

Weigh In!

Want to test a new tool or share a tool-related testimonial, gripe, or technique? Contact us at JLCtools@hanleywood.com

BY MYRON FERGUSON

Festool's Cordless Screw Gun



Photos courtesy Festool

Preloaded screws, no cord. The author advocates the use of collated fasteners for their speed when you are initially hanging a sheet. He likes the convenience of cordless, as well as the added safety of not having a cord, which is a trip hazard around scaffolding and ladders.

It takes about 3,500 screws to hang 3,500 square feet of drywall—which is how much an average crew can hang in a day. That's a lot of screws. Professional drywall hangers are adept at loading those screws one-by-one on a single-feed drywall screw gun, so they're able to move rather quickly. Autofeed screw guns, by comparison, use fasteners that are preloaded on a strip (50 screws in a strip is typical) so you don't have to load the screw each time, making them faster, easier to use, and less stressful on the body. I know plenty of drywall contractors who are devoted to their single-feed screw guns; however, I fully endorse the use of autofeed screw guns—especially cordless versions—for hanging drywall. In fact, I haven't used a single-feed drywall screw gun in at least 15 years.

While there are a number of brands available in both corded and cordless versions, almost all of which I've used, I chose to review the Festool DWC 18 because it has some standout features that I like. It's relatively new to the U.S. market (it was released in September 2016), but it's been in Germany for about seven years, so its design is well-developed. The tool is equipped with an EC TEC (permanent magnet, remotely commutated, 3-phase) brushless motor, uses readily available collated screws, and has an on-demand drive system and precision depth control—all key features that I like.

Like many other collated screw guns, this model will work with any collated strip on the market. That's a baseline feature of any collated screw gun for me because it means I don't have to order screws if my local supplier doesn't stock them or runs out—I can get them anywhere. The Festool magazine can be turned in various angles in order to get the strip out of the way in situations where it might get hung up or be a nuisance. Also, the depth of drive is set right on the nose of the magazine and can be fine-tuned using a green dial, so you can precisely adjust the depth of drive. (Note: Every feature that is green on a Festool tool is a feature you can adjust.)

The magazine can also be removed easily to change the bit, or to access improperly-set screws. When pressure is applied to the bit in this instance, it engages a “pulse” mode that acts like an impact drill. The impact is slow and each hit turns the screw in only about .5mm. This allows the screw to be set precisely.



Interchangeable head for single-drive mode. Some contractors prefer the single-feed action, which this head offers. It also improves accessibility in inside corners.

The feature that I like the most is the on-demand drive system, which has two modes: manual and auto. In manual mode, you have to engage the trigger in order to drive the screw, though the motor only turns on when pressure engages the clutch. In all the time that I've been using this tool, I had never used it in manual mode until writing this review, though I can see its usefulness for backing screws out.

In auto mode, you don't have to engage the trigger—you simply choose the mode on top of the gun. In this mode, the screw engages when pressure is applied to the tip, as it does in manual mode. But with auto mode, you can just keep going without ever touching the trigger. This is an incredibly efficient design because it saves on battery life, and it's also incredibly quiet because the gun is on only when you're driving a screw. Some newer cordless single-feed screw guns aren't on all the time, but still require pulling and locking the trigger to engage the motor.

The motor spins at 4,500 rpm, which is typical of a drywall screw gun. I found this to be adequate most of the time. There are a few exceptions—with fire-coded drywall, for example, or with older framing that is harder than new spruce or fir—when there just wasn't enough power to effectively drive the screw to full depth. My guess is that because the motor doesn't run constantly, it doesn't have enough time to ramp up to the full rpms when working in these materials.

The gun is designed to be used in both wood and metal framing. I did find it tough to insert a screw to the proper depth in tight inside corners, however. A lot of framers still don't give us a wide-enough nailer in the corner to insert the screw without having to get the nose tight into the corner—so I blame them more than the gun. If the screw isn't set square to the drywall in this scenario, it won't go in straight and, as a result, will not be set deep enough. The gun does come with an alternative nose and bit

attachment that can be used in place of the collated attachment. This helps with inside corners, but I find it inconvenient when attaching a sheet to switch attachments. Instead, I use a secondary, small cordless drill with a Dimpler screw setting attachment that I find faster to pick up and use for inside corners.

Another nice feature on this gun is a ladder/scaffold hook on one side of the tool (opposite the belt hook, which is a standard feature on most tools). This can be folded out of the way if it's not needed.

According to Festool, you can set about 10,000 1 1/4-inch screws on a 5.2-Ah battery. If you're not using that many screws, the 3.2-Ah battery is lighter and you can still get about a day's worth out of a single charge. Cost: \$300 for the tool only in a Systainer Sys 2 box; \$540 for the tool, charger, and a 5.2-Ah battery in a Systainer Sys 2.

Myron Ferguson is a drywall contractor living in Galway, N.Y.

The FrameFast System

BY TIM UHLER

Just outside Seattle, where I live and build, code often requires a structural connection between trusses or rafters and walls. Traditionally, this connection has been made with hardware like a hurricane clip. FastenMaster's TimberLok is a structural screw that also meets that code requirement; it's faster than clips but still needs to be installed with a traditional driver from a ladder (usually). In our testing, TimberLoks install twice as fast as a Simpson H2.5a or H1 hurricane clip off of a ladder.

FastenMaster now has a new tool dedicated to tying trusses and rafters to walls that don't require special hardware. It's called the FrameFast. The FrameFast system looks like a typical screw gun with an extended drive attachment that straddles a truss or rafter and guides the screw into place at the correct angle. This lets me attach the fully threaded, 6-inch screw to the top-plate-rafter connection up to about 10 feet without using a ladder. The tool has "wings" on top to align it on a truss or rafter. One wing folds out of the way—nice for us because we stick-frame every roof. Folding the wing away lets us fit the tool next to the ceiling joists nailed to the side of each rafter.

I typically install hurricane clips with a Hitachi NR38AK Strap-Tite positive placement nailer. To do some comparison testing, we first installed the 6-inch TimberLok screw using our Milwaukee impact wrench. When you can reach the top plate without a ladder, the impact gun and the FrameFast gun seemed to be identical in speed. But for most connections, because we didn't need a ladder up to 10-foot ceilings, we went about three times faster with the FrameFast. If we had made more connections, the difference in speed would likely have been even greater.

The tool worked very well. My only complaint is that when the heel of the rafter wasn't within about an inch of the inside edge of the top plate, the FrameFast didn't drive the screw properly. That isn't a common framing condition for us, so I can't fault the tool. Since most framers will use this tool in a truss-to-top-plate application, it'll work well every time.

The FrameFast tool retails for \$550. That is too much money for me in custom residential, but I think in larger developments for production crews, it would make sense. The more connections you have, the greater the time savings.

I priced out the FrameFast screws and they cost about \$0.55 a screw, whereas the H2.5 we use costs \$0.49 + \$0.16 for nails (\$0.65 total per connection). Factoring in labor, I would recommend that wherever possible, ask the engineer or code official to go the screw route over hardware. Even without the FrameFast tool, it is cheaper and faster, and easier on the body, to install FrameFast (or any fastener in the Lok line; these are our go-to structural fasteners as a replacement for hurricane clips on all our jobs). The hi-torque impact wrench we've been using for about three years retails for \$230 (tool only) and has been very reliable.

Tim Uhler is a lead carpenter for Pioneer Builders in Port Orchard, Wash.



Ladder-free installation. The FrameFast proves to be a much faster way to make code-approved truss- and rafter-to-top-plate connections.

Photos: Tim Uhler