

Taming the table

Michael Forster takes a detailed look at what you might want from table routing and advises on which accessories are the real deal

Most of my routing is done at the table, and the need to squat down to adjust the depth of cut or change the cutter has been seriously giving me and the old knees some grief.

Addressing that problem seemed like an opportunity to take a good look at the table-routing scene in general, so I've been looking at some options to suit different needs.

Fixed or flexible?

With table-based routing there are basically two ways to go.

1. Treat the table as an accessory, mounting the router in it when required and removing it for hand-held use. For some people that's the right way; it saves having two large routers, one of which stands idle most of the time.
2. Make the router table permanently available with a separate machine for hand-held work.

Table and freehand work demand different things from a router. For the latter, you need to consider issues like the quality of the fence and whether it includes fine adjustment. You'll appreciate a soft start that doesn't make the router buck with the power from 2000 throaty watts; and good dust extraction,



PHOTOGRAPHS BY GMC/ANTHONY BAILEY

probably through the plunge column so the hose doesn't interfere too much, will really be appreciated.

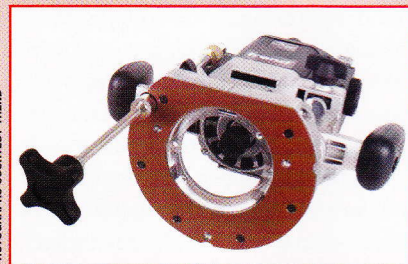
However, for a dedicated table router the side fence is irrelevant; a soft start is of less value, and you'll probably rely heavily on the table's fence-based extraction, making the router's own system largely redundant. For this application, you may be more interested in raw power. You might well be using big cutters such as panel-raisers, so a wide variable-speed range is a must; and you'll want a base aperture big enough for those

to pass through. A 1/2in collet is essential to get the best from it, but look for one that can accommodate 3/4in shanks too, so you can save on unnecessary duplicate bits.

So on the face of it, we might think that for flexibility we want a high-end machine that'll cope with both sets of demands while for dedicated table use there's no point. Why not just get a big, butch cheapie with bags of power, multiple speeds, a choice of collets and no frills? Unfortunately it's not quite that simple...

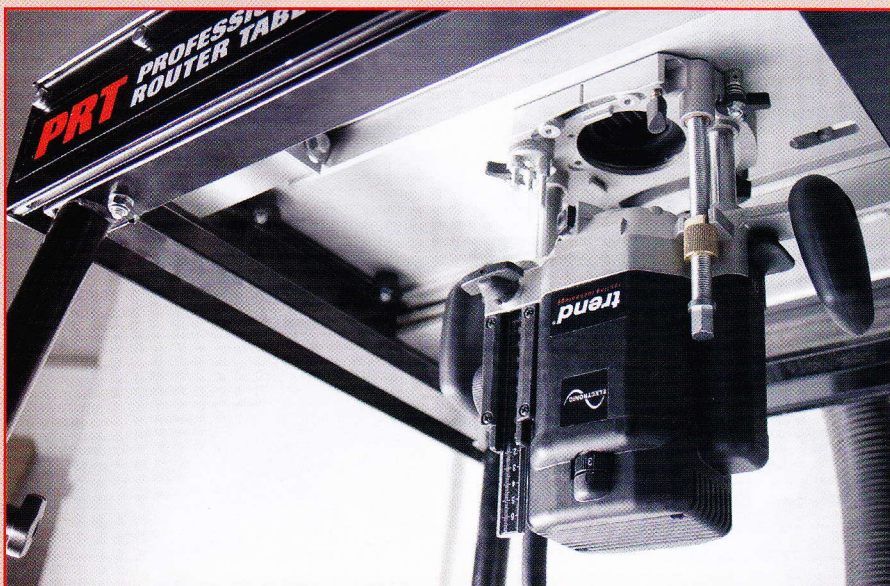
IDEAL WORLD SCENARIO

You might find it best – especially if you're in the market for a new router anyway – to consider a high-end machine designed to work well in both modes: something with all the attributes of a good table-based router, and with plenty of bells and whistles for hand-held use as well, so consider the following:



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY TREND

The Trend T11's fine adjuster works through the base...



... making it very suitable for table use

“Cutter changing can also take place above the table thanks to a collet that plunges right through the base”

Trend T11

Earthquake-proof, well-featured, go-anywhere, this router will do just about anything and is great for heavy-duty hand-held work – especially since Trend produce possibly the largest single range of accessories, guides and attachments around, and the Trend Base Configuration (TBC) is now becoming widely adopted by other accessory manufacturers. For table use it has a fine adjuster that works through the baseplate, enabling above-the-table adjustment, so you won't need to squat or bend down every time you want to deepen the cut.

Freud FT3000VCE

This features a similar spec to the Trend.

Triton routers

The Triton range machines can be used in either mode, and cutter changing can also take place above the table thanks to a collet that plunges right through the base, automatically engaging both spindle and motor locks for safe, one-handed bit changes. For hand-held



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY TRITON

Triton's routers, designed with tables in mind, include a plunge-through collet to facilitate cutter changing from above the table

work, there's a range of accessories, and their dust extraction system is reputed to work well in either mode. There are two models to choose from: the 1400W MOF001 and its bigger elder brother the TRB001 with 2000W of rippling muscle. The former, more recently designed machine, also has a through-the-base fine-height adjuster similar in principle to Trend's. The 2000W original doesn't have this, but the adjusters are well designed to be operated easily by feel, without straining to get your eye below table height.

Still not convinced?

All three manufacturers are well respected by routing enthusiasts, and if you're choosing the flexible option, then one of the above might be for you. And if you're in the market for a dedicated table router, then you too would do well to take a good look. They may seem pricey and over-featured for that purpose, but by the time you've bought a cheap big router and added a lifting device and possibly a collet extension you'll have paid a lot more for an inferior machine.

TECHNICAL table routing & accessories

USING AN EXISTING ROUTER

Maybe you already have a router you're happy with and don't really want another just to allow above-the-table adjustments. In that case take a deep breath as we venture into deeper waters...

Jack it up



A car jack is a cheap and seemingly ingenious solution, but how will the table respond to the pressure?

The simplest and cheapest solution may be a car jack under the router – or a home-made router-jack. This would be inexpensive, involving minimal outlay and no fundamental changes to your existing setup. I know people who have gone down that route and are happy with it; however, I'd worry about the upward pressure against the underside of the table; there must be a great danger of the top bowing upwards in the centre, which would be detrimental to accuracy, safety and the life of the table. Remember that the jack will be lifting the weight of the router against the pressure of the plunge springs.

Plunge bars

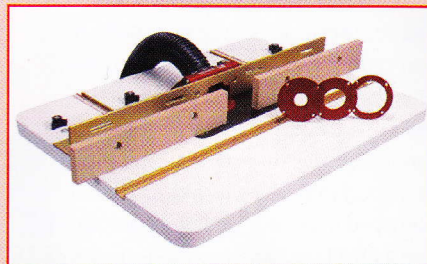
Plunge bars work on a simple principle: the bars are squeezed together with one hand to raise or lower the router. They are attractively cheap, and once fitted can be left in place for table- or hand-held use; however, they don't offer true fine adjustment and won't in themselves help with cutter-changing and general maintenance.

Life-out table insert



Table inserts mean the router assembly can be removed and inverted for adjustment

A number of outlets supply metal inserts for router tables. The main benefit of these is to minimise the reduction of the router's cutting depth when set into a solid table-top. However, they also allow the router to be lifted through the table so that adjustment and cutter-changing can be carried out just as with a hand-held. So another cheap, simple option might be to swap your rigid table for a home-made one to take one of these.

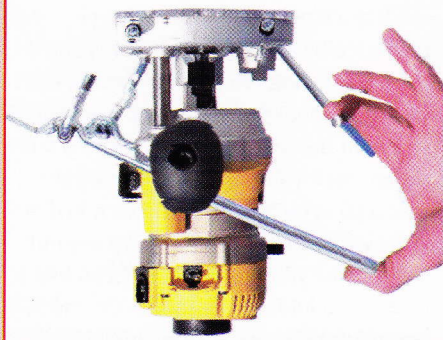


Firms like Woodpecker can supply sophisticated systems incorporating complete tables, tops, insert plates and fences

A good place to start looking would be one of the big suppliers such as Axminster or Rutlands and specialist manufacturers like Trend whose name on a product is generally an assurance of quality. The main issue with these is rigidity: it'll be carrying a lot of weight if you have a powerful router – so it's worth considering something above the entry level. Veritas guarantee their table to remain minutely convex when the router's installed, ensuring a constant cutter depth on longer workpieces. They also offer a basic stand for theirs which allows the top to flip open for access.

How the router fixes to the underside of the insert varies. Most use screws through the pre-tapped holes in the router base while some others use a clamp system which has the advantage of quicker changes if you're using the same router in the hand-held mode. It might be just my neuroses, but I always feel better with the former method – maybe it's memories of cheap clamp-on attachments for electric drills in the 1960s, that never fitted really well and

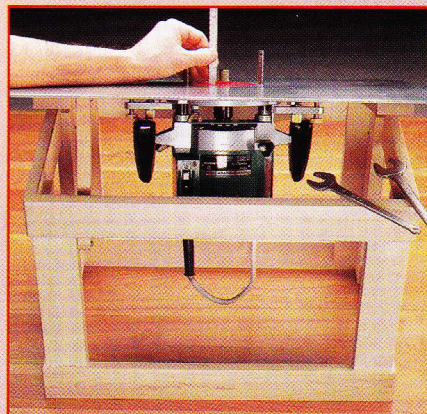
Upside down...



or the right way up!

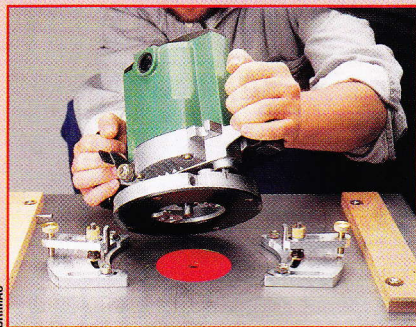


If you want an inexpensive option, plunge bars are worth investigating



The Veritas router tabletop hinges upward for access

USING AN EXISTING ROUTER – CONTINUED



BRIMARC

For a flexible approach, the Veritas clamp system facilitates quick fitting and removal of the router

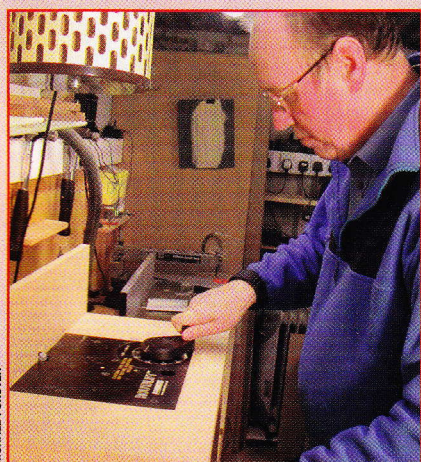
always seemed ‘Heath Robinson’ to me. So I just feel happier with the router firmly bolted into the table. There again, with a clamp system that carries the name Veritas, one really should feel confident, so that’s probably just me playing old tapes.

Router lifts

These give fine-height adjustment with no bending, lifting or dismantling. There are a few on the market, notably the RouterRaizer and the Routilift, both available by mail order.

The RouterRaizer can be used in table or hand-held positions, so is an option really worth considering, but it can be complicated to fit to some routers. However, you’ll only need to do it once.

Axminster’s Routilift – actually made by Jessem – is a combination of a table insert and lift mechanism. The router is mounted into Jessem’s ‘Swiss cheese’ multi-hole plate so a good range of routers should fit it. This is not one



MICHAEL FORSTER

Router lifts make fine adjustment easy, but don’t help with cutter changes

for those who want the flexible option; it really means committing a router permanently to the table – not that it’s difficult to fit or remove, but it takes a while.

Once installed, the whole setup can be lifted out of your router table, like other insert plates, for cutter-changing.

This sort of solution offers a lot of benefit, but may prove expensive, especially if you’re buying a router as well.

Collet extensions

Collet extensions are principally designed to get round the loss of cutting depth mentioned earlier, but also have the advantage of enabling above-the-table cutter changes. They are not universally liked by experts, though: the leverage puts extra strain on the router’s bearings and some users have experienced vibration, so if you go for one of these, those are points to consider.

An interesting example of a collet extension is the Xtreme Xtension which the suppliers claim can be undone and retightened with just one hand from above the table and bits changed in 30 seconds – now that’s tempting. It’s also described as ‘dynamically balanced’ so should present less of a vibration issue. Combined with, say, a RouterRaizer, it could amount to a useful package if you’re happy with extensions in principle.



WOOD WORKERS WORKSHOP

A collet extension compensates for that, but can be a mixed blessing – and the costs are starting to add up

CONCLUSIONS

If I were starting from scratch, looking for both a router and a table setup, then I’d probably go for a robust insert plate, a home-built table and the smaller Triton. For flexibility that would give me the best of both worlds, and for a fixed system it would undoubtedly be the most cost-effective option.

If you’re looking for something to upgrade an existing router that you’re attached to, then I’m afraid you’re going to have to make up your own mind because there really isn’t a one-size-fits-all answer. All I can suggest is that you list your requirements along with the most likely permutations, carefully cost it out and do a breakdown of pros and cons.

WHERE TO BUY

Freud FT3000VCE router from Freud UK

Tel: 0870 770 4275

Website: www.freudtooling.co.uk

Trend T11 router from Trend

Tel: 01923 224657

Website: www.trendmachinery.co.uk

Triton routers from MAP UK

Tel: 01376 339670

Website: www.tritontools.co.uk

Basic table inserts from most good power tool suppliers, including Axminster Power Tools

Tel: 0800 371822

Website: www.axminster.co.uk

Veritas table inserts from BriMarc Associates

Tel: 01926 310 9100

Website: www.brimarc.com

Plunge bars from Rutlands

Tel: 01629 815518

Website: www.rutlands.co.uk

RouterRaizer, Woodpecker tables and fence systems, Xtreme Xtension, from Wood Workers Workshop

Tel: 0845 165 9244

Website: www.woodworkersworkshop.co.uk

Routilift from Axminster, as above