

The Right Bench Knife for You

Looking for your first carving tool or a reliable upgrade? Check out these quality options

By Staff of Woodcarving Illustrated

Whether you're a total beginner shopping for your first blade or a hobby carver wanting to graduate to a more reliable tool, choosing a knife is a big decision. After all, this tool will accompany you through your early projects and—if treated right—bring you years of woodchips, sometimes even developing a patina specific to the oils in your hands. In short, buying a carving knife is a commitment.

Not sure where to start? Let us help! In this article, we'll go over nine fixed-blade knives you should know about as you start to build your toolkit.

Rules of Thumb

- If you can, hold the knife before you buy. The ideal knife will fit snugly in your hand and be useable for hours at a time without causing discomfort.
- Unless you have advanced sharpening skills, buy it pre-sharpened.
- Even pre-sharpened knives need periodic honing. Make sure to pick up a basic strop and stropping compound along with your knife.
- Quality steel is an absolute necessity. Buying low-quality tools just because they're cheap will cost you more in the long run—either in time spent maintaining them or money spent replacing them.
Note: Some budget tools do use good steel; just do your research before you buy.
- Think about what you'll be carving. If you gravitate toward smaller projects with fine details, a detail blade is best. If you're a flat-plane carver at heart, a longer-bladed Sloyd will make those smooth, sweeping cuts a cinch.
- Buy the best knife for your needs and budget. There is no perfect knife—just the perfect knife for you.

Note: Tools are listed alphabetically by brand. This is by no means a complete list of all quality knives available; follow the above criteria when shopping and you'll find success.

BLADE COVER CHALLENGE

We have another carving challenge in the works! By September 13, send us a photo of the most unusual carved blade cover you've made. It can be an animal, a person, or an object; painted or natural; and in any style you like. More details on page 4.



Did You Know?

The Rockwell Scale is used to determine how well a material will hold up to damage from an outside object. For carving knives, the ideal Rockwell score is between 58 and 62.
Note: When choosing a quality knife, make sure to consider multiple factors in addition to steel hardness.



Beavercraft - Beavercrafttools.com

Based in Ukraine, Beavercraft has recently generated a lot of buzz in the carving community—primarily for the wide range of viable starter tools it offers. The C2 bench knife comes pre-sharpened with a moderately ergonomic oak handle (flat sides but a rounded belly). The blade shape works well for basic whittling projects and even simple chip carvings, but given the thickness, we do not recommend it for finer detail work. Given the price point and steel quality, it's a solid first knife choice.

Deep Holler - Deephollerknives.com

Handmade in the "hollers" of Eastern Tennessee by Matthew Altland (who learned his craft from celebrated knifemaker Bud Murray), this flat-grind tool will spoil you for knives—in a good way. Handle shape ranges from classic A to finger groove, but we preferred the feel of the mid-size Double D handle. You can browse Deep Holler's line of bench knives through trusted carving shops such as Mountain Woodcarvers and Art from the Bark.



Drake - Drake-knives.myshopify.com

Drake's Gil Special knife is a powerhouse of a tool: the blade's large surface area allows for easy roughing out, even on larger projects, and the fine tip works well for detailing. Astoundingly sharp out of the box, this tool was a pleasure to use—especially given its unique handle design, which encourages a comfy pistol-like grip as you carve. Given the higher price point, it's a good option if you're looking for a professional upgrade with a lifetime guarantee. Alternatively, consider the \$40 Standard Detail Knife, which you can customize based on blade length and handle shape.



Dunkle - Stadtlandercarvings.com, mdiwoodcarvers.com

Made by second-generation knifemaker John Dunkle, this little straight knife is sharp, stylish, and reliable. The ergonomic handle is sleek but not slippery, and the slightly springy blade works great for all stages of caricature carving. It's available through dedicated retailers such as Stadtlander Carvings and MDI Woodcarvers Supply—and, depending on the source, you can choose from a fun range of handle colors. Leather sheath included.



Flexcut® - Flexcut.com

With an ergonomic, lightweight ash handle and a mildly flexible spring steel blade, this knife is comfortable to use for long carving sessions. It came carving sharp right out of the package, and the thin taper of the blade lends itself well to both roughing out and detailing. While Flexcut offers a range of tool profiles, including a roughing knife, an upsweep knife, and a cutting knife with a chunkier blade, we recommend the versatile detail knife if you're just getting started.



Lee Ferguson - Fergusonknives.com

The sleek A-2 knife boasts a 1¾" blade with a fine tip perfect for detail work. The blade needed a quick strop right out of the package but held an edge well. Lee Ferguson's signature rosewood handles combine a nice heft with a slim body well suited to all hand sizes. If the polished finish is too slippery for you, wrap the handle grip area in a layer or two of vet wrap (available for around \$2 at pet supply stores) and you'll be good as gold.





Morakniv® - Industrialrev.com (US); morakniv.se (Europe)

The Mora 120 is a classic sloyd knife beloved by carvers specializing in the Scandinavian flat-plane style (popularized by Harley Refsal and others in the US). Its long, smooth blade came brutally sharp out of the box and is ideal for large, flat cuts; however, the fine point also lends itself well to minute details. Some carvers may find the large handle a challenge, but the tapered barrel shape allows for multiple grip options depending on your hand size. Sheath included.

Murphy - Rmurphyknives.com

Manufactured in Massachusetts, the Murphy Hand Carving and Dental Lab Knife is a slim little tool with a fine detail tip. If you order directly from the manufacturer, expect to spend some time bringing it up to speed before use: the blade didn't come sharpened and the tang needed a quick grind for a smoother transition into the back of the handle. Once sharpened, however, this knife really holds an edge and is a quality starter tool. Unless you're experienced at sharpening, we recommend purchasing a ready-to-carve version from select retailers, such as Hillcrest Carving.



Kryshak/OCCT - Kryshakcarvingtools.com

Fans of OCC tools will recognize their hallmarks—a squarish handle and a smooth, flat-grind blade—in the Scout beginner knife, now manufactured by John Kryshak in Wisconsin. A good little tool that slices through endgrain like butter, it's great for kids and carvers with smaller hands. You can purchase the Scout and other knives from the former OCCT line through dedicated carving retailers such as Chipping Away, Hummul, and Treeline.



Brand	Model/Name	Price	Rockwell Hardness	Comes Sharp?	Blade Length	Style	Great For
Beavercraft	C2	\$18	56+	Yes	1¾"	Bench Knife	Whittling, simple chip carving
Deep Holler	Double D	\$35-\$40	61	Yes	1⅜" to 1½"	Bench Knife	Flat-plane, caricature carving
Drake	Gil Special	\$50	61-62	Yes	2"	Rough Out	Roughing out and detailing
Dunkle	9ST	\$34-\$43	62	Yes	1½"	Bench Knife	Caricature, detail work
Flexcut	KN13	\$25.95	59-61	Yes	1½"	Detail	Caricature, detail work
Lee Ferguson	A-2	\$35	60	Needed minor stropping	1¾"	Detail	Detail work
Morakniv	120 (M-14028)	\$32.99	58-60	Yes	2⅜"	Sloyd	Flat-plane carving, bushcraft
Murphy	HANDS (Short Blade)	\$23.80	54-58	No, unless purchased specially from select retailers	1½"	Bench Knife	Carvers on a budget
Kryshak	Scout Beginner Knife	\$24.95-\$25.95	59	Yes	1¼"	Detail	Kids and carvers with smaller hands

Note: Prices accurate at the time of publication.