

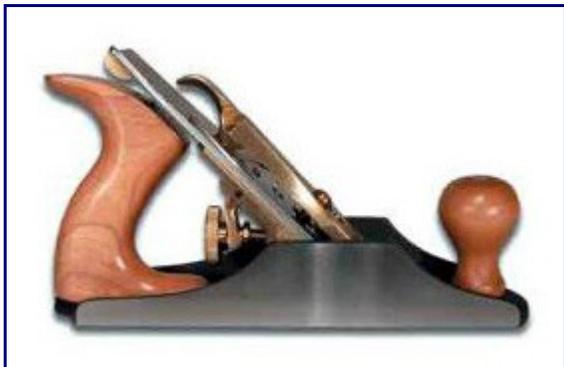
The Plane Facts: Bench Planes – why are there so many sizes?

Lee Laird December 9, 2010

A question I hear from customers at many of our shows regarding bench planes is: “Why are there so many different plane sizes and do/will I need ALL of them?”

In this article, I’ll talk about the range of bench planes, their sizes and purposes.

All of the bench planes (those that range from a #1 up through a #8) get split up into three basic categories: Smoothing planes, Jack planes and Jointer planes. Each of these categories perform specific functions, but can ultimately cover ground outside of the primary function.



No. 3 Smooth Plane

Starting with the smallest (and smallest numbers) are the Smoothing planes. This encompasses the #1 through the #4 1/2, and the primary differences are the size and weight. The Smoothing planes are used for, well, smoothing a surface. These are usually setup for use with an extremely sharp blade just barely protruding and a very small mouth opening. This setup is ideal for taking a very fine shaving from a piece of wood that is already flattened, which ultimately can leave one of the best surfaces a piece of wood can ever hope to have.



No. 5 Jack Plane

The next group is the Jack planes. These are the # 5 & # 6. Size and weight are the primary differences between these two planes. The Jack planes are usually setup to deal with initial stock removal (when the job isn’t so severe as to warrant using a scrub plane, which we’ll touch on in a later segment), which will deal with rough surfaced wood that may have a multitude of negative characteristics (twist, wind, bow, etc...) that are between you

and a flat, square piece of lumber. Since the wood the Jack plane is used on is not usually flat and square, this plane is often setup with the blade protruding deeper and the mouth set much wider (to handle the thicker shaving created by the further advanced blade). These settings allow the plane to rapidly remove material, but will normally require additional work.



No. 8 Jointer Plane

The last of the bench planes are the Jointer planes. These are the #7 & #8. Size and weight are the primary differences between these two planes. The Jointer plane setup is somewhere between the Smoothing plane and the Jack plane, but usually much closer to that of the Smoother. The Jointer plane's primary purpose is to flatten wood.

Always remember that even though a bench plane size is normally used for a specific function, many can be used in other ways. An example would be using a Jack plane with the blade opening closed up and the blade projection reduced, so it could function as a Smoother.

So now that you know how the planes sort out, the question is whether someone needs one of every size. Part of that depends on whether the end-user works with a wide range of sized projects. If the answer is yes, then it becomes a personal decision. I personally would recommend starting with one bench plane in each group and then expanding your set if/when it is necessary or desired.....