



THE JOINERY

Woodworking Shared Shop and Learning Community

Your Personal Tool Kit

A Shop Companion

What to buy, what to skip, and what to buy later

For: **New Members & Beginning Woodworkers**

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Welcome

One of the first questions almost every new member asks is: what tools do I actually need to buy myself? The honest answer is fewer than you think, and probably not the ones you would expect.

The shop is stocked with the big machines and most of what you will reach for on any given day. This guide is about the small handful of personal tools that are worth owning yourself – the ones where having your own, sharp and square and known to you, genuinely changes the work. It also lays out your choices, because there is rarely one right answer, only what works for you.

About This Guide

I'm Steven Ricks, co-owner of The Joinery, a woodworking shared shop and learning community in Middleton, Wisconsin. I have watched a lot of new woodworkers agonize over tool purchases, spend money on the wrong things, and put off starting because they thought they needed a fully outfitted kit first. You don't. This guide is built to get you working with the least money and the least research, and then to help you spend well later, once you actually know what you like.

Throughout this guide you will see callout boxes labeled "Thoughts from Steven." That is where I share the things that don't fit into a list: the reasoning behind a pick, the mistakes I have watched people make, and the conventional wisdom that is worth ignoring.

Thoughts from Steven

This guide gives you two tiers and asks you to mix them. Tier 1 gets you started. Tier 2 is what you buy once you have earned an opinion. Don't try to get it perfect on day one.

You will learn more from six months of using a cheap chisel than from six months of reading about expensive ones. The research feels productive. It isn't. Start, and the rest sorts itself out.

Why Own Your Own Tools

Shared shop tools get used hard by a lot of hands. A chisel someone tapped into a hidden nail, a square that got dropped, a tape with a bent hook – none of it is anyone's fault. It is just what happens in a busy shop. These are exactly the tools where your copy being sharp, square, and known to you changes the outcome of your work.

That is the whole logic of a personal kit. You are not duplicating the shop. You are buying the few items where trust and condition matter more than horsepower. A layout line that is off by the thickness of a pencil mark compounds through every joint that follows it. Your own square, your own knife, your own sharp chisel: those are worth carrying in and out.

What the Shop Already Provides

You do not need to buy any of the following. They are here, they are maintained, and they are part of your membership:

- Jointer, planer, table saw, miter saw, bandsaw, drum sander, and dust collection
- Routers, router table, Festool Domino, track saw, drills and drivers
- Clamps in every size, assembly tables, and bench space
- Shared measuring and layout tools, sharpening equipment, and finishing supplies

Keep Your Tools Yours

Mark every item with your name before it ever comes into the shop. Keep edge tools in blade sleeves or a simple tool roll so shared storage doesn't dull or chip them.

A \$120 chisel and a \$12 chisel go dull at exactly the same rate when they rattle around loose in a drawer.

How This Guide Works

Every tool below is shown in two tiers side by side. Most people end up with a Tier 1 kit and two or three Tier 2 upgrades in the things they discover they care about. Mix them freely – nothing here is a matched set.

The Two Tiers

Tier 1 – Get Started. The cheapest option that still clears a real quality bar: 4.3 stars or better, 500 or more ratings, with one flagged exception. Everything comes from a single Amazon cart. The point of this tier is to start, not to optimize.

Tier 2 – Tools for Life. Buy-once tools. Not better scores – better in ways you can feel: a square you never have to re-check, a chisel that holds an edge through a run of dovetails, a plane that arrives ready to cut. Worth it only for the operations you have discovered you actually do.

A Note on Prices

All prices were verified on August 1, 2026. Amazon pricing moves constantly and specialty suppliers go in and out of stock. Treat these numbers as accurate-on-the-day, not permanent. The picks will outlast the prices.

Personal Protective Equipment

Buy these first. No exceptions, no substitutions, no waiting until after your first class. You cannot borrow your way through safety gear, and the shop is loud and dusty on a good day.

Tool	Tier 1 – Get Started	Tier 2 – Tools for Life
Ear Plugs	Mack's Ultra Soft, 50 pair, NRR 33 \$9.89 4.5★ • 50,348 ratings	None needed <i>The Tier 1 pick is the permanent answer.</i>
Safety Glasses	NoCry clear, anti-fog, ANSI Z87.1 \$13.99 4.5★ • 50,656 ratings	None needed <i>Replace when scratched. Fit beats prestige.</i>
Dust Mask	3M 8511 N95 w/ Cool Flow valve, 10-pack \$19.99 4.7★ • 2,270 ratings	None needed <i>Consumable by design. Keep a fresh one handy.</i>

Thoughts from Steven

There is no premium tier for safety gear, and I want to be blunt about why. A \$200 respirator sitting in your car protects you exactly as well as no respirator at all. The gear that works is the gear you will actually put on, every time, without thinking about it.

So buy the cheap stuff, buy enough of it that there is always a clean pair within reach, and spend your upgrade money on steel instead. If the glasses fog or the plugs itch, replace them immediately – discomfort is how people talk themselves out of wearing protection.

Measuring & Marking

This is where a personal kit earns its keep. Layout errors don't stay small – they multiply through every cut and every joint downstream. These are the tools where owning a known-good copy actually changes what comes off the bench.

Tool	Tier 1 – Get Started	Tier 2 – Tools for Life
Tape Measure, 12'	Stanley PowerLock 33-212 \$14.99 4.6★ • 7,400 ratings	No upgrade needed <i>The PowerLock has been the answer since 1963.</i>
6" Metal Ruler	PEC Tools 6" machinist pocket rule, USA-made \$9.90 4.6★ • 53 ratings	Incra Precision Marking Rule (Lee Valley) \$9.50 <i>Cheaper and better. Graduated slots let you drop a pencil tip into an exact increment instead of eyeballing it.</i>
4" Small Square	iGaging 4" precision double square \$26.99 4.4★ • 854 ratings	Starrett 13A double square (Woodcraft) \$124.99 <i>The real upgrade is that you stop wondering whether the square is the problem.</i>
Setup Blocks	Whiteside 9800 brass setup blocks, 5-pc stackable \$15.75 4.6★ • 953 ratings	Woodpeckers 3D Setup Blocks, 7-pc + rack \$169.99 <i>Genuinely optional. The brass set does 90% of this for \$15.</i>
Marking Pencil	Pica Dry Longlife 3030 \$13.75 4.7★ • 26,200 ratings	No upgrade needed <i>Same pencil, same price. It's already right.</i>

Thoughts from Steven

If you buy one Tier 2 tool in your first year, make it the square. Here is why: when a joint doesn't close, you have to figure out whether you cut it wrong or measured it wrong. A square you trust removes an entire category of doubt from that conversation.

That said – consistency matters more than precision. If your square is off by a hair but you use the same square for every layout on a project, the parts will still agree with each other and the piece will go together. Problems come from mixing references, not from small absolute errors. Pick one square, one rule, one pencil, and stay with them through the whole build.

Cutting & Shaping

Three tools cover almost everything a beginner needs by hand: something to score a line, something to pare to it, and something to cut across it. Everything else is the shop's job.

Tool	Tier 1 – Get Started	Tier 2 – Tools for Life
Hobby Knife & Blades	Nicpro precision knife set with #11 blades \$9.99 4.7★ • 2,100 ratings	Narex dual double-bevel marking knife \$34.67 <i>Replaces the hobby knife for layout. A knife line beats a pencil line for joinery, full stop.</i>
Chisels	GREBSTK 4-piece bevel edge set \$13.99 4.6★ • 8,000 ratings	Narex 6-piece bench chisel set \$118.42 <i>Czech-made, excellent steel, the standard first serious set. Alternative: Stanley Sweetheart 750, roughly \$137–175.</i>
Japanese Pull Saw	SUIZAN Dozuki dovetail saw, 6" \$38.80 4.7★ • 4,100 ratings	No upgrade needed <i>The Tier 1 pick is already the right saw.</i>

Thoughts from Steven

A sharp cheap chisel outperforms a dull expensive one every single time, and it is not close. The \$14 set will not hold an edge as long as the Narex, but it will take a keen edge, and that is the part that does the work. Buy the cheap set, learn to sharpen on tools you are not afraid to ruin, and upgrade when you notice yourself sharpening more often than you would like.

The knife is the sleeper pick in this section. Most beginners mark with a pencil because that's what they've always done, then wonder why their joints have gaps. A pencil line has width. A knife line is a physical wall your chisel can drop into. Switching to a knife for joinery layout is the single cheapest improvement most people can make to their work.

The Two Maybes

These two don't belong in a starter kit and they don't belong in the 'someday' pile either. Buy them when you hit the problem they solve – probably a few projects in, and sooner than you think for the scraper.

Tool	Tier 1 – Get Started	Tier 2 – Tools for Life
Card Scraper	Bahco 6" cabinet scraper \$7.95 4.7★ • 2,200 ratings	Crucible Card Scraper (Lost Art Press) \$25.00 <i>Correct thickness and a properly prepared edge. The cheap ones fight you while you're still learning to burnish.</i>
Block Plane	Jorgensen No. 60-1/2 low angle, adjustable mouth \$42.98 4.7★ • 551 ratings	Lie-Nielsen No. 60-1/2 \$200.00 <i>Often backordered. Middle option: WoodRiver low angle, \$114.99, arrives close to ready.</i>

Thoughts from Steven

I will make the case for the card scraper harder than anyone else in this guide. Eight dollars, no moving parts, and it will save you hours of sanding and give you a better surface than sandpaper ever does. Tearout around figured grain, glue squeeze-out, planer chatter – the scraper handles all of it in about a minute. Sanding is what we do when we've run out of better ideas.

The catch is that a scraper doesn't work until you learn to put a burr on it, and that takes an afternoon of frustration. Come find me or ask on Discord and someone will show you in ten minutes what a video will not teach you in an hour.

The block plane is the more honest 'maybe.' It's a joy to own and it makes chamfers, end-grain cleanup, and fitting easy. But you can build good furniture without one for a long time. Buy it when you catch yourself wishing for it, not before.

What It All Costs

Four realistic paths, depending on how you want to approach this. None of them is wrong.

Path	Approximate Cost
Tier 1 Core Kit <i>PPE, measuring & marking, cutting & shaping. Everything you need to take a class and start working.</i>	\$188
Tier 1 Complete <i>The core kit plus the card scraper and block plane.</i>	\$239

Path	Approximate Cost
The Realistic Path <i>Tier 1 kit plus the three upgrades most people actually end up wanting: Starrett square, Narex chisels, marking knife.</i>	~\$460
Full Tier 2 Build <i>Every buy-once tool in this guide. Very few people should start here.</i>	~\$794

Thoughts from Steven

That middle row is the one I'd point at. Buy Tier 1, use it for six months, then upgrade only the two or three things you found yourself fighting. Most people discover they care intensely about chisels and squares and not at all about setup blocks. Nobody can tell you in advance which one you'll be – including me, and including you.

There's no prize for spending more up front. The kit you actually use is worth more than the kit you researched into perfection and then felt too precious to take to the shop.

How to Actually Use This

- Buy all three PPE items today. That part isn't a decision.
- Buy the Tier 1 measuring and cutting tools before your first class. Total, with PPE, is under \$190.
- Use them for six months. Build three or four things. Pay attention to what annoys you.
- Then upgrade only what you fought with. Two or three items, not the whole list.
- Skip anything you can't picture yourself reaching for. Setup blocks and block planes are the usual candidates.

A Note on Sourcing

The PEC rule has only 53 ratings, well below the bar used for everything else in Tier 1. It's included anyway because precision rules are a low-volume category across the board – nothing in it clears 500 reviews. PEC has manufactured in the United States since 1960 and the listing is Amazon's Choice. I'd rather flag the exception than bury it.

Everything else in Tier 1 clears 4.3 stars with 500 or more ratings. Tier 2 picks are chosen on reputation and construction rather than review counts, since specialty suppliers don't generate the same volume.

Taking Care of What You Buy

- Put your name on everything before it enters the shop. Tape and a Sharpie is fine; a stamp is better.
- Keep edge tools in sleeves or a tool roll. Loose tools in a bag chip each other.
- Wipe steel down before you leave. Wisconsin humidity finds bare metal fast.
- Never use a chisel as a screwdriver, pry bar, or paint scraper. You know this. Do it anyway and you'll regret it.
- Check your square against a known reference occasionally. Squares go out of square when they hit the floor.

Sharpening: The Honest Answer

A chisel is only as good as its last sharpening, which means sharpening is not an advanced skill you graduate into – it's the first skill. The shop has sharpening equipment and you're welcome to it, so you don't need to buy stones to get started.

Thoughts from Steven

Most beginners sharpen far too rarely, because sharpening feels like an interruption of the work rather than part of it. It isn't. Ten seconds on a strop between cuts is normal, not fussy.

If you take one thing from this section: when a cut suddenly feels like work, the tool is telling you something. Stop and sharpen. The number of mistakes I've watched people make while forcing a dull chisel is genuinely hard to count.

Where to Ask Questions

Questions about any of this belong on Discord. Someone in the community has bought the wrong version of most of these tools and can tell you exactly why they regret it – that's information you can't get from a product listing, and it's the single best reason to ask there rather than emailing me.

You'll also get faster answers, and the next person searching the channel gets the benefit of your question. If you'd rather ask in person, find me in the shop. I'm happy to look at a cart before you click buy.

Thoughts from Steven

One last thing. The tools are not the craft. I have watched people assemble beautiful kits and never build anything, and I have watched people build lovely furniture with a borrowed chisel and a tape measure from the hardware store.

Buy the starter kit, take a class, and make something. The tools will sort themselves out around the work you actually end up doing. That's the right order.

The Joinery

Woodworking Shared Shop and Learning Community

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