

You Can't Have Too Many Clamps

Measure Twice, Cut Once – April 2022

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It's a well-worn saying in the woodworking world: "You can't have too many clamps." One cannot be a woodworker for long without gathering an ever-growing number of clamps. Try this thought experiment: someone approaches you to help clear out their grandpa's shop, because he is moving out of state. You already have one or two of most of the tools. My guess is that you'd take some, if not all, of the clamps and leave most of the other tools.

Is any other shop item as versatile or downright modest than a clamp? Clamps serve so many purposes in the shop. They align pieces during precision operations, squeeze pieces firmly during glue-ups, stabilize jigs and fixtures, lock down length stops, and act as a third or fourth hand with awkward or unwieldy parts, among other jobs. Glue-ups of long, complex, or curved parts may exhaust one's clamp supply. You may rarely use *all* your clamps on a single job or project, but over time every one of your clamps has probably been called into service. Large and small, stout or delicate, each of your clamps excels at one or more tasks, and there are probably uses you have not yet imagined.

Hand screws can substitute for a vise. Some bar clamps can spread parts apart to aid in disassembly. Spring clamps can be bookmarks in a pinch (ouch, sorry). Clamps hold temporary fences in place. Pipe clamps can be made indefinitely long. Shifting a pair of clamps can bring an assembly into square.

Unlike other essential shop tools, clamps require minimal maintenance or special attention. They don't get dull, blow fuses, need tune-ups, or leak oil. Sure, they demand valuable real estate as their families grow and sometimes gather glue and gunk, but mostly they stand by silently, ready to serve.

Can clamps offer any life lessons? As we experience life's ups and downs, we often need support just to keep it together. Changing jobs or moving houses? Raising or marrying off kids? Starting a new relationship or ending another? Facing a medical crisis or recovering from surgery or illness? Learning a new hobby? Want someone to share an experience, enjoy a concert, or celebrate a victory?

At one time or another, we need people, resources, and groups in our lives who can help steady, reinforce, stabilize, or align us. Sometimes, we can hold it together ourselves, akin to using a one-handed clamp. In other circumstances, we might need a whole crew of supporters to drive to weeks of medical treatments, pick up groceries, or prepare meals. How often have you reached out to a neighbor or fellow woodworker to wrangle that unwieldy project out of the shop and move it to its intended home?

In our networks of family, friends, and acquaintances we can often find the kind of bonds we need to savor our joys and navigate our difficulties. Better still, we can be one of the clamps that someone else needs to pull the pieces together while the metaphorical glue dries.