

BUYING A CHAINSAW

Kurt Hertzog answers a reader's question about types and brands of chainsaw



PHOTOGRAPHY BY KURT HERTZOG EXCEPT WHERE INDICATED

I'm thinking about buying a chainsaw to cut wood, especially blanks for carving. Do you have any suggestions on features and brands? I can offer some suggestions but bear in mind that everyone's needs vary, so your selection must be tailored to your specific needs. My first suggestion is that if you are new to using a chainsaw, be sure to get instructions on proper use, PPE and safety measures. Saws are loud, throw chips and don't care what they cut. Your eyes, ears and body parts need to be properly protected. A moment's inattention – or sometimes poor luck – can cause serious injuries (or worse). The first order of business is my standard disclaimer. While I'll tell you the brands that I have bought, please don't take that as a product endorsement, just my personal experience. With regards to brands and sizes, I can tell you what I have purchased, use and why. Without being too simplistic, in my opinion, I lump chainsaws into two categories. The first category is the big box store brands that

are mass-marketed to the 'casual' user. These are most often marketed based on price. Nothing wrong with that, but bear in mind these brands are mostly used for light duty and infrequent use. I bought my first chainsaw when we lived in the city. Our house had several large pine trees and a couple of cherry trees. The occasional tree branch trimming with a handsaw was not only cumbersome but the pine tree trimmings are sticky. I bought a small Homelite chainsaw with a 16in bar at a big box retailer for tree trimming and yard work. This was before I began woodworking. That or one of the many similar brands might serve your needs. My Homelite is still in use after 40-plus years. Other than plug and chain replacements, it runs great and routinely starts on the first or second pull. Our current property has no trees, so all my chainsaw use is for my woodworking needs. The Homelite is used for quick, light-duty cuts on smaller logs as needed. I keep it because it is light, easily loaded in the truck, starts

and runs reliably and is good for light work. The second category is the more professional-level saw. These brands aren't usually available in the mass-marketing outlets but rather through the speciality shops. My needs for a saw outgrew my Homelite once I started woodworking. Not only the need for more horsepower but potentially optional bar sizes and heavier-duty use. My current workhorse chainsaw is a Stihl Farm Boss. I've owned it for 20 or so years and it serves me well. I currently only own one bar and chain size for it, but this and other pro-level brands offer a wide selection of lengths and other options. The pro-level saw dealers offer sales, service and repair. Service and repair aren't often available at the big box stores selling the home user saws. The professional level saw needs this since they often see heavy-duty use daily. The sawyer using their equipment to make a living can ill afford to have delays in maintenance or repairs. I have friends who own/operate tree services

or are professional arborists. The brands they use or speak highly of are Stihl, Husqvarna, and Echo. Other brands may fill your needs. My third saw is a Poulan corded electric. It is small and quiet. I can run it inside the workshop or garage and other than the mess, there is no excessive noise or any exhaust. There are times when a quick cut or two is all that is needed. I don't like to run a gas-powered saw in the basement or garage, even with the doors open. Hence the small electric. Mine isn't for continuous use or large, heavy cuts, but works great for small work.

QUESTIONS TO ANSWER AS YOU PREPARE TO SHOP
What are you cutting? What is it typically, and how big? Where are you cutting? In your garden, a timber yard, a logging road or a remote (carry-in) site? How often will you use your saw? Cutting all day or just some trim cuts intermittently? Do you need gas or electric? If gas, how much horsepower will you need? What bar length will serve your needs? If electric, will corded or will battery-powered work? As you answer those questions, sort out your budget, optional equipment and potential need for repair/maintenance from someone else. If you are in the gas market, remember you'll be mixing gas and oil.

A dedicated gas can will be needed for your mixed gas as well as the ability to fuel the saw. Either gas or electric will need bar oil. For your protection be certain to include earmuffs, face screen, helmet, steel-toed shoes, sawing gloves and chaps. Two features that I suggest you look for are a bar oil level window and tool-less tensioner. Not critical but certainly very convenient. The proper saw blade file and the knowledge on how to use it will be necessary. Chainsaws are like any other cutting tool. Touching up any cutting edge is far easier than sharpening. Dull tools of any sort are dangerous. Keep your saw blade sharp.

THINK ABOUT VALUE
Some general advice that I always include in buying tools or equipment is don't be afraid to buy used if you have someone knowledgeable you trust who can help you vet well-cared-for used equipment. Select and buy based on value, not price. The lowest price may not be the best selection overall. If the \$99 electric chainsaw (corded or battery) from the big box retailer



1 Don't overlook your PPE relevant to chainsaw use as you plan your purchase. Helmet with screen and muffs along with chaps and gloves



2 My humble stable of chainsaws. You may need only one for your needs. Not a product endorsement but I have had excellent service from these

answers your needs, great. If the \$399 gas, lower-tier pro saw from a specialist shop does it, go for that. In the market, as I look now, you can get quality name, corded or battery-powered saws for under \$100 or spend up to \$600 or more for the gas-powered pro saws.

Whether you buy new or used, proper care will not only give you long life and serviceability but also help retain resale value. A quick look on eBay shows my well-used but cared-for Homelite saw selling for well more than twice I paid for it. And that's after I've had 40 years of use!



3 If your needs take you to the 'professional' level of saws, you'll have selections from small to large with something certain to fill your needs



The pro lines have equipment from the basics to the very specialised. Here, an extendable, long-reach saw



When you shop for your saw, consider your current and likely future needs. The difference in price for a more powerful saw may not be much