

• Router Table Basics •

by Ken Evans, cabinetmaker

A router can do lots of useful things right out of the box, but without a router table to go with it, you're missing at least half of what the tool can do. Practical value is why router tables have skyrocketed in popularity, but great equipment alone is never enough. Your workshop success depends on know-how, too. Add a little bit of customized tweaking to your equipment, and your shop will really shine. And while it may take years to fully master a tool like the router table, getting there is what makes wood-working fun. The skills you need come in small pieces, beginning with the kind of basics that you'll find here.

Bolt a router upside down in a table and the combination becomes a working router table. It lets you slide wood over the spinning bit instead of pushing the tool over a stationary piece of wood with your hands. Safety and effectiveness are what router tables are all about, but there's a little more involved here than meets the eye. If you had to choose just one operation to do with your router table, milling your own moulding and decorative edges would have to be top of the list. Door trim for your home, decorative profiles on projects, plus mouldings and doors for cabinets are a few of the things you can make with a good router table. More than half of all modern router bits are made for this kind of work, and many include guide bearings that also allow router bits to follow curved surfaces. But as useful as these bearings are, you'll get better results if you slide straight pieces of wood along a router table fence, instead of relying on the bearing exclusively. There are three reasons why.

Router bit bearings often leave groove-shaped depressions in wood, while using a fence eliminates this problem by supporting boards more fully as they're milled. Another reason to use a fence is safety. By enclosing most of the bit, a fence makes it easier to keep your fingers out of harm's way. Then there's dust. Good router table fences include a shroud that allows effective vacuum collection of dust and shavings.

A growing number of routers also include a feature called 'top-of-table bit height adjustment', and these are the easiest models to use in a router table. Convenience and accuracy are the reasons why. Reaching underneath the table to raise or lower a router isn't always convenient. Top-of-table designs, on the other hand, allow you to insert a crank handle or knob into the table top from above, making both large and small adjustments fast and easy.

Do your router bits sometimes leave a burned profile behind? It's a common problem, especially on hardwoods, and surprisingly difficult to sand off, though there's a simple solution.

Rout all but 1/32" of wood in the usual way, then raise the router bit that last little bit for the final pass. Taking a shallow final cut like this greatly reduces friction and heat build up. Keep your wood moving past the bit at a good clip and it'll never burn.

Ideally your router table should operate as a team player, and table height is a big part of this. Modify your router table so it's the same height as your tablesaw and both machines function as outfeed tables for each other. Add four lockable casters to the router table, and you'll know first-hand why they're here to stay.



Installing the router



Fence = Safety and Accuracy



Top of table height adjustment



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