

## Improved Roto Zip

by Clayton DeKorne



Rockers have known about the “roto zip” for years. This small router from Roto Zip Tool Corp. simplifies cutting knockouts in drywall for electrical boxes, plumbing stubs, and furnace duct-work. And in the last few years this little router has been improved. The latest *RotoMite* not only cuts drywall, but is one of the best tools available for cutting irregular shapes in cementitious backerboard, acoustical ceiling tile, ceramic wall tile, cabinet backs, fiberglass, laminates, and plywood. This makes it a highly versatile tool that every remodeler should consider owning.

### Zip Bits

The *RotoMite* is essentially a laminate trimmer — a small 28,000-rpm router — with a few special features. The switch is protected from dust by a plastic cover like you see on good drywall guns.

And a splayed flange at the front of the tool directs the air from the motor away from the bit so the dust doesn't blow around. Instead the dust is directed back towards the surface of the wall. This not only keeps the dust out of your face, but allows for nearly dustless operation if your helper follows the cut with a vacuum nozzle.

The main feature of the *RotoMite* is the bits. Unlike the straight flutes used in a laminate router, most “zip bits” resemble 1/8-inch-diameter drill bits with sharpened spiral flutes. Roto Zip makes seven different zip bits for cutting different materials:

- The original drywall bit. This 1/8-inch cutter is slower than the newer drywall bits.
- A faster-cutting drywall bit with a non-cutting guide point that rides on the outside of an electrical box, duct, or pipe. If the

depth is set correctly, there is little chance of nicking the wires with this bit.

- A double-ended version of the fast-cutting drywall bit. You can turn this bit end-for-end for twice the cutting life.
- A 1/4-inch drywall bit made for quickly cutting out door and window openings. The larger diameter is suited for straight cuts, while the thinner bits are suited for cutting tight circles. This bit also works well for slicing rigid insulation.
- A carbide tile bit. This 1/8-inch bit resembles a coarse rat-tail file. The abrasive surface works well for cutting outlets through a ceramic wall tile, but will not cut through floor tile.
- A 1/4-inch carbide bit for cutting plumbing knockouts and sink openings in cement backerboard.
- An 1/8-inch “sabre” wood cutting bit. This resembles the drywall bit but the spiral has been elongated to create a long sharp edge that works well for cutting plain or laminate-faced particleboard and plywood.

Two collets are available for the 1/8- and 1/4-inch bits, and the spare collet stores in a small hole with a coverplate on the back end of the tool. The wrench for changing the bits and adjusting the base also stores on the back of the tool.

### Performance

I tested the *RotoMite* and about 2 dozen bits on several materials. Here's what I found.

**Drywall.** The spiral bits literally zip through drywall. Holding a sheet in place over an electrical outlet or ceiling box, you just poke the bit into the center of the box, cut to the side to locate the box edge, jump over the lip, and then follow the outside edge of the box. This cuts a perfect knockout. An adjustable base allows you to set the depth so you don't nick the Romex when you're in the box. The original *Roto Zip* tool, and similar tools made by Bosch and Porter Cable, don't have this feature. If you use one of these you'll have to tolerate endless grumbling from the electrician who will be forced to cram the wires deep into the box.

**Plaster.** With the 1/4-inch carbide bit, this tool is the best I've found for retrofitting outlets in old plaster walls with wood lath. Ordinarily when you cut into the lath, a Sawzall blade will hook on the lath and vibrate the whole length of lath right out of the wall. The *RotoMite* cuts a clean hole without any vibration. Because you can set the depth of cut, you don't have to worry about slicing existing wires or plumbing in the wall. The maximum depth of cut is

about 1 inch, which is just enough to get through plaster and lath in one pass.

**Cementboard.** With the same 1/4-inch carbide blade, the *RotoMite* is also the best tool I've found for cutting plumbing knockouts through cementitious backerboard and gel-coat fiberglass shower surrounds. Hole saws always get trashed quickly by the abrasive backerboard, and the hole for a single-lever shower mixing valve is always bigger than any hole saw I have on hand. One bit cuts about 200 feet of cementitious backerboard. It won't replace the old carbide knife for straight cuts, however, as the roto zip cuts more slowly.

**Ceramic wall tile.** The 1/8-inch carbide bit cuts slowly but surely through wall tile. Because it's slow there's a tendency to force the bit through the tile, but you have to let the tool do the work or you'll burn up the bit. It works best to plunge in from the unglazed back of the tile by pivoting off the tool's base so the side of the bit's tip makes the cut, instead of the point. Once the bit is inserted, the bit holds a line well and is unlikely to crack the tile. With a little practice I was able cut an outlet through the tile, leaving just 1/4 inch of tile between the opening and the tile edge.

You can also rig up a small tile cutting station by mounting the *RotoMite* to the bottom of a plastic mud bucket with a plywood table. A single bit will cut 75 to 100 linear feet of wall tile.

**Countertops.** With the sabre bit, the *RotoMite* also works well for sink cutouts. The narrow base fits within 1 inch of the back-splash.

**Plywood.** In the shop, a jigsaw is still the best tool for cutting irregular shapes in plywood. But on site there are numerous places where a roto zip is much easier to maneuver. It would be a good tool for cutting out the flanges of wood I-beams for heating ducts and other pass-throughs that are bigger than the 1 1/2-inch knockouts in the beams. It's also a good tool for cutting plumbing knockouts out of cabinet backs, outlets in a cabinet endpanel, and heating ducts through subfloor.

**Acoustical ceiling tile.** The roto zip makes a clean cut through acoustical tile. With an optional circle cutter, you can cut very clean holes very quickly for can lights.

### Cost

The *RotoMite* sells for about \$70, and the bits cost about \$5 each. The larger, 1/4-inch carbide bits cost about \$9. For more information, contact RotoZip Tool Corp., P.O. Box 9, Cross Plains, WI 53528; 800/521-1817. ■

*The RotoMite router is a good tool for cutting electrical box and duct openings in old plaster walls. The small router with a 1/4-inch carbide bit cuts a clean opening without vibrating the wood lath loose.*



*With the new “sabre” spiral wood-cutting bit, the RotoMite cuts easily through plywood and particleboard cabinet stock. The tool is small, and maneuverable enough to cut inside a cabinet.*

