

Dripless Caulking Guns

by Gary Katz

I've been fighting a losing battle with caulking guns ever since I was sixteen years old and started working in construction. Over the years, I've gotten lessons from pro painters, exacting tile setters, slick glaziers, and even clean shower-door installers — everyone who's anyone when it comes to running a perfect bead of caulking. But even after all those tips, I end up having to use my finger. And every time I touch the caulk, I know I've lost the battle again.

Fortunately, all those days of wet

rags, rolls of paper towels, and miles of blue masking tape are over. I now use a dripless caulking gun.

The Perfect Bead

There's only one manufacturer of the name brand Dripless (Dripless, Inc.; 800/960-1773; www.dripless.com), although several competitors market similar tools, including Newborn Brothers (800/638-3983; www.NewbornCaulkGuns.com). The first thing I discovered while investigating this new development in caulking guns was that

the name is somewhat misleading — none of the guns I used (and lent to other tradespeople for their opinions) over a period of several months were actually dripless. All of them dripped a little bit after use — but only a little bit. I never had to worry about a long line of caulking oozing from the gun after use. After discussing this point with one manufacturer, I learned that air bubbles in the caulking tube cause a slight amount of oozing after the trigger is released.

What these “dripless” marvels actually do is maintain an even flow of pressure, even after you release the handle. The trick with a standard caulking gun (and what all those pros kept trying to teach me) is learning to feel how much further the flow will continue and the bead must be run after you release the trigger handle. With a dripless caulking gun, there's no learning curve. The flow stops when you release the handle, and the bead of caulking never builds up or alters shape.

That's because the plunger rod is in “neutral” all the time on a dripless gun, except when you squeeze the handle. Whether the plunger rod is secured by a silica-gel retainer or a slip-spring, the force and action of the plunger are constant and produce an even flow of material. This allows the plunger rod to “step back” from the pressure of the caulk each time the handle is released (see Figure 1, page 125), so there's never any surge. When you release the handle, the caulking bead stops, period. Maintaining an even bead is easy, even for a caulking-challenged carpenter like me.

Gear Ratios

I've always bought my caulking guns from lumber yards and big-box outlets. I've never paid much attention to gear ratios. But after using several of these new guns, I've become a lot pickier. The “thrust,” or “mechanical” ratio, determines how much hand pressure is required to force material from the



Figure 1. The secret of dripless caulking guns is in the plunger-rod mechanism (inset). Every time you release the trigger, pressure is fully released from the contents of the tube, so the flow stops.



Figure 2. On some models, the dripless feature can be released for higher-viscosity materials.

tube with each squeeze of the handle: the higher the ratio, the less pressure required. But there's a tradeoff: Like first gear in your truck, the plunger in a 14:1 ratio gun doesn't travel nearly as far with each squeeze of the handle as the plunger in a 7:1 gun, so far less caulking is applied in higher-ratio guns. The standard ratio for a ratchet or hex-rod gun is 7:1; high-performance models vary between 12:1 and 14:1. For some types of caulk, especially thick polyurethane, a higher ratio is extremely helpful; for latex and silicone, a lower ratio is preferable.

Price and Quality

Dripless caulking guns range in price from \$7 to \$19. The entry-level guns that I used worked great, though higher-end models have higher gear ratios and heavier construction. Also, for a little more money, you get more features, like rotating barrels and thumb releases.

A rotating barrel allows the operator to turn the tube of caulking and change the direction of the angle-cut spout without touching the caulking tube. I found this was a handy feature, especially when turning corners in tight spots. The optional thumb-release lever on some models is a wel-



Figure 3. Look for the handy extras, like tip cutters (left) and seal puncture tools (below).



Figure 4. Ladder hooks are a welcome feature on these new dripless guns.

come way to disengage the dripless feature for applying higher-viscosity material, like polyurethane (Figure 2, previous page). I imagine the thumb release would also be useful in colder climates, but thankfully I wouldn't know much about that.


Accessories

Even on a low-end starter model, you should expect to get all the extras you really need from a caulking gun, but be sure to look before you buy.

Spout cutter. Spout cutters have come a long way from those old dull

and useless cigar cutters. Dull cutters leave rough edges even on a freshly cut spout, and a coarse, jagged spout leaves a coarse, jagged bead. I never relied on a spout cutter before and have always used my utility knife — until now. Spout cutters on the tools I used were sharp and cut a small wire-size tip cleanly and smoothly (Figure 3).

Seal puncture. Puncturing the tube has always been another prickly point about caulking guns. I've carried pokers in my tool bags and even wrapped wire on the handle of my caulking guns, but these new tools all come with thin, stiff rods permanently attached to the base of each gun. No mess, no fuss.

Ladder hook. In the past, we've all had the same complaint about caulking gun engineers: too bad none of them ever used one of these tools. But now it seems that they have (Figure 4). Every one of the tools I investigated is equipped with a hooked handle, so hanging the gun from the top of a ladder or from a scaffolding bar is no longer a worry. 

Gary Katz is a finish carpenter from Reseda, Calif., author of The Door Hanger's Handbook, and a frequent contributor to JLC.

TOOL BITS

Wood-to-Steel Connections

For fastening plywood to light-gauge steel framing, you might want to check out the



4250/65 CP-STL Wood-to-Steel Coil Nailer.

The special nails are suitable for shear wall and horizontal diaphragm applications and are the only such pneumatically driven fasteners with ICBO recognition for both wind and seismic resistance available today, according to the manufacturer. You'll pay around \$499, for the nailer; fasteners are \$50 per thousand.

Contact: ITW/Paslode, 888 Forest Edge Dr., Vernon Hills, IL 60061; 800/682-3428; www.paslode.com.

Shear Delight

With a 2-inch capacity and one-handed action, the *RS7290 Ratchet Shears* will cut PVC and PE pipe used for gas, plumbing, or water. Suggested price is \$99.50 for the



shears; resharpenable replacement blades cost \$38.45.

Contact: Reed Manufacturing, P.O. Box 1321, Erie, PA 16512; 800/666-3691; www.reedmfgco.com.