



Saw Sharpening by Hand

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At a recent general club meeting there was some discussion about sharpening handsaws. The discussion was about which saw doctor could be recommended. I don't remember which companies were recommended; because I was busy wondering why nobody mentioned sharpening his or her own saws by hand. A good idea for an article!

I think most people can sharpen their own handsaws. Most handsaws can be sharpened by hand, except some modern handsaws that have induction-hardened teeth, which are extremely hard. These may be almost impossible to sharpen without a diamond tool because a saw file simply isn't hard enough. However, most saws are sharpenable and with only basic skills can be kept in excellent working order. The equipment required is minimal and the skill demands should be within the abilities of most woodworkers. If you can cut dovetail joints by hand with no visible gaps, then I think you should be able to sharpen a handsaw. From my experience, the time spent touching up a slightly blunt saw is probably less than the time spent taking the saw for sharpening, never mind the return trip to fetch the saw!

Like cutting dovetail joints, there are different approaches to saw sharpening. I have several articles on the subject and none of them agree in all respects. I will not attempt to provide the details here, as I think the subject has been very adequately covered in these references. There is an excellent article on the Internet at www.vintagesaws.com/library/primer/sharp.html, which gives a comprehensive introduction. I'm not sure that it is necessary to approach things with quite the same rigor, but you can be the judge of that. There are two other articles that I can recommend: In *Fine WoodWorking* May 1980, reprinted in *Fine WoodWorking on Hand Tools* and in *Fine WoodWorking* Jan 1988, reprinted in *The Best of Fine WoodWorking: Bench Tools*. These do differ somewhat in the details and advice given. You should be able find some other articles on the Internet as well.

These articles suggest different angles for sharpening, based on the experience of the different writers. If your saw works well, then I recommend you reproduce the exact same cut and angles when you sharpen it. Otherwise, I suggest you read the articles and judge for yourself what is likely to work best.

The steel used for saws is hard for durability, so don't expect a saw file to last long – one article suggests that three sharpenings are all you can expect. One Disston with large crosscut teeth that I reworked practically wore out a file on its own – but then Disstons are known for their hardness and consequent durability. Even fine back-saws can be sharpened – I needed a magnifying glass to inspect the results on my fine 12 tpi Disston but the result was worth it.

Quite a good way to judge the sharpness of a saw is to compare the little-used parts near the heel and toe with the most used section in the middle. When you can feel a difference between how the middle section and the ends of the blade cut, then it is time get out your saw files. The first time will take a while, as you will need to make a saw vise of some sort, albeit homemade. You will also need to understand how to make the cuts as explained in the articles, but once you get going; a light sharpening shouldn't take more than ten to twenty minutes. The picture on the masthead shows a saw being sharpened with a commercial cast iron saw vise – this is first prize, but you can improvise with two pieces of wood clamped in a vice to hold the saw blade firmly. (Question: What type of saw is being sharpened in the picture - crosscut or rip?)

Second-hand hand-saws can be had quite cheaply, but you can be sure they will be blunt, so you will have to invest some time on sharpening. This can be worthwhile if you can identify a brand name saw with a blade made of good steel such as a Disston. It may be harder on a saw file, but it won't need attention as often. If you find a good blade with a dodgy handle, make a new handle using the old one as a pattern. If any of the brass fixing screws are missing, these can be had from Axminster in the UK. If you are lucky, you might find an old Disston such as referred to in the ads below. The larger brass fastener has the distinctive Disston logo and name on it. If the blade is not too rusted, you may be able to make out the etching as shown in the picture of the saw below.

The
SAW
with "DISSTON" on it
is Guaranteed
SUPERIOR in QUALITY and FINISH
to any saw
without "DISSTON" on it.

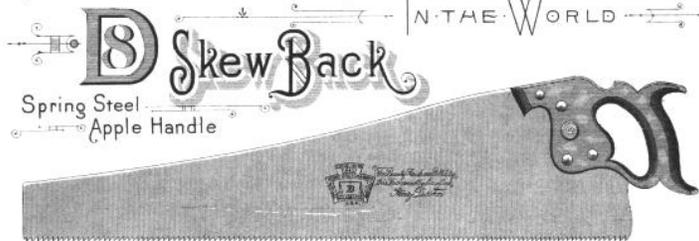


1840

"If you want a Saw, it is best to get one with a name on it which has a reputation. A man who has made a reputation for his goods knows its value, as well as its cost, and will maintain it."

Henry Disston

THE MOST POPULAR SAW IN THE WORLD



Skew Back
Spring Steel
Apple Handle

Perfection comes of long experience
We have Manufactured Saws SIXTY-SIX YEARS