get more from your Rip Fence

Follow these simple steps to improve your table saw's performance.

Parallel. *Slide a combination square in the miter gauge slot to determine if the fence is parallel to the blade.*

One part of my table saw I take for granted all too often is the rip fence. I just expect it to be dead-on accurate day in and day out.

To get the best results from your saw, it pays to periodically take some time to give the rip fence a quick "checkup." After that, you can make some handy rip fence add-ons to help you get even more from this essential component.

THREE CHECKS

The rip fence on your table saw is a simple, stout piece of equipment. So it isn't likely to get out of alignment easily. But even so, there are a few things you should check whether your saw is old or new. And in less than an hour you can take care of those things using only common shop tools.

Before getting started, be sure your saw blade is set parallel to the miter gauge slots in your saw. Then you can use the slot as a reference edge for other setups and be assured of reliable results.

Parallel. The first test is to make sure the fence is parallel to the blade (and miter gauge slots). If the fence angles into the blade, it can cause blade marks, burning, or lead to kickback.

The photo above shows how to do this. Hold a combination square in the miter gauge slot and slide the rip fence up to the blade of the square. Now as you move the square along the slot, the blade should stay in contact with the fence. The fence shouldn't force the square away from the edge of the slot or show a gap.

If the fence isn't parallel, take a look at your owner's manual for instructions on how to correct this problem. Usually, it's just a matter of adjusting a few set screws.

A Second Opinion. I've talked with woodworkers who say the fence should angle away from the blade slightly. They say this helps prevent a workpiece from pinching the back of the blade. In theory, it sounds like a good idea. But I prefer to let a splitter prevent pinching and set the rip fence for a perfectly parallel cut.

Square to Fence. The next thing to do is see if the face of the fence is square to the table (far left photo). Use a square to check the fence at several points along its length.

Is it Square? *Check the fence face in several places to see that it's square to the saw table.*

Check for Flat. *Use a straightedge to verify the fence face is flat along its whole length.*

A face that isn't square can cause slight variations in width when ripping thick and thin stock.

If the fence is a one-piece metal assembly, there's really only one thing to do to remedy the situation. And that's to add an auxiliary fence and use tape or shims to make sure it's square to the table.

For a rip fence with removable faces, you can use masking tape or shims to square it up.

Is It Straight? The final test is to see if the face of the fence is straight along its length. Bumps or dips in the face can make a workpiece drift away from or into the blade. To check this, I use a long metal ruler, as shown in the lower right photo on the facing page.

The easiest solution to a warped face is to replace it (if possible). Or, as I mentioned before, simply attach an auxiliary face to your existing rip fence. (More on this later.)

If you do this, it's a good idea to run through the other two tests to make sure the new face hasn't caused any other problems.

Auxiliary Face. *A plywood face lets you "bury" a dado blade to cut perfect rabbets. Low-profile clamps stay out of your way.*

THREE ADD-ONS

With your rip fence tuned up, you're well on your way to making smooth, accurate cuts. But don't stop there. The accessories shown on this page can help your rip fence tackle some new tasks.

Rabbeting Fence. When using a dado blade to cut rabbets, I clamp an auxiliary fence to the rip fence and "bury" the blade (photo above). This makes setting the exact width of the rabbet a breeze. The trouble is ordinary clamps can get in the way of the workpiece.

The solution is to use a new adjustable clamp from *Rockler* (right margin). A round leg at one end fits into a hole drilled into the top edge of the fence. This keeps the clamps out of the way and makes attaching the face to the fence quick and easy.

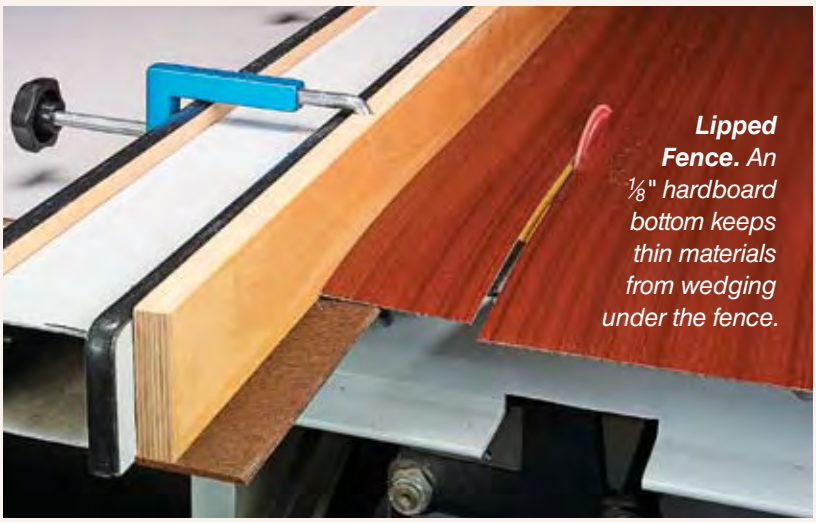
Tall Fence. Supporting a wide workpiece on edge can be tricky. That's why I made the tall fence shown in the lower left photo. The face is glued to a back piece that's identical to the rabbeting fence.

Thin Stock Fence. The final add-on comes in handy for cutting plastic laminate and other thin materials. On some fences, thin stock can slip under the fence and get wedged. The hardboard lip on the bottom of this face creates a square, hard corner to keep the workpiece moving smoothly.

After taking these steps, you'll quickly notice cleaner, more accurate rip cuts. And by adding some new capabilities to your saw, you'll find it's time well spent.

Tall Fence. *A tall face gives you solid control when cutting wide workpieces on edge.*

▲ ***Fence Clamp.*** *The adjustable leg fits into a hole in the edge of the fence face. And it won't interfere with a cut.*



Lipped Fence. *An ⅛" hardboard bottom keeps thin materials from wedging under the fence.*