that I rarely need pins any longer than 1 3/16 in. to get a job done.



2 in. (largest pin size)

Max NF235A \$225 www.maxusacorp.com

Exhausting in a good way

This tool is similar to the Grex P635 except that the smallest pins it can fire are ½ in. rather than ¾ in. The Max was the only gun tested that had both a large slot in the track for viewing pins and an anti-dry-fire feature. The nailer is lightweight, and has a belt hook and a comfortable grip. I liked the rear-exhaust feature because I didn't get a puff of air in my face while I was working. Although I didn't have much use for the removable no-mar nosepiece (I've never had problems marring surfaces with any pinner I've tried), some people might find it useful.



Large slot for viewing the remaining pins

Porter-Cable PIN100 \$125 www.portercable.com

Limited fastener length, but handy in tight spaces

We found this model to be a no-frills, economical choice, similar to the Senco. The price trade-off leaves you with a limited fastener length of between ½ in. and 1 in. Like the Senco, this pinner holds only a single rack of pins; however, the track is a bit better because it doesn't need adjusting when swapping pin sizes. Although this tool can't drive long fasteners, it is compact, and we found ourselves using it a lot when we needed to get into tight spots.



Good for accessing tight spots

Senco FinishPro 10 \$125 www.senco.com

One of the first on the market, but now it's outdated

Senco made the first headless pinner I ever owned. It was incredible at the time, but the manufacturer has not made any real improvements since then. This gun falls short for several reasons. It fires pins only up to 1 in. in length, the track holds just a single rack at a time, and it must be adjusted when switching to different fastener lengths. The trigger also has no safety, a characteristic that I can't recommend. Pins are hard to see when buried in wood and even harder to see when buried in your finger. Bottom line: This gun costs more than guns with better features.

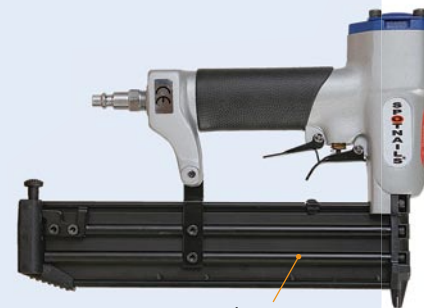


No trigger safety

Spotnails SP2340 \$110 www.spotnails.com

An affordable heavyweight

If a framing contractor picked a headless pinner, this would be the one. Although I certainly wouldn't call it heavy, at 2 lb. 9 oz., the Spotnails gun is the heaviest of the bunch. On the other hand, it seemed to be almost indestructible, and it made me wonder if this tool originally was designed for use in high-demand production facilities. I was confused about the long track on this tool because it held only two racks of pins, unless you start breaking up full clips into smaller sections to max out the capacity. A maximum pin length of 1 ¼ in. is more than adequate, and the price is reasonable for what you get.



Longer-than-average track

favorites. The truth is, though, that if you don't own a headless pinner right now, any one of these models will make a dramatic change in the way you work.

A few words on fasteners and applications

With growing competition between manufacturers, I've found that marketing campaigns are emphasizing nail length as one of the major selling points of pin nailers. My advice: Don't buy an expensive gun that can fire 2-in. pins if most of your work can be accomplished with a less-expensive gun that fires 1-in. to 1½-in. pins. If you want to spend the extra money, put it toward a gun that can shoot both headless pins and slight-head brads (sidebar facing page). Slight-head brads offer more holding power and are great for attaching thin appliques or moldings that headless pins are more likely to pull right through. Also, beware of guns without safety triggers. Pin nailers don't have a contact-trip safety nosepiece, so it's a good idea to choose a model with a two-stage trigger to prevent accidental firing.

I also believe strongly that headless pins are best for use in wood-to-wood applications, such as fastening mitered returns or attach-

ing a decorative panel molding. A headless pinner that can fire 2-in. nails might be tempting to use for installing baseboard or crown molding, but these nails aren't meant to fasten molding directly to a wall.

Because 23-ga. pins are so small, it's hard to tell when the tool is empty. Manufacturers aim to solve this problem either by incorporating an oversize slot in the track to show the number of remaining pins or by including an anti-dry-fire feature so that I don't think I'm firing pins when I'm really just shooting air. The Max is the only gun with both features. Without either of these features, I often don't realize that I'm out of nails until the piece of trim I think I'm fastening falls on the floor.

None of the guns we tested had a problem setting pins. Of course, that could be because I run my compressor at around 100 psi to 110 psi, but I doubt that I would have problems running at the recommended 60 psi to 100 psi, either. □

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