

Why We Don't Own A Benchtop Mortiser

I am frequently asked why I don't own a dedicated hollow chisel mortiser such as the Delta-14-651 or Jet JBM-5. Being one of those who has never met a machine he did not like, I have frequently considered the purchase of a mortiser. However, each time I go through the "ownership" phase of my buying decisions, I decide against the purchase for one or more of the following reasons:

1. No room in the inn. Mortisers appear small in the magazines and advertisements, but they do take up space and are relatively heavy (50 to 95 pounds), falling somewhere between bench top and stationary tools.
2. Have you used one? There is a reason for the large length lever. It takes effort to chisel a square hole. Plus, they all tend to have some quirk that requires fine tuning before they function optimally.
3. Fussy bits. Sure, the hollow chisel bits work, but you have to keep them sharp. When mortising dense wood, the bits dull rather quickly. If not kept sharp, the bits tend to burn and smoke their way through the wood. Or worse, they clog up and get stuck in the work piece.

Obviously, thousands of these mortisers have been sold and with some tweaking and bit sharpening they work great. Plus, their prices have dropped like a rock. It's just not the right tool for our shop at this time.

Consequently, I use the following methods to mortise:

1. Drill out the mortise with a forstner bit and clean up the mortise with a chisel. Not great for production, but if you only have a few mortises to machine, it works quite well.
2. Mill the mortise using a spiral up-cut router bit, plunge router, and a shop-made jig. Works great, but takes time to setup. Plus, you have to make the jig.
3. Use the WoodRat. This works great, but my Rat has play in the carriage that is accentuated when I add the accessory mortising shelf.
4. Use the Festool OF1000 router and Festool MFT Multiple Function Table. Works great but setup can be somewhat time consuming and requires that I mess with the circular saw setup.

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Which leads me to the Mortise-Pal. I have yet to find an easier and more accurate method for producing mortises. The Mortise-Pal is intuitively simple to setup and use. The first time I used it, it took longer to mount the cutter in the router's collet than it took to machine a perfect mortise.

In function, the Mortise-Pal resembles option #2 above. It is used with a plunge-router, a precision 5/8" OD template guide bushing, and an up-cut spiral cutter. And though it resembles shop-made designs that have appeared in magazines and Internet forums over the past few years, few shop-made jigs can match the Mortise-Pal for its unique combination of simplicity and accuracy.