

Ridgid Tri-Stack Compressor

by Sim Ayers



Tri-Stack Specs

Weight: 77 pounds

Amps: 14.5

Rpm: 3,450

Tank capacity: 5 gallons

Maximum pressure: 150 psi

SCFM: 4.9 @ 90 psi

Price: \$300

Warranty: 3 years, 90-day money-back guarantee

Ridgid
800/474-3443
ridgid.com

I've been a hands-on contractor since 1989, building everything from custom homes to 32,000-square-foot commercial buildings. At the moment, I'm running a four-man crew and doing fire-insurance work. Regardless of the job, we normally use hand-carry, twin-stack compressors for everything from framing to finish. I've owned a bunch of them over the years, and they're usually a good match for the work we do. But they're bulky and weigh up to almost 80 pounds, which makes them a chore to carry.

Ridgid's new oil-free Mobil Air Tri-Stack 5-gallon compressor (model OF50150TS) separates into two parts for carrying, and it also delivers more air than my twin-stacks. When I saw it at Home Depot several months ago, I couldn't resist buying it to see if it would be a significant step up.

Split Personality

As the name indicates, the Tri-Stack has three tanks, including a pair of two-gallon tanks on the bottom and a one-gallon tank up top that bolts to the motor. The bottom has a regulator with two outlets, and the top has a regulator with one outlet.

If you search "tri-stack" at ridgid.com and click on the link, you can view a video that demonstrates the compressor's versatility. For starters, you can separate the top and bottom units by simply pulling and twisting a knob and releasing the connecting hose. That allows you to carry the 43-pound top section with one hand and the 34-pound bottom section with the other. You can also use the regulated top section solo for powering a finish nailer and other small loads. Used this way, the compressor kicks on after almost every shot because of the small top tank, but for some interior trim jobs, we've found the self-contained unit to be a convenient substitute for a pancake. Meanwhile, the bottom unit can serve as a regulated air-carry tank, but according to Ridgid you can only drive about 20 two-inch, 15-gauge finish nails into pine before you have to reconnect the top unit to refill the tanks. For small jobs, why not just use the top unit instead?

Yet another option is to separate the two units and connect them with an extension hose so you can plug the compressor directly into a receptacle (as recommended) but move the main tanks closer to the work.



The compressor quickly separates into two parts for easier carrying.

Weigh In!

Want to test a new tool? Or share a tool-related testimonial, gripe, usage tip, or news flash? Take a minute and contact us at JLCtools@hanleywood.com or 707/951-9471.

Sim Ayers

Toolbox

We've done this, and although it allows us to use shorter hoses, we haven't noticed any change in line pressure.

Most of the time, though, we use the compressor conventionally and only break it down for easier carrying.

Performance

The Tri-Stack has other premium features, including quarter-turn ball valves for draining the tanks and quick-connect hose couplers. I also like its oil-free convenience.

As a general guideline, Ridgid says the compressor will power two framing nailers. Plugging directly into 20-amp circuits and using a splitter, we've simultaneously run up to two framing nailers, a palm nailer, and a metal-connector nailer, which is more than we can do with our twin-stacks. However, we normally use just one nailer at a time when nailing off shear walls with the Tri-Stack. It has a duty-cycle rating of 50%, which means it can pump about half the time you use it without causing excessive

wear. I didn't time it, but I'm pretty sure we generally stayed within that limit. That's a conservative rating, though; Ridgid actually pushed the compressor to 67.7% in its durability tests.

The Bad News

I had to return my first Tri-Stack after a week because it suddenly only pressurized to 30 psi and kept running. I simply swapped it for a new one. The second one ran great for about six months, then the same thing happened. Call me crazy, but we like the compressor's easy carry, ample power, and versatility so much that I'm not only having it repaired (luckily there's an authorized service center about 20 miles away), but I just bought another one. I'm hoping I initially bought into a defective batch or tapped into damaging low voltage on a job site, but we'll see.

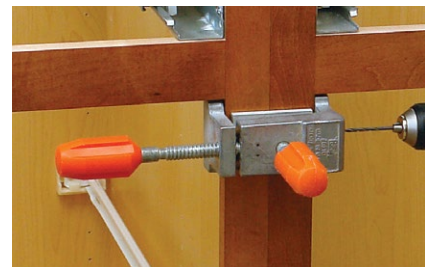
Sim Ayers owns SBE Builders in Discovery Bay, Calif.



The top section can be used solo for powering a finish nailer or other small jobs.

Classic Drywall Knife

Sometimes tool manufacturers get it right the first time. Stanley's fixed-blade No. 199 cast-aluminum utility knife — complete with its fleur-de-lis — was introduced in 1936 for cutting fiberboard, and it's still one of the most popular knives for ripping drywall panels. To rip panels, experienced rockers commonly start by pinching their tape-measure blade at the required dimension on the panel edge, holding their knife against the tape's blade hook, and pulling both hands along the panel to score the face paper. The knife blade on the Stanley (and on some other fixed-blade knives) extends about 1/4 inch farther than typical retractable blades do, which makes it easier to hold it against the tape's hook. As a bonus, the extended blade doesn't wiggle. The classic knife (model 10-209, stanleytools.com) costs about \$6 to \$8. — *Bruce Greenlaw*



Speedy Cabinet Clamp

Crescent City, Calif., carpenter David Montez reports that he has been using Pony Cabinet Claw clamps for several years to help speed the work when installing face-frame cabinets. The dual-action clamps draw neighboring cabinets tight while flushing up the meeting stiles. Built-in drill guides make it easy to bore pilot holes and screw the stiles together before removing the clamps. The clamps are made by the Adjustable Clamp Co. (adjustableclamp.com) and currently cost about \$62 per pair at Amazon.com. — *B.G.*

Stabila LD 420 Laser Distance Meter

by Bruce Greenlaw



LD 420 Specs

Range: 2 inches to 328 feet

Accuracy: $\pm 1/25$ inch

Smallest fraction: $1/32$ inch

Price: \$230

Stabila
800/869-7460
stabila.com

I tested 13 laser distance meters for the January 2013 *JLC*. These models cost \$115 to \$280, are accurate to within $1/16$ inch or better, and let you measure lengths by yourself with simple pointing and clicking. Most add helpful features such as estimating tools and the ability to measure indirectly. My favorite was the Bosch GLM 80, which costs about \$175.

Meanwhile, the Stabila LD 400 I tested was an older model with a perplexing keypad and a high price of \$250. But Stabila is now replacing that model with the LD 420, which costs about \$230. It's powered by two AAA batteries that are supposed to deliver up to 5,000 measurements. I used the new tool for a while to see how it measures up.

Range and accuracy. The LD 420 can measure lengths from about 2 inches up to either 262 feet when aiming at typical surfaces or 328 feet when aiming at an accessory target plate. It's accurate to $1/25$ inch, which is as good as it currently gets.

Functions and features. The LD 420 can calculate square and cubic feet; add, subtract, multiply, and divide dimensions and calculations; take a continuous reading while moving toward or away from a target and freeze the minimum and maximum distance measured (making it easy to measure diagonals); and lay out a series of equal intervals. Like most of the other models, it can also use Pythagorean geom-

etry to calculate certain measurements indirectly, which requires you to take two or three shots from a distance. A trapezoid function lets you measure a sloped ceiling from base to peak without climbing a ladder. Several of the measuring functions let you press the MENU button for extra information. For instance, if you measure the area of a rectangular room, then press the MENU button twice, you instantly get the length of the diagonal.

The meter's memory stores the last 20 dimensions or calculations in order, which isn't unique. But it can also store up to 10 constants (including custom ones you create with the keypad) that you can drop into calculations any time.

Other common features include a programmable timer that delays the shot after you push the measure button, an illuminated display, and a tailpiece that makes it easy to measure from inside corners to check diagonals. And it has an IP65 rating, which means you can hose it off and it's completely sealed against dust.

Rocker switch. There are a few dedicated buttons on the keypad, but you access many of the functions and settings through the MENU button and surrounding rocker switch. I figured out all of the menu options over two cups of coffee, but if you have no experience with these tools you'll definitely want to study the manual.

I'd buy it. I use the timer regularly, so I wish you could activate it with one press of a button like you can with some models. Instead you have to push various buttons a total of seven times. Also, unlike some top models, the LD 420 doesn't include an inclinometer, which can measure slopes and angles. But I really like this meter's trim-carpentry precision, versatile feature set, uncluttered keypad, rugged build, and reasonable price. It's one of my favorites.



If the meter gets dirty, you can simply hose it off.