

How to Buy a Miter Saw

A miter saw is just the ticket for accurate cuts, whether you're building a house or assembling a picture frame.

What is it?

Miter saws are designed for making precise crosscuts at any angle from 0 to 45 degrees (some saws have a 60-degree capacity). Miter saws are versatile and portable. They can be hauled to a jobsite to rough-cut boards for a deck one day and brought back to your shop to cut delicate moldings for a furniture project the next.

The Family

There are three branches of the miter saw clan. The first is the conventional miter saw. Designed primarily to make dead square crosscuts and miters, these saws have been fixtures in woodshops and at jobsites for decades. The saw head can swing at least 45-degrees left or right of the centerline for miter cutting.

The second branch of the family is the compound miter saw. Cutting a compound angle means cutting a bevel and an angle at the same time. With a compound miter saw you simply set the bevel cut by leaning the cutting head to the desired angle, and set the miter angle on the table. A number of these saws allow you to bevel the head left and right. Some moldings, like crown for example, require compound angles. On a conventional miter saw you have to prop the molding upside down against an extra-tall auxiliary fence. It's a pain! A compound miter saw allows you to make the same cut with the crown molding laying flat on the bed of the saw—a huge advantage. A compound miter saw is more versatile than a conventional miter saw.

At the head of the family is the sliding-compound miter saw. The big advantage of these saws is the huge leap in cutting capacity made possible by the sliding head. Most of these saws will crosscut 11-1/2 in. or wider stock, which rivals the cutting capacity of some radial-arm saws.

But, sliding saws are safer to use than radial arms because you push the saw through the cut instead of pulling it. This eliminates climb cutting (cutting in the same direction as



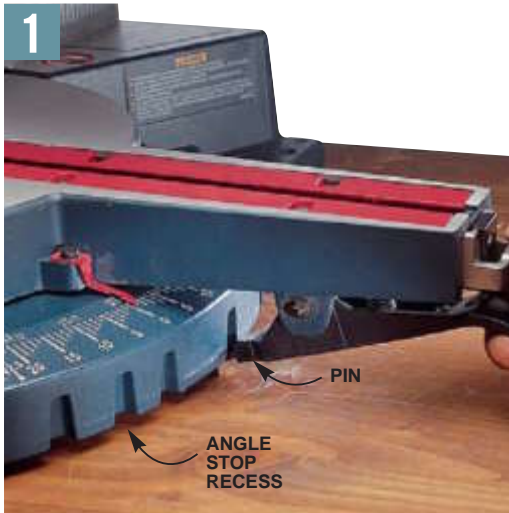
PHOTO COURTESY OF MANUFACTURER

Craftsman 21224; \$300.

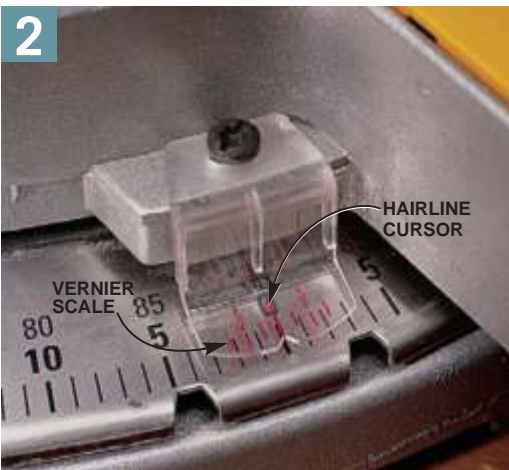
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the spinning blade). Like a radial-arm saw, the head can be tilted for bevel cuts and angled for miters. Combine the tilting head with the slide and you can bevel wide stuff like big base moldings. Unlike with a radial-arm saw, you can't rip or dado on a sliding-compound miter saw, but that's what your tablesaw is for.

Features

Positive Angle Stops

Distinct positive stops are best (Photo 1). A spring-loaded pin firmly drops into the angle-stop recess as you're swinging the saw to the angle setting. These stops leave no doubt about whether you're on the right spot.

Easy-to-Read Angle Indicator

An easy-to-read angle indicator, like the hairline cursor in Photo 2, makes setting the saw quick and accurate. The vernier scale allows you to set 1/4- and 1/2-degree increments.

Fence Height

A tall fence is best because it allows you to cut 3-1/4-in. crown molding on a conventional miter saw without having to add a wooden sub-fence (Photo 3). The compound miter saws also benefit from the increased support offered by a taller fence.

Handle Style

Handles are either horizontal or vertical. Our testing panel preferred the horizontal style and the Hitachi and DeWalt were voted the most

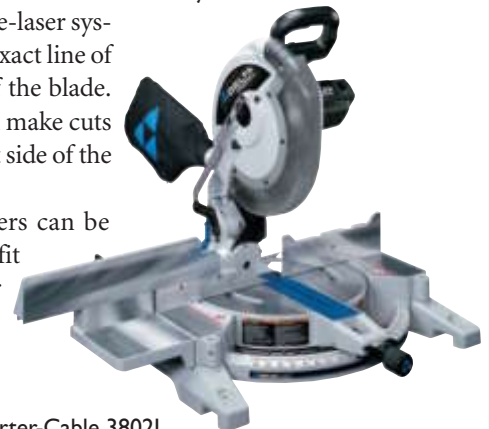
What's New?

Double Lasers Show the Kerf

Porter-Cable and Delta have added a new dimension to the laser-guided miter saw. Instead of a single laser line, these new saws feature a double-laser system that shows the exact line of cut on both sides of the blade. That means you can make cuts from the left or right side of the blade. That's huge!

The factory-set lasers can be adjusted to exactly fit the kerf of your

blade. The lasers operate independently of the motor so you can activate them for positioning without a spinning blade to worry about.



Delta 36-255L and Porter-Cable 3802L, 12-in. compound miter saws; both available fall 2002 for under \$400.

“left-hand friendly.” We recommend trying both to see what’s comfortable for you.

Blade Size and Tooth Count

A 10-in. blade is the way to go. Bigger blades yield modest capacity increases for a big price. For carpenters who need to cut 45-degree angles on a 2x8, the bigger blades may be worth the extra cost. Also pay attention to the tooth count of the blade that comes with the saw. A 40-tooth, 10-in. combination blade is great when you’re framing walls, but not so good for framing photos. Plan on spending another \$50 if you need to buy a high-tooth-count blade for your saw.

Quick-Acting Hold-Downs

Some saws come with hold-downs to aid in cutting large stock. Quick-acting hold-downs are best. They work like toggle clamps so it’s a snap to secure material to the saw. Hold-downs that work on a screw thread, like a C-clamp, are more poky.

Two-Way Bevel Setting

If you’re considering a compound miter saw, go for one that bevels both left and right. It’s something no tablesaw or radial-arm saw offers and, because you can work from either side of the saw, it makes it much easier to do compound cutting. An easy-to-read bevel indicator is also important. **AW**

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