

TALKING SHOP



Finish Hammers

Buying and using these less weighty whackers

BY CLAYTON DEKORNE



Holding his hammer in a relaxed grip, *This Old House* master carpenter Norm Abram gently taps a finish nail into a section of window molding to get it started, then drives it home with three swift strokes. He swings the hammer as if it were an extension of his arm, delivering the blows in a steady rhythm, without the slightest hesitation between beats. He sinks nail after nail, the succession of hits leaving each small head perfectly flush with the surface. Asked how he manages such precision without denting the wood, Norm smiles, quietly admitting he's had a few years to practice. But he's quick to credit the hammer as well. "It's all in the balance," he says. "A good finish hammer seems to swing itself."

Balance is the key feature of a finish hammer. A framing hammer tends to be top heavy; the massive head is required to generate the momentum to bury a large nail. A finish hammer, however, has a more even distribution of weight from head to handle, which gives a user the control needed to strike a nail squarely, even when working overhead or across the body. That balance keeps a carpenter from overdriving or bending a slender finish nail, and minimizes repetitive stress on muscles and tendons. But there's no simple formula for a well-balanced hammer. "Mostly, it's what feels comfortable in your hand," Norm says.

After he sinks the last nail along the window's edge, Norm slides the handle of his hammer through the loop on his tool belt and reaches for the next length of trim. When all the pieces are in place, he will countersink the nails, leaving the wood surface perfectly smooth. "A hammer's a pretty forceful tool," he says, "but used the right way it's great for the delicate work, too."

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