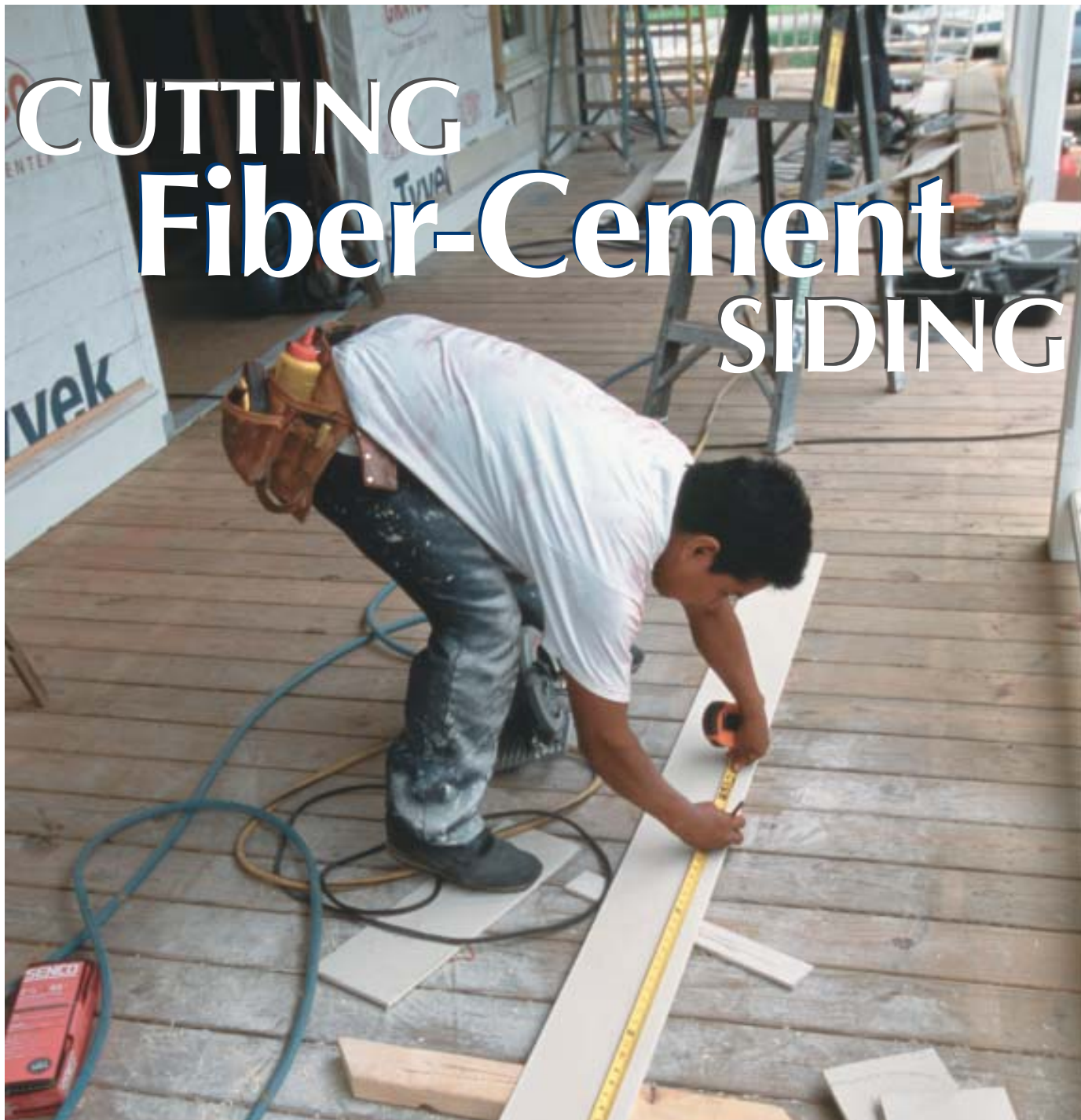


CUTTING Fiber-Cement SIDING



I've been a carpenter for more than 20 years, but I only recently installed fiber-cement siding for the first time. When *JLC* asked me to try out some of the portable tools for cutting fiber-cement siding and trim, it was an opportunity too good to pass up: a chance to check out the tools without risking a bad purchase.

by **Matt Moody**

Cutting fiber cement with a circular saw blade is like producing your own personal dust storm — definitely not the most pleasant environment to work in. I'm not afraid of getting dirty, but fiber-cement particles are very small and especially irritating to sinuses, skin, and eyes. So it's natural that manufacturers would be keen on developing tools that cut cleanly and quickly, without the dust.

Specialized power tools
work well, but so does a
simple circular saw blade

Two Schools of Thought

Two types of dust-busting portable tools have emerged: circular saws with a dust collection system and electric shears that cut fiber cement the way aviation snips cut metal (see Figure 1).

Dust-collecting circular saws are similar to the circular saws we use every day, with one major difference: The blade is covered by a plastic shroud with an exhaust port that connects to a portable vacuum. I tested Makita's 7¹/₄-inch model 5057. (Makita also makes a similar 4-inch saw, model 5044KB.)

Shears come in two platforms: large, relatively stationary, guillotine types and hand-held portable shears powered by electric drill bodies. I didn't test the guillotine-type shears. They may well be the best tool for cutting fiber cement, but unless you're a full-time siding subcontractor, the \$1,200 investment wouldn't be practical. I tested portable shears from Kett, Snapper, and Porter-Cable.

Fiber-cement shears have their origin in the electric shears used by sheet-metal fabricators. However, you can't use fiber-cement shears to cut metal: The cutting head on fiber-cement shears won't accept metal cutting blades, and vice versa. If you want to use your shears for both materials, the best option is to buy another cutting head designed for metal (\$60 to \$100) and swap the heads back and forth.



Figure 1. With a cutting action similar to that of scissors, shears crush the material between hardened steel blades. Replacement blades cost about \$65, and makers claim that the blades will last for about five 2,000-square-foot houses.

Makita 5057KB Dust-Collecting Saw

Based on Makita's venerable model 5007 circular saw, the 5057KB dust-collecting saw looks similar to a typical sidewinder except for the plastic housing enclosing the blade (Figure 2). I found that the saw worked better in theory than in practice. The blade enclosure quickly filled with dust, reducing visibility, and retracting the guard was cumbersome.

But perhaps my biggest obstacle to using the saw was that it's a sidewinder, and I happen to be accustomed to wormdrives. Switching platforms proved difficult for me — a sidewinder fan would probably be more comfortable with this saw. When a pin securing the shoe fell out, rendering the saw unusable, I happily set it aside. Despite my experience with the saw, it produced an excellent cut. Plus, unlike the shears, the saw can be used for cutting other building materials. The street price is \$222, without the diamond blade.



Figure 2. Makita has addressed the dust problem with a vacuum-connected saw. A plastic housing encloses the blade, capturing the majority of airborne particles.

Makita 721263-A Fiber-Cement Blade

When the Makita saw broke, I installed the four-tooth fiber-cement blade on my Skil worm-drive and went back to work. This blade is fantastic. Even when gang-cutting up to six pieces, it produced smooth, fast cuts (Figure 3). And while the work was dusty, the speed with which the saw cut made it bearable. Although Makita would probably discourage it, cutting an occasional piece of lumber wasn't a problem. The blade has a street price of about \$75.

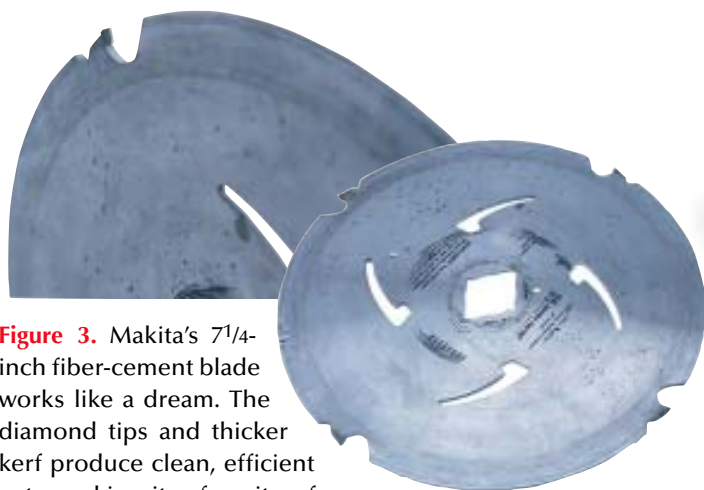


Figure 3. Makita's 7¹/₄-inch fiber-cement blade works like a dream. The diamond tips and thicker kerf produce clean, efficient cuts, making it a favorite of the author.

Kett KB-392 Cordless Fiber-Cement Shears

This was my favorite set of shears overall. Although they cut slower than the corded shears, the convenience of cordless made up for the pace (Figure 4). When I first used them, the battery pack got in my way on longer cuts. Frustrated, I loosened the screws securing the cutting head and rotated it slightly, which produced a more effective and comfortable cutting angle.

The 14.4-volt drill body ran for a long time, frequently going the whole day without swapping packs. I was grateful for the run-time, because the battery release was difficult. Kett's cordless shears come with two batteries and have a list price of \$420.



Figure 4. These Kett shears cut more slowly than the corded variety, but the convenience of cordless made up for the slower cutting speed.

Kett KD-292 Electric Fiber-Cement Shears

The Kett KD-292 was my favorite set of corded shears. At 4¹/₂ pounds, they were 1¹/₂ pound lighter than the others. Although initially concerned

that there was no variable-speed trigger, I soon discovered that didn't matter (Figure 5). Controlling cuts depends more on how quickly the operator feeds the material and less on motor speed.

But I did find one serious shortcoming with the KD-292: no belt hook. And because electric shears won't fit in a standard drill holster, I often found

myself looking for a convenient spot to set them down. It's not a big problem while working on the ground, but it's a major pain when you're up on a scaffold. The tool has a list price of \$230.

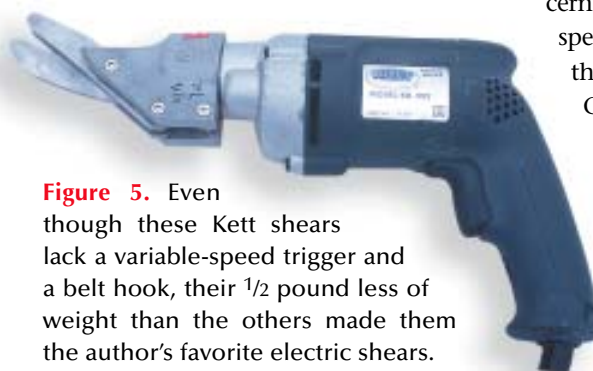


Figure 5. Even though these Kett shears lack a variable-speed trigger and a belt hook, their 1¹/₂ pound less of weight than the others made them the author's favorite electric shears.



Figure 6. Kett's more powerful electric shears have a belt hook, which their cheaper model lacks. But without a rubber handle or grip insert, they're tough to hold on to.

Kett KC-193 Electric Fiber-Cement Shears

The variable-speed KC-193 is an ounce shy of 5 pounds, making it among the heaviest of the shears, but I found that the motor was smooth and didn't bog down, even with aggressive cutting. This Kett model includes a top-mounted belt hook and 2 additional feet of cord, but the additional weight, compared with Kett's model KD-292, makes it more tiring to use. Because it lacks a rubber grip on the handle, holding the shears with sweaty hands proved more difficult than with other models (Figure 6). The tool lists for \$260.

Porter-Cable 6605 Cement-Siding Shears

Based on a new 1/2-inch drill body, Porter-Cable's model 6605 is more comfortable to use than the other shears I tested. The belt hook can be mounted on either side of the drill for right- or left-handed use. The side-mounted belt hook keeps the drill oriented for quick and easy



Figure 7. Porter-Cable's shears have better ergonomics than any of the other shears tested. The side-mounted belt hook is reversible for lefties and holds the tool in a more convenient position than top-mounted hooks.

retrievals, compared with top-mounted hooks that allow the drill body to flop around (Figure 7). The belt hook also provides a convenient thumb rest, and rubber inserts in the handle add to its ergonomic advantage. Although this tool weighs as much as the heaviest shears, the additional ergonomic features and better balance make it easier to use. The Porter-Cable shears have a street price of \$229.

Snapper Shears Steelhead SS-404

Because it came with the longest cord and had the most powerful motor, I expected this tool to be a real standout. Although I liked the 9-foot cord, the Milwaukee-built 7-amp motor performed only slightly better than the smaller motors found on the other drill bodies. The tool weighs almost exactly the same as the other shears (except for the single-speed Kett model KB-392), but the motor felt front-heavy and put extra strain on my wrist and forearm (Figure 8). The disappointing ergonomics were enough to make me reach for another tool.

Interestingly, Porter-Cable uses Snapper's shear head on its fiber-cement shears, but adding P-C's side-mounted belt hook, along with a more balanced drill, made using P-C's model less strenuous. The street price for the Snapper is \$279.

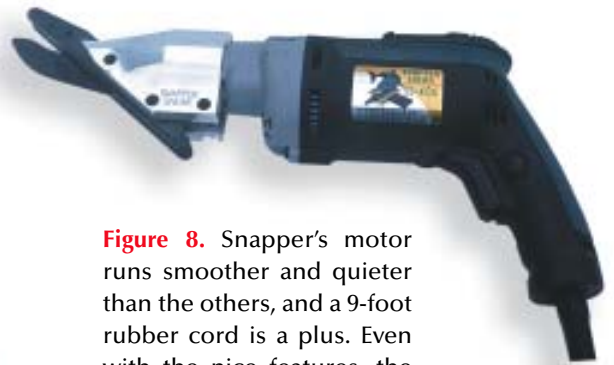


Figure 8. Snapper's motor runs smoother and quieter than the others, and a 9-foot rubber cord is a plus. Even with the nice features, the front-heavy design makes the tool harder to use.

Snapper Whipper Snapper SS-414


Although it bears a strong resemblance to standard shears, the hook-shaped cutter makes this tool unique among the fiber-cement tools I tested. Designed for curves rather than straight cuts, the Whipper Snapper cuts tight radii for outlet boxes and pipes (Figure 9). I also tried some 90-degree turns for notching under a window; while the shears managed it, I'm more comfortable making that type of cut with a circular saw. The SS-414 definitely cut a tighter radius than the other tools, but it's a little too specialized for me to justify the cost. My Rebel Rotozip spiral cutter, equipped with a tile-cutting bit, proved an excellent tool for tight-radius cuts and also has the ability to make plunge cuts, something the Whipper Snapper can't do. Street price for the Whipper Snapper is \$299.

The Verdict

My first experience working with fiber-cement siding taught me a lot. I found that the specialized shears all produce a decent cut and don't make dust, but they cut more slowly than I'm accustomed to. I used my wormdrive circular saw equipped with Makita's fiber-cement blade more than the shears, in spite of the dust. The quality of cut was better, and gang-cutting six pieces is obviously more efficient than cutting a single piece at a time. I'm sure my familiarity with the saw added to my reliance on it, but speed was also a big factor.

In an effort to increase my efficiency, I tried using a set of shears to cut two pieces of siding at the same time. I figured that, since two pieces of siding are about the same thickness as the $\frac{7}{16}$ -inch fiber-cement trim, which I was able to cut easily, cutting two pieces of siding shouldn't be a problem. As it turns out, the trim is less dense than the siding. The result of my test was a spray of ball bearings spilling from a broken shear head.

I also found that my Rotozip spiral cutter with a tile bit did an excellent job of making curved cuts around vents, pipes, and electrical boxes, and that that little tool is more versatile than those designed exclusively for fiber cement.

For me, the best option for cutting fiber cement would be to combine effective dust collection with a wormdrive or miter saw. But for now, it looks like my old saw and a good dust mask are the way I'll go. 

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Figure 9. The Whipper Snapper's unique cutter head makes tight-radius turns around pipes, vents, and electrical boxes. It works well, but such a specialized tool is probably meant only for siding subs.

List of Manufacturers

Kett Tool Company

513/271-0333
www.kett-tool.com

Makita USA

800/462-5482
www.makita.com

Porter-Cable

800/321-9443
www.porter-cable.com

Roto Zip Tool Corporation

877/768-6947
www.rotozip.com

Pacific International Tool & Shear

800/297-7487
www.snappershear.com
Snapper Shear