

Medieval-Inspired Wood Butchery

Using Fewer Tools Than You'd Think

And Far Less Space

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The Tool Collection

A saw, a set square, a measuring tape, and something to use as a saw bench (which could be a picnic table) is, I think, the minimum setup to make things.

Oh, and a pencil. A notebook is useful too.

For that first saw, a double-edged Ryobi is a good choice.

In *very approximate* order of importance after that:

A marking knife. Saws run better with grooves to run in – this is called knifewall. I just use a Swiss Army knife I've had since I was a kid.

A drill with a standard set of drill bits. Get a decent cordless drill, they're useful around the house too.

Clamps. A pair of basic 3" or 4" C-clamps will help hold things as you work on them. A pair of long bar clamps can help with assembling boxes.

A palm sander. You can hand-sand, but a basic power sander is *so much faster*. And sanding is, frankly, boring.

Chisels. A four piece set of 1", 3/4", 1/2", and 1/4" will be more than enough.

A chisel mallet. Make your own, it's a good fun project.

An old-school brace-and-bit hand drill, with square-shank drillbits. Useful especially for larger holes than a regular set of drillbits will make.

A #4 hand plane.

A dovetail saw for work with tighter tolerances.

A cabinet scraper.

Facebook Marketplace or other second hand venues can be incredibly useful for chisels, the brace-and-bit, the plane, and other stuff you might decide you want like spokeshaves. The saws are cheap enough to just buy new, and I'd probably buy new (but look for sales!) for the cordless drill and palm sander. If you go cordless, make your life easier by buying tools from the same company that can share batteries.

Pretty much all of this will store in a milk crate.

Six Board Chests

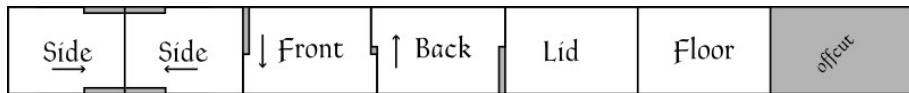


Illustration 1: Approximate cut layout on a single 10 foot by 1 foot board. An 8 foot board will give you a slightly smaller chest with zero waste wood.

Six board chests have some useful features that make them ideal for those new to wood butchery: all the cuts are straight lines, faces made from single boards (as opposed to being built up from multiple boards), offset joints on the corners for strength, and extended sides down below the floor of the chest to act as legs. This style of chest construction is incredibly ancient (found in, among other places, Egyptian tomb furniture, the Viking Age Mästermyr chest, the 16th C Mary Rose wreck) and was a common rustic construction method right up to the modern day.

A nicely sized chest can be created from a single 8 foot by 1 foot plank or better, a project board the same size.

All cuts are straight, the layout is easy, and it holds together well with glue reinforced by dowel pegs, modern finishing nails, or square head antique style nails at the corners.

Trestle Tables

Another very ancient design. “Trestle table” encompasses a few designs; the ones we’re discussing have saw-horse style separate trestles that the table top rests on.

You can build up your trestles from 1x2 stock, which is easy and strong but a very modern construction method, or use 1x6 plank construction.

Figure out your desired height – tables tend to be about 28” tall, counters about 34” – and your desired width, and design your trestle parts to meet that.

Each trestle has three parts, a top rail that the tabletop sits on, a wider front leg, and a simpler narrower rear leg.

Picking Lumber

Take your time picking out lumber. Be prepared to reject far more lengths than you put aside to buy.

Sight down the length of each piece, going for the straightest, most knot-free, least-warped pieces with the cleanest edges and ends you can find.

For larger planks (12” or 16” or more wide) use project or shelf board. It’s constructed of lots of smaller pieces of lumber jointed together and planed, and is more stable, less warped, and easier to work with than most actual 1x12 lumber.

“Lumberyard common” pine or spruce is fine for most of what we’re talking about today. Fir is more expensive but stronger; go oak or maple if you’re feeling fancy, but expect to pay a lot more for your project’s lumber.

If you find a place that sells good lumber for reasonable prices, cherish them, and tell me about them, please. Reimer Hardwoods (in Victoria) has been recommended to me.

Finishing Your Project

A lot of prestige furniture in period was painted. A lot of utility furniture seems to have been oiled or left largely unfinished.

I tend to use modern acrylic craft or house paint because it's easy to work with, we already have a lot of it around, and it's available in a huge range of colours. I seal with modern water-based varnishes.

For stain and varnish, I really like the Saman line of water-based stains & varnishes; they have the advantage of being a Canadian company. <https://saman.ca/en/>

If you're going to bring your projects to camping events, do seal at least the feet. Remember that end grain absorbs moisture incredibly well. Double-seal any end grain that is going to touch the ground.

Milk paint sealed with linseed oil is much closer to traditional/period paint finishes and is apparently incredibly hard-wearing because of how the milk paint absorbs into the wood.

Linseed, Danish or tung oil are great to seal anything you don't want to paint, especially shop-made tools like mallets.

Other Projects

Depending on your starting place, a saw bench might be a good first project.

A woodworking mallet is easy to make and a useful thing to have around.

A shooting board is another good starter project that'll be useful to have around.

If you have space for it, an actual workbench. A low Roman bench could double as patio furniture; a high bench is nice but will need dedicated space.

Bigger box to disguise your cooler with.

Smaller boxes (in period, often called coffers or caskets) to store jewelry or smaller things.

Flag poles & marshalling staffs (mostly this is just "buy hardwood closet rod, paint").

Resources & Links

I have a huge trestle table blog post with photos and links:

<http://blog.wirelizard.ca/2025/10/05/medieval-trestle-tables/>

St Thomas Guild is a Dutch reenactor group that specializes in medieval woodworking. Their plank-built trestles are really easy and have a nice build diagram. Lots of other stuff on their blog too, search for "trestle".

<https://thomasguild.blogspot.com/2011/08/threstle-table-quick-summer-project.html>

Rex Kruger has a YouTube woodworking channel I highly recommend. Lots of approachable, entry-level projects using very limited sets of tools. Go back about five years to his "Woodwork for Humans" series for some great stuff, but his more recent videos are good too.

<https://www.youtube.com/@RexKrueger/>

Lee Valley (Victoria or leevalley.ca) sells a variety of square-head antique style nails, lots of different hinges, and other fittings, most of them surprisingly affordable. Also very, very high end hand tools if you're feeling flush.

KMS Tools (Victoria, Nanaimo, many other locations) have a good selection of hand tools in amongst the huge selection of power tools. Better prices than many other stores.

Local lumberyards like Castle, Lumberworld, or Windsor (in Victoria) usually have better quality lumber often for better prices than the big outfits like Home Depot or Rona, but shop where you have to.

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