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three easy ways to Cut a Rabbet

Choose the best technique and cutting rabbets on the table saw will be a breeze.

There aren't many projects I tackle that don't involve cutting at least a couple rabbets. Now the old saying goes, "There's a right way and a wrong way to do everything." For the most part, you can't argue with that. But I'll add that sometimes there's more than one right way to do a job. And that's the case with cutting rabbets on the table saw.

QUICK AND EASY

At certain times, I'll use a really simple approach to cutting rabbets on the table saw. This just involves making multiple passes across the blade. I'll give you

a couple examples of when this method might be the best way to handle the job.

Narrow Workpiece. The left drawing and detail below show a quick way to cut a rabbet across the end of a long, narrow workpiece using multiple cuts. Here, the rip fence is set up as an end stop to set the width of the rabbet. And the miter gauge is used to feed the workpiece square to the saw blade.

The setup is pretty simple. The distance between the fence and the outside edge of the blade will give you the width of the rabbet. The

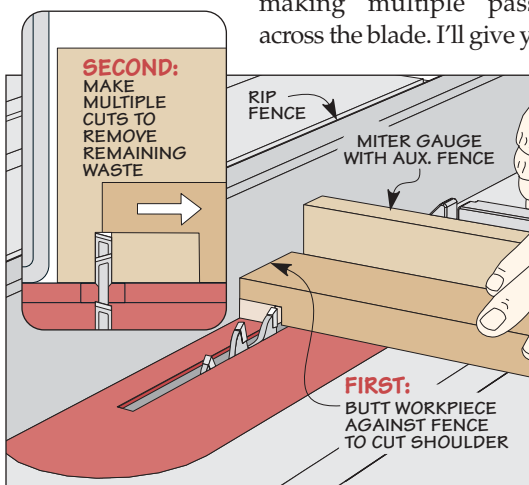
height of the blade gives you the depth. It's hard to hit the blade height dead on, so I like to start with the blade set a bit low and then sneak up after the first pass.

Once you're set to go, the first pass is made with the workpiece butted up against the fence. This pass will give you a clean, square shoulder. And after making any necessary adjustments, you can start nibbling away the remaining waste. Just back the workpiece a little further away from the fence after each cut until you reach the end (left detail drawing).

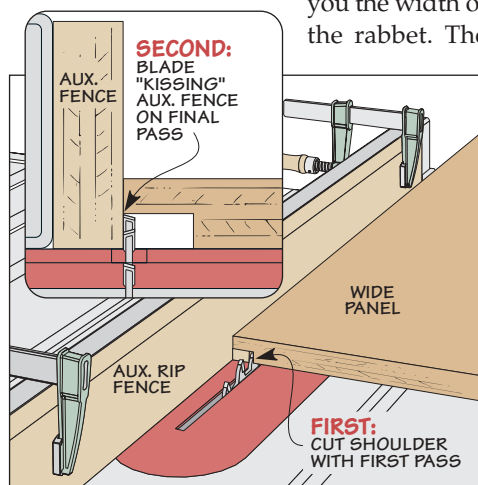
Closely overlapping saw kerfs will give you a pretty smooth bottom. But for an even smoother surface, I follow up with a simple trick. Just use the miter gauge to support the workpiece as you slide it sideways across the blade at several points along the rabbet. This will clean up any leftover ridges.

A Wide Panel. The right drawing and detail show a similar method you can use for large panels. The difference here is that you don't use the miter gauge but you will need to install an auxiliary rip fence on the saw.

Just as before, the rip fence is set so that the first pass cuts the



▲ **An End Rabbet.** Rabbeting the end of a narrow workpiece is simply a matter of nibbling away the waste with multiple saw cuts.



▲ **Wide Panel.** To rabbet a wide panel with multiple cuts, you have to slide the auxiliary rip fence toward the blade between cuts.

shoulder of the rabbet. Then, unlock the rip fence, give it a nudge toward the blade, and make a second pass. Just keep nudging the fence over and nibbling away at the waste. On the final pass the saw blade should be barely “kissing” the auxiliary fence.

TWO CUTS

A different technique works great for cutting a rabbet in the edge of a workpiece up to about 6" wide.

If you think about it, a rabbet is basically just a 90° notch. So creating a rabbet can be as simple as making two intersecting, perpendicular cuts. Using this “two-cut” method, you can get the job done quickly and accurately with minimal setup time.

The Tricks. The goal here is both to size the rabbet accurately and to make the cuts safely. There are just a couple of simple, but important, tricks to doing this.

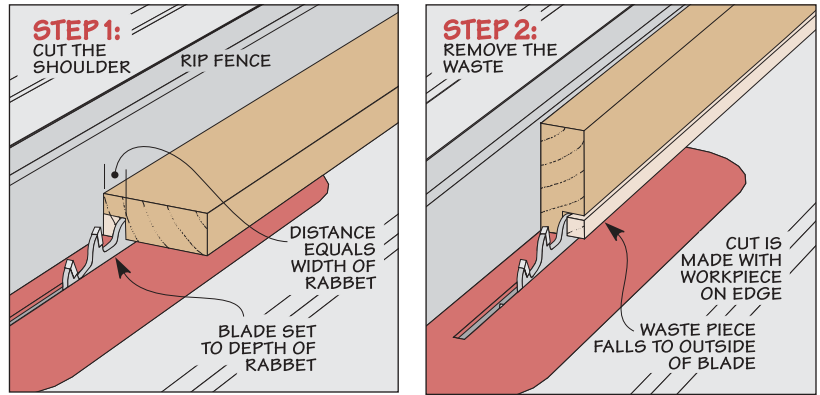
The two drawings at right show the correct way to make the cuts. You want to start by making a clean shoulder cut on

the face of the workpiece as shown in the first drawing. Just as before, the rip fence is set to establish the width of the rabbet.

The two cuts you make should create a sharp, square corner. So the height of the blade for both cuts has to be right on. I like

to start with the blade set a tad low and then “tweak” it up.

The cut that removes the waste has to be made with the workpiece on edge. The right drawing shows the only *safe* way to do this. When the waste piece is cut loose, you don’t want it trapped between the



▲ **Two Simple Cuts.** Rabbeting the long edge of a workpiece is simply a matter of making two “perpendicular” cuts. First cut the shoulder to the inside of the blade, then remove the waste to the outside of the blade.

fence and the saw blade. Chances are good it will be “kicked” back. The trick is to make the cut so the waste piece falls safely to the outside of the blade. This just means you’ll need to set the fence to the width of the remaining piece as shown in the drawing. 🛠️

Dado Blade A One-Pass Method

With a good dado blade on the table saw, cutting rabbets enters a whole different world. You’ll find that rabbeting with a dado blade takes a little extra “setup” time, but afterward you’ll zip through the cuts and the results can’t be beat. It’s my method of choice when a project calls for some “serious” rabbeting.

The Setup. A dado blade rabbeting setup is pretty straightforward. First comes the blade. A good stack dado set works best. It will give you a clean shoulder and a nice, flat bottom. Whenever possible, you want to put a “stack” on the saw that’s slightly wider than the rabbet you’re going to cut (right detail drawing). This allows you to cut the rabbet with a single pass. And then once the blade is installed, I like to cover it with a zero-clearance insert. The cut will be cleaner and the work safer.

Bury the Blade. The final piece in the setup is really the key. As you can

see in the photo and the drawings, one edge of the dado blade is “buried” in an auxiliary fence clamped to the rip fence of the saw. You’ll use this auxiliary rip fence to guide the cut and the dado blade will be free to cut right up to the edge of the workpiece.

The Cut. The great thing about rabbeting with a dado blade is that after the saw is set up, you’re pretty much home free. Once you’ve set the fence by measuring to the outside of the blade, use the first workpiece to “sneak up” on the depth of the cut. When you’re right on the money, give each workpiece a pass across the blade. Just apply good, downward pressure and you’ll get quick, consistent results from one workpiece to the next.

