

Tried and True

Measure Twice, Cut Once – December 2021

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Last month's essay began by noting that the "Measure Twice, Cut Once" series ponders sayings or principles that seemingly have originated among woodworkers and might provide wisdom in other aspects of life. The saying of the month for November, although it was about hammers, turned out to come from cognitive psychology. This month, I want to share an expression that I only recently learned may come from our backyard. That idiom is "Tried and true."

In common usage, "tried and true" refers to a procedure or method that has stood the test of time and can be reliably expected to achieve a result. For instance, my mom taught me that *The Joy of Cooking* has plenty of tried-and-true recipes. Or "buy low, sell high" is a tried-and-true strategy for investing. We all have our own tried-and-true remedies, practices, and wood finishes.

I wonder how many other readers believed, as I did, that this must be a very old phrase, perhaps first used by Shakespeare or borrowed from ancient sources. According to the Grammarist.com website, the origin is unknown, with "various sources say[ing] that the expression 'tried and true' came into use in the 1900s, 1700s, or 1400s." One commonly cited theory is that it comes from woodworking.

Really? Let me recommend watching "The Trying Plane in Use", a video from *Mortise and Tenon Magazine's* "Setting Up a Hand Tool Workshop" series: <https://youtu.be/z0bm7pW7yGY>. As an aside, thanks for Dan Sichel for introducing me to *Mortise and Tenon*. It is a wonderful publication, and they have a number of good YouTube videos.

In several installments in the series, editor-in-chief Joshua Klein explains and demonstrates stock preparation using wooden planes. To thickness and flatten a board, you start with a use a fore (or jack) plane with a cambered blade to remove material, often working perpendicular to and then diagonally across the grain. The fore plane, typically 18 to 22 inches long, is set to take coarse shavings, with a goal of rapid removal of material. The equivalent metal plane might be a Stanley No. 5 or 6. The curvature of the blade leaves a rippled surface like small waves on a pond.

Next up is the jointer, or try, or trying plane is longer still, 20-24 inches, like a Stanley No. 7. The try plane is long with a dead flat sole and a square blade. The long sole skims across the crests of the uneven surface left by the fore plane. Hence, with this plane we are trying, or testing, the surface of the board to determine if it's flat. Once long continuous shavings replace the short, interrupted shavings, the board must be flat, or true. In other words, the board is now "tried and true." The board must be true because the tool is true.

Notice that, in this context, "tried-and-true" refers to the result, rather than the process. It's the board, or the tabletop, that is tried and true, not the method. This is an important distinction. How many allegedly "tried-and-true" approaches sometimes flop? Moreover, as others have noted, if we always play it safe and use tried-and-true methods, we don't innovate or grow. To misappropriate another well-worn phrase, we might follow a tried-and-true recipe, but ultimately the proof is in the pudding.