Bandsaw Upgrades

12 ways to supercharge (or spruce up) your favorite sawyer.

By Joe Hurst-Wajszczuk

It's no surprise that the bandsaw ranks as one of the hardest-working machines in most woodshops. What's really interesting is that the design of the venerable 14" (wheel diameter) machine has remained largely unchanged for decades. The popularity and longevity of this ubiquitous workhorse has given manufacturers plenty of time to devise a bevy of upgrades and accessories. Choosing the right ones can soup up an old saw or transform a new machine into a super sawyer.

If you haven't bothered to look under the saw's hood in a few years, or if you just bought a new saw, read on. Here is a dozen of our favorite add-ons. Many don't cost much time or money, but can pay you back with a smoother running machine and cleaner, more accurate cuts. In a few cases, these accessories may help you tackle some new tasks.
1 Magnetic Light
Cost: $34.99, (#09L06)
Installation time: less than a minute
A bandsaw’s upper blade guard often casts a shadow on your work, even in shops with ample ambient lighting. With a magnetic base, swiveling head, and articulating arm, a magnetic shop light is a fast fix that is sure to shine light exactly where it’s needed for line-splitting, or line-saving, accuracy.
This fixture is larger than goosenecked LED lights, but in this case, bigger might be better. A 60-watt incandescent bulb provides about 2x more lumens than most compact LEDs. (For a few bucks more, you can outfit the fixture with a screw-in LED, like MiracleLED’s Got Wood (#158693, $17.99). This 4-watt bulb produces the same light as a 60-watt incandescent, but generates almost no heat and lasts 25x longer.)

2 Wheel Brush
Cost: $7.99, (#146153)
Installation time: 5-10 minutes
Even if your shop has a dust-collection system, odds are good that there is a pile of sawdust hiding in the bandsaw’s bottom wheel well. A little dust is acceptable, but when crud cakes up your bottom wheel tire, it can cause blade tracking issues and may even wear out the tire prematurely.
A wheel brush is a cheap and easy fix for both problems. As the wheel turns, the bristles gently clean the tire, keeping chips and dust from collecting. Depending on your saw, you may need to shim the brush slightly so that the bristles can reach the wheel.

3 Kerf Inserts
Cost: $10.49, (#148112)
Installation time: about a minute
Metal inserts have two main faults. First, most are made with wide slots designed to accommodate the widest possible blade. This means that when using narrow blades, small workpieces can fall through the gap, leaving you to fish them out of your saw or dust collector. Second, metal-on-metal contact dulls or degrades good blades.
Kerf inserts solve both problems. The zero-clearance inserts keep parts from falling through and can reduce exit tear-out, especially when cutting thin material. In the event of accidental contact, nylon won’t dull teeth. If you dedicate inserts to your favorite blades, the three-insert pack will last a long time.

4 Urethane Tires
Cost: $24.99, (#144969)
Installation time: less than 30 minutes
After years of faithful service, rubber tires can lose elasticity, dry out, and crack. When this happens, the blade may not track correctly. If the tires start to slip on the wheel, the blade may stop cutting altogether.
If your saw has seen a few miles, then it’s probably due for a fresh set of tires. The good news is that installing new urethane tires is quick and easy. First, remove the old wheel, and then cut off the old rubber tire and scrape off any dried glue. Next, simply stretch the new tire over the wheel. (Use a wood dowel, as shown at right, to stretch the band, and then center the tire on the wheel.) Unlike rubber tires, urethane versions don’t require adhesive. And since urethane outlasts rubber, this may be the last time that you’ll need to make this fix.

5 Tension Spring
Cost: $24.99, (#144967)
Installation time: 5 minutes
Without proper blade tension—especially when sawing thick stock with wide blades—a blade may bow or wander uncontrollably from your line. If turning the tensioning arm doesn’t seem to affect blade tension, then the spring’s probably shot.
Installing a new spring is an easy and affordable way to get your saw back on track. Simply unscrew the tensioning arm (see the photo on page 47), pop out the old spring, and drop in the new. (Note: This heavy-duty replacement will enable you to apply more tension than before, but be careful not to overdo it. Too much tension can damage the bearings.)

6 Cool Blocks
Cost: $15.99, 4 blks (#49H02)
Installation time: 5 minutes
Factory-supplied metal guide blocks can last forever, but they don’t offer much guidance without risk. Occasional contact with steel blocks dull the saw teeth. To make matters worse, if the blocks rub the weld, they can cause the blade to snap.
Cool Blocks offer a safer, softer solution. These replacement guides are made from a self-lubricating, non-metallic material. As the name suggests, they provide firm support for the blade without generating friction, or heat, and without any risk of dulling the blade. Unlike steel or ceramic blocks, these blocks can be set against a narrow blade to keep it from twisting. Although these softer blocks are sacrificial, they can be refreshed by touching them against a belt sander. (Note: Remember to install a pair in both the upper and lower guides.)
7 Link Belt

Cost: $34.99, (#145530)
Installation time: 10 minutes

Many older bandsaws (and newer saws that sit too long) suffer from excess vibration. In many cases, the root of the tell-tale thump is the V-belt connecting the motor and drive pulleys. When a standard belt sits in one position for too long, it can develop a permanent curve, or “set.” When that happens, it’s time to strap on a better belt.

Link belts not only maintain their flexibility, but the links also dampen motor vibration for smoother cuts and quieter operation. A real plus for owners of old saws is that the links can be added or removed to match belts of any length. (Note: Check your saw before you buy. If the existing V-belt is longer than 4’, buy an extra foot of links for less than $10 (#25N67).)

8 Fence and Resaw Attachment

Cost: Fence $104.99, (#153477); 4½” Resaw Guide, $18.99, (#146051)
Installation time: seconds

If your saw doesn’t already have a fence, you don’t know what you’re missing. A reliable fence is essential for resawing and other straight-line cuts (such as tenons). This magnetic fence offers convenience for a good price. Two powerful, switchable magnets provide plenty of holding pressure, but can be easily released for repositioning the fence or for its quick removal.

Unlike other rail-guided fences, this magnetic fence can be put into service with other ferrous-metal machine tables. In addition to a fence, you should consider a resaw guide (#146051, $18.99). Unlike a straight fence, this accessory’s single point of contact allows you freedom to rotate the workpiece to stay on a line while keeping the blade a set distance away from the cut.

9 Quick Release 1000

Cost: $179.99, (#142671)
Installation time: 30 minutes

If you haven’t touched the tension control knob on the top of your bandsaw since the last time you changed blades, then you need this upgrade. A quick-release lever relieves blade tension in a snap—so that your blade won’t. In addition to saving blades (and making them easier to change), releasing the blade when you’re not using your saw reduces the wear and tear that constant tension can have on the tension spring, tires, and wheel bearings.

As shown in the photo at right, the lever’s base sits beneath the saw’s threaded tension arm. Most of the installation process is simple, but drilling the cast-iron frame in order to attach the lever’s base requires a little patience. (While you’re making the upgrade, consider replacing the tension spring.) Once installed, fine-tuning blade tension is still done via the tension knob. Once the tension’s set, swing the lever up or down to engage or release blade tension. The lever also offers a “partial tension” setting midway between the two extremes for checking blade tracking and adjusting the blade.

10 6” Riser Block

Cost: $109.99, (#961137)
Installation time: 30 minutes

A riser block is not much more than a cast-iron block that sits on the frame between the upper and lower wheel, but by increasing a standard 14” bandsaw’s resaw capacity from 6” to 12”, this simple spacer can take your cutting repertoire to a new level.

In addition to the block itself, the riser block kit includes a longer guide post, bolts, and guards. The kit works with most 14” cast-iron saws, but to be safe, you should check your saw’s instruction manual, and ask about compatibility before you buy.

Installing the riser isn’t difficult, but it helps to have an extra pair of hands around when removing the upper wheel assembly and installing the block.

Despite certain obvious advantages, bigger isn’t necessarily better. Riser blocks aren’t a must-have upgrade for everyone. First, realize that a riser block isn’t something you’ll want to take on and off. This means that in addition to the price of the upgrade, you’ll need to invest in a new collection of 105”-long sawblades. Also, if your saw seems to bog down when making wider cuts, you might find yourself shopping for a larger motor. If you’re content to limit your curve-cutting and resaw work to 6” or less (most small shops have 6” jointers), it may make sense to stick with what you have.

Blade Treatments

Most blades can benefit from a couple of modifications too. Rounding the back edges of the blade with a truing stone (#49H09, $13.69) can reduce scoring or burning, especially when cutting tight curves.

By keeping chips or pitch from sticking or clogging teeth, Saw Blade Lubricant (#144624, $8.99) can prolong blade life and produce smoother, quicker cuts. Simply press the stick against the blade before making the cut.
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