

# Pin Nailers

For delicate trimwork,  
these tools are indispensable

BY KIT CAMP



I bought my first 23-ga. pin nailer, a small Senco, more than 10 years ago. At that time, these tools were used mainly in industrial settings for making furniture and the like, and they were just starting to be seen on home-building job sites. That crude little Senco shot pins ranging in size from only  $\frac{3}{8}$  in. to 1 in., and the magazine had to be adjusted manually when I switched nail sizes. The tool had a blunt nose, which I filed down to help the nailer countersink 1-in. pins in harder woods, and it had no safety mechanism. If I pulled the trigger, it shot a pin. One day, in a hurry while switching tools, I fired a 1-in. pin deep into the muscle of my palm, just below the thumb. The result: surgery under full anesthesia to remove the buried pin.

Today, these little nailers are a common sight in the hands of

## HOW WE TESTED

This is not a comprehensive review of all 23-ga. nailers now on the market, but rather all the models released since our previous review of this category ("23-ga. Pinner's Change Everything," *FHB* #186). The

best-rated tool from that article was a model made by Nikle, a company no longer producing nailers, so we decided it was time to crown a new king.

We chose to limit the test to tools that shot the most

common, and most useful, range of pins up to at least 1 $\frac{3}{8}$  in. Although there are nailers available that hold up to 2-in. pins, and one is included here, that's not a feature that makes or breaks my decision. I've found that

### Cadex V1/23.35 \$200

Pin size:  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. to 1 $\frac{3}{8}$  in.



**FEATURE** The Cadex is essentially identical to the Grex model I have been using for the past few years. Not only does it have all the features of the other decked-out models—belt hook, rear exhaust, nice nosepiece, solid construction—but it also shoots 23-ga. slight-head brad nails, which offer more holding power.

**FLAW** Although I didn't have any problems, I've heard complaints of previous Cadex tools leaking at the blow-gun fitting. I'm a fan of the blow-gun feature for clearing sawdust from a workpiece, but it seems that the more O-rings there are, the greater the chance of one leaking.

**BOTTOM LINE** Definitely the Cadillac of the test, the Cadex compares favorably to some of the bigger-name models currently on the market, but for a more reasonable price.

### Duo-Fast SureShot 2336 \$260

Pin size:  $\frac{5}{8}$  in. to 1 $\frac{1}{8}$  in.



**FEATURE** Built to be compact and solid, this tool has the same old-fashioned feel as my vintage Senco nailers, but with a round-shaped nosepiece, which I loved.

**FLAW** There aren't many creature comforts to be found on this model. It has no carrying case, no belt hook, no rubber nose, no dry-fire lockout, and only a tiny window to see if any pins are left in the magazine. It didn't even come with an air fitting. It is the only tool to require manual adjustment for using different-size pins and to feature a bottom-loading magazine.

**BOTTOM LINE** If you want a nailer to hand down to your grandkids, this is the one. Aside from that, and despite my enjoyment of the tool as an object, it is hard to reconcile the steep price with the lack of modern features.

### Hitachi NP35A \$89

Pin size:  $\frac{5}{8}$  in. to 1 $\frac{3}{8}$  in.



**FEATURE** The Hitachi has a finely pointed nose and good visibility when placing pins. Although it's about the same size as the Ridgid model, the Hitachi had no problem sinking 1 $\frac{3}{8}$ -in. pins into the hardest test pieces, which the Ridgid could not do.

**FLAW** This tool doesn't have a belt hook or dry-fire lockout, features that other nailers at this price point include.

**BOTTOM LINE** This compact, no-frills nailer would be a good choice for someone starting out in the trades or a current builder still unsure of how to get the most out of a 23-ga. pinner. Its slight advantage in driving power is worth the slight increase in cost over the Ridgid.

savvy trim carpenters, cabinet installers, stairbuilders, cabinetmakers, and woodworkers. Thankfully, they also have come a long way from their roots.

Each tool in this review shoots a much wider range of fasteners (from  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. all the way to 2 in.), many have belt hooks and anti-dry-fire mechanisms, all but one adjust to different-size pins automatically, and even the least-expensive models have a double trigger, a safety system that works well and is easy to use.

### Finding their niche on site and in the shop

The 23-ga. pinner's are significantly different from the more common 18-, 16-, or 15-ga. finish nailers. Unlike their big brothers, 23-ga. pinner's are ideally suited for split-free fastening of even the tiniest pieces. The nails that these tools shoot are about the diameter of a sewing pin and are commonly headless. Compared to 18-ga. brad nails (the next smallest pneumatic option, which have small heads and shanks that are more like the diameter of a toothpick), 23-ga. pins are nearly

such long pins tend to curl up out of the workpiece.

To get a sense of the tools, I rotated the nailers I used on the job and put them through their paces on a large cabinet project in my shop. Finally, I fired rack after

rack of pins into test pieces—red oak, old-growth Douglas fir, Baltic-birch plywood, white pine, and cutoffs of some tropical-hardwood decking—to see how they handled different wood densities, grain patterns,

and fastening angles. To test sightlines, I made pencil marks on pieces of molding to see how close I could get to the mark, as well as nailed together a handful of thin bamboo skewers to see if any caused splitting.

Although I didn't experience a single misfire or jam on any of the tools in the test over the course of firing thousands of nails, I removed each nosepiece to see how easily potential jams could be cleared.

### Porter-Cable PIN138 \$137

Pin size: 5/8 in. to 1 3/8 in.



**FEATURE** The PIN138 offers a slight increase in pin length over its PIN100 predecessor, and it also fires 23-ga. slight-head brads for more holding power.

**FLAW** I noticed a lot of recoil with this tool, not something I experienced with any of the others. The magazine also bound when opening and closing, even without pins in it. The nose was the bluntest of all the tools tested, with the thickest rubber protector, making it the least accurate when placing pins.

**BOTTOM LINE** I wasn't too impressed with the Porter-Cable, and there isn't much reason to choose it over the lower-priced Hitachi and Ridgid models.

### Ridgid R138HPA \$75

Pin size: 5/8 in. to 1 3/8 in.



**FEATURE** The Ridgid is tiny and sports my favorite belt hook; it's large enough and spaced far enough from the body of the gun to hook securely on my nail bags. The nose of the tool is small, and the magazine is silky smooth. The nailer comes with a swivel air fitting installed. While the fitting was difficult to connect and disconnect, I enjoyed it while using the tool.

**FLAW** This nailer struggled a bit to sink 1 3/8-in. pins into the hardest of my test materials, a weakness that the owner's manual stated clearly.

**BOTTOM LINE** No doubt, this tool is certainly a bargain at this price, but if the majority of your work is in dense hardwoods, you might want to look elsewhere.

### Senco FinishPro 11 \$210

Pin size: 1 in. to 2 in.



**FEATURE** The FinishPro 11 is the only model tested that could fire 2-in. pins. I had to set my compressor to its maximum (120 psi) when shooting the 2-in. pins, but it sank every pin every time. Also, although the stated minimum nail length is 1 in., I shot a few racks of 5/8-in. pins without any trouble.

**FLAW** My guess is that this nailer shares a body with one of Senco's 18-ga. models because it is the largest of the group. It also had a distinctive hiss-pop sound when fired that made it much louder than any other tool.

**BOTTOM LINE** This tool is a vast improvement over the FinishPro 10, which could handle only up to 1-in. pins. If you want to fire 2-in. pins but don't want to spend upward of \$300, this tool is worth considering.

invisible when countersunk. On paint-grade work, 23-ga. pin holes often don't even need to be filled.

On the job, I use my pinner mainly for three things: attaching small trim elements to larger built-up assemblies; pinning outside miters on baseboard, crown, and other types of molding; and fastening small or fragile pieces like returns on shoe molding. I use 1 3/8-in. pins 90% of the time, and because they don't have tremendous withdrawal strength, I always use pin nails in conjunction with glue.

In the shop, I often use these nails to register larger parts that are being glued together. As an example, a few well-placed pins keep things from shifting around when gluing face frames onto cabinet cases as I position cauls and snug down clamps. Paired with some CA glue, they also work great for router templates attached to a workpiece. □

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