Blades for Building Outdoors

by Ken Evans, cabinetmaker

Summer's the best season to make your outdoor building plans a reality, but there's a problem. The handheld circular saws and chop saws that are a mainstay of deck, dock and porch construction never come from the factory with blades that let these tools live up to their potential. Even the world's best saws are only as good as the blades they spin, and it's not unusual for a huge gap to exist between the quality of a terrific new saw and the ho-hum blade they put on at the factory. This is why investing in key blade upgrades makes so much sense. The world's best saw blades have never been cheaper, and they're a critical part of achieving the most successful building results.

Today's thin kerf blades for hand-held circular saws are a good place to start. There are two reasons why. The most obvious is the way they leverage the greatest slicing power from a given saw motor. A thin blade chews up the least amount of wood with each cut, and this is especially important with hand-held cordless saws that are 18-volts or less. Another advantage of a top quality circular saw blade is less obvious but more important: safety. Low friction coatings and anti-kickback tooth designs make premium thin kerf blades more predictable and safer to use.

Working with a sliding compound miter saw offers one of the most effective ways to improve the quality of your outdoor projects. That's because they make it easy to cut wood precisely at many different angles. The $60 to $90 you'll pay for a premium 10" or 12" diameter chopsaw blade might seem steep, until you realize how many years it'll last. A good carbide blade can be resharpened often enough that it becomes almost a lifetime investment for most home workshoppers.

Few handy homeowners realize how useful a miter saw can be for installing aluminum soffit, fascia and eavestrough. All you need is a saw blade made especially for cutting thin, nonferrous metal. You'll get best results if you lubricate the teeth of the spinning blade with a couple of shots of WD-40 after each few cuts. Also, take the time to clean aluminum shavings from your saw to prevent scratching the factory applied paint. It also pays to apply self-sticking felt pads to the support areas on either side of your saw to keep the paint pristine.

Ever thought of building projects made of steel? Specific miter saws are designed to cut steel and other ferrous metals using carbide saw blades instead of the more traditional abrasive wheels. Steel-cutting blades have teeth just like those for sawing wood, and they work better than abrasives in three ways. Cuts are unbelievably smooth and burr-free, they generate no heat build-up in the metal, and there are no sparks.

Enthusiasm alone is never enough to build well. Optimal results also depend on a small investment in the right blade for the work you'll tackle this summer.

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