

The Tools Every Homeowner Should Own

Having a basic set of tools on hand will allow you to quickly respond to household emergencies, perform routine maintenance and handle simple installations, repairs and adjustments.

Below is a list of the 18 tools every homeowner should own. While new tools are invented all the time, you'll never be sorry you invested in these standards.

Choose reputable manufacturers (Stanley, Craftsman and Master Mechanic are industry stalwarts) and expect to spend about \$250 for everything included in this article.



Slip-joint Pliers

Use slip-joint pliers to grab hold of a nut, a bolt, a nail and much more. What makes this type of pliers so versatile are the jaws – which feature both flat and curved areas for gripping different types of objects – and the built-in slip-joint, which allows you to quickly adjust the jaw size to suit the task at hand.

Tips for Use

- When gripping nuts and other flat-sided objects, use the flat section of the jaws; when grabbing odd-shaped items, use the curved section.
- Avoid gripping the threads of a bolt or screw with pliers. However, if you must do so, put a piece of rubber (a large rubber washer or an old bicycle inner tube, for example) between the object and the jaws of the pliers to keep from damaging the threads.



Needle-nose Pliers

Often, it's the little nails, screws and bolts that are the toughest to bend, grab or remove. Needle-nose pliers (also called long-nosed pliers) are just what you need in such a situation. They're also designed to bend and manipulate wire, but most homeowners will use them far more often for grabbing small items and working in restricted spaces.

Buying Advice

- Better-quality versions come with a built-in wire-cutting feature, which is quite handy.
- Don't confuse these pliers with a smaller version used for electronics. True needle-nose pliers have jaws approximately 2 1/2 inches long, with grooves cut into the inside face for real grabbing power.



Plunger

A clogged sink or toilet is one of the most disconcerting problems most homeowners will face. With a plunger on hand, however, you can usually remedy these troubling plumbing issues relatively quickly.

Buying Advice

- You may want two plungers: a small plunger for clearing a clogged sink (or bath/shower drain); and a large “funnel-cup” plunger for dealing with a clogged toilet.

Tips for Use

- Cover the drain with the plunger, pump it up and down 10 times, then remove it from the drain.
- If air bubbles pour out when you pump the plunger, you probably aren’t making a good seal. Try repositioning the plunger, applying a little more pressure or both.
- If, when you pump the plunger, water squirts out of an “overflow opening” next to the drain, you’ll need to block-off that opening with a hand or towel in order to maintain a sufficient amount of pressure on the clog.
- If backed-up toilet water begins nearing the rim of the toilet, turn off the water valve connected to the toilet tank. (Turn that valve back on when things have improved to the point that you want to flush the toilet again.)
- Don’t flush the toilet until you’re sure the clog is gone. If it appears the clog may have moved on, pour water into the toilet bowl. (If the added water drains, it’s safe to flush the toilet; if the added water increases the water level, the clog still exists.)



Combination Wrench Set

On a combination wrench, one end is open and the other end is a closed loop. Both ends are the same size; they simply grip the nut or bolt in different ways for the sake of convenience.

Nuts and bolts are manufactured in two different varieties: standard or metric. Because both varieties are widely used, you’ll need wrenches to match – one set of standard combination wrenches and one set of metric combination wrenches.

Buying Advice

- Not all wrench sets contain the same number of wrenches. Look for an 11-piece metric wrench set (wrenches sized 7mm to 19mm), and an eight-piece standard wrench set (wrenches sized ¼ inch to ¾ inch).

Tips for Use

- For the most control and the greatest leverage, always pull a wrench towards you (instead of pushing on it).
- There’s no way to accurately determine the size or variety of a nut or bolt by simply looking at it. Just try the different wrench types until you find the one that fits best.
- Avoid over-tightening a nut, as this may damage the bolt.



Adjustable Wrench

Adjustable wrenches are awkward to use and can easily damage a nut or bolt if not handled carefully. However, for those situations when you need two wrenches of the same size (a relatively common occurrence), an adjustable wrench is ideal.

Buying Advice

- Look for a two- or three-piece set of adjustable wrenches (small to large).

Tips for Use

- To avoid damaging the bolt or nut, it's imperative that you screw the jaws all the way closed each time you make a turn with an adjustable wrench.



Caulking Gun

Most glues and sealants are sold in self-dispensing containers. But for larger repairs, as well as most painting and improvement projects, you'll want to buy those things by the tube – which require a caulking gun to dispense.

Buying Advice

- Some of the new caulking guns come with two features designed to solve long-standing problems: a built-in cutter that allows you to quickly remove the tip from a tube of caulk, and a wire for keeping the tube tip from becoming clogged. These features are worth the extra money.
- The plunger rod that pushes the product out of the tube will be either serrated or smooth. Models with a smooth plunger rod usually offer the best control.

Tips for Use

- Most caulking guns are made to apply continuous pressure to the product in the tube, even after you stop squeezing the trigger. To avoid creating a big mess, make a habit of releasing the pressure on the tube each time you finish squeezing the trigger.
- When you're done with your project but still have product left in the tube, put tape over the open tip to keep the contents from drying out (duct tape is ideal for this – see listing lower down on this list).

Flashlight



Most repairs begin with a visual inspection of the situation. Having a flashlight close at hand will make it much easier to shed some light on the problem – and implement a solution.

Buying Advice

- Big flashlights are awkward and gobble up battery power too quickly. A traditional two-battery flashlight (like the one pictured here) is all you need.



Tape Measure

Rulers are designed for measuring paper. Yardsticks are for determining the dimensions of fabric. When it comes to measuring for house projects, use a tape measure.

Buying Advice

- Tape measures come in a variety of lengths; buy one that measures 25 feet and you won't be disappointed.
- The simpler the better. Because they get so much use, fancy locks, built-in levels and other features can be cumbersome – and easily broken.
- The bent tip at the end of the measuring tape is supposed to be slightly loose.

Tips for Use

- Measure everything at least twice. It's easy to make a mistake, and this old adage has proven to be the most effective way to avoid mis-measuring.



Crosscut Handsaw

Electric saws are great, but a good handsaw is still a must-have for small repair, maintenance and improvement projects. Designed for cutting wood, a crosscut saw is extremely versatile and can be used for cutting everything from sheets of plywood to thin pieces of molding. The “crosscut” designation means that this saw has more cutting teeth and, therefore, makes cleaner cuts than its sister, the “ripsaw.”

Buying Advice

- Choose the longest saw blade you can manage.
- For the best compromise between smooth cuts and speed, choose a saw with 10 to 12 teeth per inch (the more teeth-per-inch, the cleaner the cut, and the slower the cutting process).
- Look for a saw that's “tapered.” That means the teeth are thicker at the tips to keep the saw from binding while cutting.
- A quality crosscut saw will make a clear ringing sound when you tap the metal blade. The blade should also easily bend into a half circle – springing back into line when released.
- Blades made of stainless steel will wear longer and require less care.

Tips for Use

- Hold the saw with one hand, and use your other hand to steady the object being cut.
- Using long, steady strokes takes less effort than quicker, shorter strokes.
- Most of the cutting takes place on the push-stroke. For the best results, push down on the push-stroke and ease-up on the return pull.
- Saw more lightly near the end of your cut to keep from splintering the wood.



Hacksaw

For cutting pipe, bolts, brackets and other metal objects, you'll need a hacksaw. Hacksaws may look thin and flimsy, but they'll quickly cut through the hardest of metals.

Buying Advice

- Focus your search on the hacksaw frame; the blades are replaceable and can be purchased on an as-needed basis.
- Choose a rigid, fixed-frame style (as opposed to the less-expensive adjustable-frame models, which can be more hassle than they're worth).
- Your hacksaw frame will probably come with a blade already installed. Buy two replacements for the future. Replacement blades are available with 14, 18, 24 or 32 teeth per inch. For all-around use, choose the 24-teeth option. (The blades are also available in different lengths, so make sure the size of the blade matches the size of your hacksaw frame.)

Tips for Use

- Choose the blade to match your project; the thinner the metal, the more teeth your hacksaw blade should have.
- Hold the saw with two hands when possible (one hand on the handle, the other steadying the end of the hacksaw frame).
- Make slow, steady strokes. Sawing metal too quickly can create so much friction that the blade may distort.



Torpedo Level

You'll need a level to determine when something is correctly situated (a picture, a shelf, an appliance, a fence post, a gate, etc.). Of the four primary types of levels, the torpedo-style level is unique because it not only shows when an object is perfectly horizontal or vertical, it also has a gauge that shows when an object is at a 45-degree angle.

Buying Advice

- While you may be tempted by the larger carpenter-style level, you'll find the smaller size of the torpedo level makes it more versatile.

Tips for Use

- Don't assume an object is "level enough" if the bubble in the view finder is close to being centered between the measuring lines. Even if the bubble is off by a fraction of an inch, this can translate into quite a slope when the entire length of the object is taken into consideration.
- Even a little dirt can throw off a level measurement. Therefore, make sure the surface of both the level and the object are both brushed clean before taking a reading.



Claw Hammer

A good hammer is invaluable to the average homeowner. Use it to drive and remove nails, to pry wood loose from the house, and in combination with other tools (such as a nail set, chisels, etc.).

Buying Advice

- The head of these hammers can come in a variety of styles and weights. A good all-purpose choice is a bell-faced 16-ounce claw hammer.
- There are a number of optional handle choices, as well. Most homeowners will appreciate the added shock-absorption that a fiberglass handle provides, but wood is good too.

Tips for Use

- Many beginners make the mistake of holding a hammer high on the handle (close to the head). For better aim – and added leverage – grasp the handle near the end.
- Put a block of wood under the head of the hammer when pulling a nail to obtain better leverage – and to prevent the appearance of ugly marks and gouges.



Screwdriver Set

When considering what kind of screwdriver to use on a particular screw, you need to consider the size of the screw and its type. For the most part, there are four types of screws used today: the slotted screw, the Phillips screw, the star-drive screw and the square-drive screw. Each of these requires a different type of screwdriver.

Buying Advice

- Two four-piece sets of screwdrivers – slotted and Phillips – should suffice (a set includes screwdrivers of multiple sizes).
- To install or remove the odd square-drive or star-drive screw, buy a single multi-use screwdriver, which comes with replaceable bits. (Just make sure the unit includes a variety of star- and square-drive replacement bits.)
- Electric screwdrivers may make the process of installing or removing screws easier, but they're not an appropriate substitute. These units make it too easy to damage the screw. What's more, traditional screwdrivers can reach places that electric drivers can't.

Tips for Use

- Never use a screwdriver for prying or chiseling. They aren't designed for such use and the tips can be quickly damaged.
- While turning a screw, use your body weight to bear down on the screwdriver. This will also help to keep it from popping loose and damaging the screw head.



Wire Cutters

With a pair of “end-cutting” wire cutters (like the model pictured here), you can cut electrical wires and binding straps, as well as small nails.

Buying Advice

- Your other option is the “side-cutting” style, which is also handy but not strong enough to cut small nails.



Safety Glasses / Goggles

For any task involving a hammer or a power tool, you should always wear safety glasses or goggles. These should also be worn anytime you’re working overhead, as well as when you’re mixing and using chemicals.

Buying Advice

- Goggles are good for situations where a lot of dust and dirt is in the air – and for those who wear prescription eyeglasses. Safety glasses aren’t as good in dusty environments, but do protect against flying objects.
- Safety glasses have made big strides in the fashion department. Invest in a pair that you think looks good, and you’re likely to wear them more often.
- Buying safety glasses with colored lenses may sound like a good idea, but you’re probably better off with the clear version since most improvement/repair tasks take place indoors.
- Eye injuries are a common occurrence on home repair, improvement and maintenance projects, so don’t skimp on the quality of your eye protection.



Respirator / Safety Mask

While paints and other coatings have certainly become less toxic with time, most still contain caustic chemicals, which is why you should wear a mask to avoid inhaling them. A mask should also be worn when working in dusty and dirty environments.

Buying Advice

- Disposable face masks are fine for painting with latex coatings, sanding and working in dusty/dirty environments. These usually come in packs of 10 and should be thrown away once they become discolored.
- If you’ll be working with oil-based paints, lacquers, chemicals or insulation, buy a respirator mask (either a disposable version rated for the situation or a plastic respirator with disposable filters).
- The quality of the air you breathe has a direct effect on your brain, your lungs and every other internal organ, so don’t make the mistake of skimping on quality when it comes to a protective face mask.



Duct Tape

This fabric-backed tape is extremely strong and versatile. Originally called duck tape (because of its water-resistance), it was widely used in World War II to make temporary repairs to jeeps, guns and aircraft. Today, it's known as duct tape, because it was for a long time used to seal heating and air-conditioning ducts (something for which it's no longer recommended). Most recently, it's become one of the key items specified for home emergency kits

Tips for Use

- This tape is extremely sticky and often leaves a gummy residue when removed, which makes it inappropriate for painting projects (use masking tape instead).



Tool Bucket

Tool buckets make it easy to keep everything organized and close at hand. They're lightweight containers with lots of room for tools of all sizes.

Buying Advice

- You'll need to buy two things: 1) a plastic, five-gallon bucket with a metal handle and 2) a fabric tool-bucket organizer – which attaches to the bucket.
- A 24-pocket tool-bucket organizer should offer more than enough room for all the tools listed above and others you'll collect in future years.