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This Old House

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▶ SHARPEN YOUR KNOW-HOW WITH THESE TIPS FOR DOING ANYTHING BETTER AROUND THE HOUSE

Square Corners Made Easy

A homemade clamping block simplifies cabinet construction

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It's not easy to hold two sides of a cabinet (or a box or a drawer) flush and perpendicular as you fasten them together. That's where clamping blocks come in. By clamping a couple of these roughly triangular blocks into position where the panels meet, you guarantee that the corners will stay straight and square as you drive screws and wait for the glue to set. Even better, you can make your own set of blocks for next to nothing from scrap pieces of MDF, plywood, or 2x lumber.

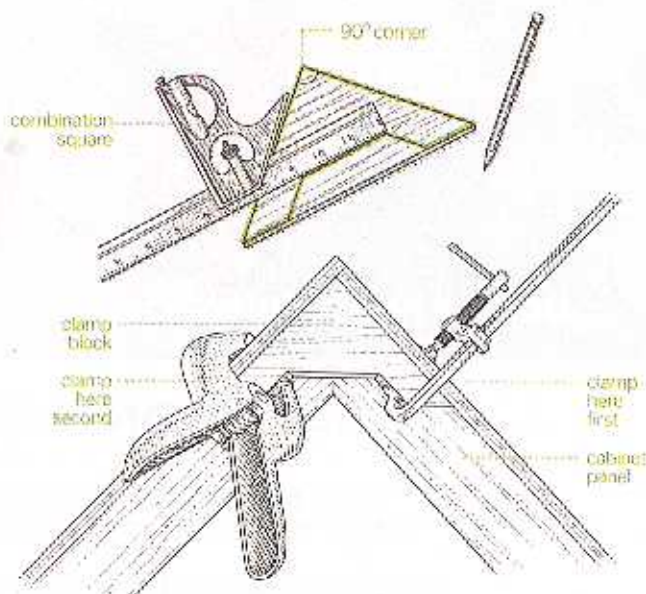
To make a block:

1. Cut a 45-degree diagonal in the scrap, 6 inches or so from a 90-degree, factory-cut corner.

2. Mark out and cut a trapezoidal notch in the block's diagonal side so its left and right sides are about one inch from and parallel to the scrap's factory-cut edges. Those sides provide a secure spot for the clamp to grip the block. A jigsaw or bandsaw are both good tools for making these notches.

To use the blocks:

Clamp them to the edges of a panel, with each block's 90-degree corner flush with the panel end and one side lined up with the panel edge. Line up the adjacent panel and clamp it to the other side of the block, as shown below. Now when you drive your screws, nothing will shift. —HARRY SAWYERS



Tips for Spraying Foam

How to get the most out of insulation in a can

RELATED STORY, P. 51
"WARMING UP THE ROOM"

A house can lose 30 to 50 percent of its heat through gaps around doors and windows, as well as pipes and ducts in the foundation. The quickest and easiest way to permanently plug openings more than 1/2 inch across is with a squirt of foam insulation from a can. Polyurethane foam can expand as much as three times its initial size—how much depends on the type you choose and atmospheric conditions—and fills every crevice before it hardens into an air- and watertight seal. Here are some tips on how to get the best results with the least mess.

1. Use the right stuff. Before you pull the trigger, make sure you have the proper foam for your application. Triple-expanding gap fillers are fine for masonry, which can withstand the pressure the foam exerts as it cures. For doors and windows, however, always use a flexible, minimally expanding foam, which won't bow jambs out of shape.

2. Vacuum the surface. Dust and grit might interfere with the foam's bond.

3. Guard against drips. Fresh foam is extremely sticky and hard to remove. Wear gloves, long sleeves, and safety goggles; protect floors with drop cloths.

4. Shake it up. Agitate the can for 30 seconds before starting, and again every few minutes during application. Foam will come out regardless of the can's position, but holding it upside down will help to force out the last bit of liquid.

5. Spray in layers. Fill the gap no more than halfway on the first pass. Wait 15 minutes to an hour for the foam to expand, then add a second layer if necessary. Two passes reduces the amount of foam that bubbles out of the gap, which cuts down on waste and cleanup.

6. Speed the cure. Foam cures by reacting with moisture in the air. To accelerate the cure, apply some homemade humidity with a spritz of water from a spray bottle. Don't touch it, however; the bubbles in the foam will collapse and leave a drippy liquid.

7. Trim. Wait 24 hours for the foam to harden, then trim away any excess using a handsaw or a reciprocating saw with a long blade. Chisel and sand away any drips.

8. Cover up. Sunlight degrades polyurethane, so hide any exposed foam under paint, trim, or a mortar patch. —SAL VAGLICA

{ TOH TIP }
If a used can of foam isn't empty, you can store it upright in a cool place for up to two weeks. But first, unscrew the trigger and nozzle and clean out any hardened foam with a straightened coat hanger.