

Do You Get What You Pay For? (Part 2)

Bevel Cut May 2021

Andrew Davis

During the autumn of 2020 I decided to try my hand at an Arts & Crafts shelf stand (dubbed a magazine rack for some obscure reason) that I read about in a woodworking journal. Looked simple, although the article rated the project as “expert.” Have you ever demonstrated unfounded confidence for a task you need to pursue or weighed in on a topic about which you really know little? This is known as the Dunning-Kruger Effect named for David Dunning and Justin Kruger, two research psychologists at Cornell University (my alma mater) who identified it in a landmark 1999 study. But I digress.

The Arts and Crafts project, besides having the major joinery at 87 degrees rather than 90, required two pairs of wedged mortises. I wanted to learn this joinery technique, never having done it before; this was my major motivation for the Arts & Crafts undertaking. I also liked the look of the piece. Anyway, four mortises needed to be cut in 1 ¼ thick oak, and four mortises in ¾ oak. Exact dimensions left as an exercise for the student!

To cut to the chase, my mortises really looked horrible, which is why I am not including a photo with this story. My chisels were sharp but apparently not sharp enough. And some of the lumber I had to use was not top-notch to say the least. (note to self: these projects take a lot of time and effort – it’s false economy not to start with decent quality materials). For this particular project, the qualification of the oak boards was that I already had the wood and need not venture out during the pandemic - questionable reasoning that I came to regret.

Back to the mortises. Along the way, I realized for the future I need to take better care setting up the scribe lines. I also thought that maybe I might need better chisels. I have a Narex “set” that I bought years ago and considered there may be better options today. So I began my online search for a “mortise chisel.” As many EMGW readers likely know already, chisels come in many flavors, including butt, bench, socket, paring, Japanese, skew, and mortise. Presumably, these varieties all have different geometries and metallurgical foundations. My online search for a ¼ inch mortise chisel revealed the following:

- In the fall of 2020, availability was almost non-existent. Promised deliveries ranged from January to March 2021. Blame supply chain disruptions. Blame the pandemic.
- Some products are listed as ¼ inch; some as 6mm. I suspect there isn’t a real difference in the physical product although 6mm is 0.23622 inch (not 0.25) and ¼ inch is 6.35mm. More to the point, I’m not sure my skill level and accuracy can detect the difference. My wedges probably couldn’t tell the difference.
- Most brands offer mortise chisels up to ½ or ¾ wide; one brand has wider size choices.
- Many brands just describe their alloy and hardness generically (carbon steel); some provide details.
- You can get a small discount by ordering a “chisel set” rather than individual tools. Like any other woodworking tool challenge, you can hunt around for free shipping or maybe no sales taxes.

The table below summarizes my findings.

1/4 inch MORTISE chisels			
Vendor	Chisel Brand	Price	Note
Amazon	Narex	\$19.99	listed as 6mm; 25 degree bevel, Rc59; hornbeam handle; image not exactly the same as the lee valley version
Amazon	Crown Tools	\$50.64	(Sheffield England); beech handle
Highland Woodworking	Narex	\$18.99	
Klingspores	Narex	\$18.95	
Infinity	Narex	\$16.90	
Lee Valley	Veritas	\$96.00	Wood-hewn handle; primary bevel at 25, secondary bevel at 35 degrees; rounded heel provides fulcrum; A2 or PM-V11 tool steel versions
Lee Valley	Narex	\$19.50	Rc59; stained beech handles 11 1/2 long; set of 6 for \$115 or \$93;
Lee Valley	Hirsch	\$70.50	yellow handles; not available online (2 cherry = metric)
Lee Valley	Sorby	\$45.00	available in larger sizes as well
Lie Nielsen	Lie Nielsen	\$65.00	A2 steel; Rc 60-62; beveled at 30 degrees ; hornbeam handles;
Rockler	Two Cherries	\$79.99	metric
Woodcraft	Sorby	\$45.99	CAB plastic handle;
Woodworkers Supply	Crown Tools	\$43.99	

You can see the price ranges from \$16.90 to \$96.00 for the ¼ inch mortise chisels found online. I presume there is a difference in performance to justify the difference in price. (The customer reviews interestingly are not 100% positive for any of the items listed regardless of price.) But I do wonder. I suspect that if you are skilled at sharpening, you would opt for the low-cost versions and then just sharpen more often.

What did I do? I bought a Narex ¼ inch and a Sorby ¾ inch from Lee Valley. When they arrived, I was astonished at how much heavier they are compared to my Narex chisels. I wonder what the rockwell hardness is of depleted uranium? You could do bench curls with these things. Now I need to do some experimenting to decide if you get what you pay for when you go upmarket.

In the meantime, I sort of wish I had a mortising machine or at least a friend with one.

At the shallow end of the technology pool is another example of a price vs. performance conundrum. Suppose you long for a new bench brush (assuming you like to clean up from time to time). A quick on-line search would find the following bench-brush options:

Fuller Brush	\$29.99
Lie-Nielson	\$20.00
Lee Valley	\$15.50
Woodcraft	\$11.49
Rockler	\$9.99
Rubbermaid	\$7.38
Harbor Freight	\$1.99

You have to wonder if one of these can sweep wood shavings better than the others. Is there a difference in the end result? Will your friends be impressed by your bench brush? And should you care? And what's the deal with coping saws?