

Hidden-Fastener Tool

by Greg DiBernardo

TC-Gun
Tiger Claw Hidden Fasteners
800/928-4437
deckfastener.com
Street price: \$279

Premium synthetic decks are the heart of my deck-building business, and I use hidden fasteners on all of my projects. In fact, I'm so familiar with hidden clips and screws that I almost wince just typing about them. Tedious and slow, my standard method of installation had been to place the clip in a groove on the deck board, then drive a small screw into the clip



and joist using either a cordless drill or an impact driver. That is, until recently, when Tiger Claw, a maker of hidden deck fasteners, introduced the TC-Gun.

This innovative tool was designed to speed up the installation of the company's own TC-G clips as well as TimberTech's CONCEALoc clips (manufactured by Tiger Claw and privately labeled by TimberTech). Tiger Claw's clips work with Fiberon, Latitudes, Portico, TimberTech, and Trex deck boards, and with pregrooved ipe, teak, and meranti.

The pneumatic TC-Gun, a relatively lightweight and compact modified joist-hanger nailer, installs clips dramatically faster than the traditional way. The user places the clip on a holder built into the nose of the gun and, in one motion, inserts the clip into the groove on the deck board while laying the gun's nail magazine flat on the joist. A squeeze of the trigger fastens the clip with a screw — not a nail — called the TC-SG.

Unlike nails, which have long-term holding issues in decks, the TC-SG provides the holding power of a screw

and can be unscrewed or tightened with a Phillips-head screwdriver. The plastic-collated TC-SG pneumatic screws come 25 to a strip and load into the magazine just like regular nails. Enough screws to install 500 square feet of decking costs approximately \$100.

While testing the TC-Gun, my crew had to remove about 20 courses of decking because of an installation error. We removed hundreds of TC-SG screws during the process. My past experience prying out clips fastened with standard stainless trim-head screws provided a benchmark with which to compare the TC-SGs. Both require about the same force from a claw hammer to remove from a joist, and neither is easy to remove without unscrewing — so I have faith that the pneumatically driven screws will hold just as well as regular screws.

Different nail guns perform best at different air pressures. I found the sweet spot for the TC-SGs to be 85 to 90 pounds per square inch. That set the clips and screws deep enough, without deforming the Phillips-head screw, as higher pressure could.

The gun I tested jammed occasionally and sometimes frequently. Sometimes jams or misfires happened on every other shot for five or six joists in a row. Then I'd run 400 square feet of decking without a hiccup. My guess is that the collation and manufacturing of screws is not 100 percent consistent.

Because the TC-Gun lacks a removable or flip-up nose, some jams can be extremely difficult to clear. Several problematic jams took nearly 8 minutes to clear. Other jams cleared in

less than a minute but still broke our rhythm.

That said, I've never owned a nail gun that did not jam from time to time. Once I saw how quickly decking could be installed with the TC-Gun, I was willing to deal with some mechanical issues. Two people running two TC-Guns can realistically install about 300 square feet of decking per hour once a rhythm is established. Even with the occasional jam, the TC-Guns have undoubtedly increased my crew's production to the point where I wouldn't consider installing a deck without these tools. I've already changed the way I estimate and price projects; what used to take half a day now takes only an hour or so.

My crew's procedure has been to deck with at least two people per board. Two people with impact drivers generally finish their halves of the board simultaneously, and neither is idle waiting for the other to finish. If only one person is using the TC-Gun, and the other on the same board is using an impact driver, the person with the TC-Gun will finish his or her half of the board and be stuck waiting for the other person to catch up. Buying an extra gun will pay for itself quickly.

Additionally, I found it's not good practice to combine traditionally driven screws and clips with the TC-Gun. The depth of set, and therefore the spacing between boards, will differ. On a big deck, a 1/32-inch difference per course adds up. I found that out the hard way.

In short, if you install hidden fasteners, you cannot afford to not have at least one TC-Gun in your toolbox. Get one before your competition does.

Greg DiBernardo owns Fine Home Improvements in Waldwick, N.J.

Cordless Rotary Hammer

**11536VSR Litheon 36-Volt
1-Inch SDS-Plus Bulldog
Bosch Power Tools
877/267-2499
boschtools.com
Street price: \$527**

by Mark Clement

A rotary hammer is a must-have for my deck sites. It offers a variety of functions — straight impact, rotation, and impact with rotation — and is a chipping hammer, a drill, and an impact drill. I use it for drilling concrete and masonry foundations for ledgers; for connections to stucco, block, and brick; and for odd-ball stuff like moderate chipping and softening the dirt in a footing hole. It's a tool I'd be lost without.

You might have doubts about a cordless rotary hammer — can a battery deliver enough power, and if it can, does it weigh as much as a truck battery? I'm happy to say yes and no. As a plus, the battery is compatible with other 36-volt Bosch tools.

A recent job required me to attach a deck ledger to a 100-year-old concrete foundation. Chemical concrete anchors for 1/2-inch bolts require deep 3/4-inch holes. Good concrete gets harder with age, and let me tell you, this was some good concrete. Using an 8-inch bit on the 11536VSR, I sank hole after hole with no problems. Smaller holes, for self-tapping concrete screws I used to attach lattice cleats under a deck, were simply a breeze.

The 11536VSR's 36-volt battery weighs about the same as an 18-volt nicad. It tucks under the handle, nicely ballasting the forward-mounted motor. The unit is easy to handle and position on the work. I've used the tool chipping overhead, drilling straight



on, and chipping straight down.

The variable-speed trigger is plush. When I don't want the tool to skate, a half pull soft-starts the bit or iron — ideal for cleaning up stray globs of concrete. The battery slides on and off smoothly. Changing between functions requires just the twist of a dial, which also moves smoothly.

The side handle is ideal for controlling the tool when a substrate breaks off suddenly or I punch through a block. I like the compact charger: It stores easily and has only two lights — either the battery's ready or it's not.

The tool ships with two batteries, which have "fuel-gauges"; these are huge frustration savers. If these batteries are like the 36-volt ones I have for other Bosch tools, their lifespan should be excellent: I can't tell the difference between new batteries and ones that are a year old. ♦

Mark Clement, a deck builder in Ambler, Pa., is a PDB contributing editor and a member of the DeckExpo live demonstration team.