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Did It Myself
Joining the Chainsaw Gang

High-powered saws are going mainstream -- but don't forget the Kevlar pants

By GWENDOLYN BOUNDS
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Picture this ad: a sexy woman clad in a tight pink sweater stands smiling, manicured hand on hip, while the camera pulls back slowly to reveal ... a chainsaw.

In the home-improvement industry's push to sell more power tools to do-it-yourselfers, they're trying to take the once-fearsome chainsaw mainstream. New models cost less than an iPod, weigh in at around 10 pounds and the best news is, you don't have to be Paul Bunyan to operate them. A few gentle tugs of the starter cord will fire the new saws up versus the endless yanking required in the past.

It's clear this is another case of makers and retailers trying to go beyond professionals and hard-core do-it-yourselfers to woo us weekenders -- including women, as evidenced in the aforementioned video from maker Stihl. After all, they've convinced novices to tackle other seemingly daunting projects such as laying their own wood floors and swabbing walls with fancy faux paint finishes.

But as I found carving up some felled trees around my yard, there's a big difference between operating a stationary chop saw in my garage and ripping through wood with sharp cutters spinning at 60-plus miles per hour.

It's just the sort of conundrum retailers are hitting as they cast about for new ways to expand the home-improvement market. Having exhausted other projects areas, they're now turning to some more difficult -- and sometimes dangerous -- new niches. Indeed, while the industry's marketing about chainsaws' ease of use is pretty convincing, the push on safety issues isn't always as overt.

That's troubling, given some amazing strides in protective gear by makers such as Stihl, Husqvarna and Echo. Chaps infused with Kevlar and other cut-retardant threads can now halt a saw's whirling blades in less than a second. This is no small matter: The number of folks who ended up in an emergency room from chainsaws rose 21% to 32,436 between 2000 and 2004, according to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission.

Lots of pros forgo chaps, but I'd argue no first-timer should. The left leg is one of the most frequently injured spots in chainsaw

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See tips first-timers should consider before powering up.

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accidents; cut your femoral artery bad enough and you could bleed to death. At \$45 to \$80, chaps aren't the cheapest piece of safety garb, but then, what's your leg worth?

Put headlines on your homepage about the companies, industries and topics that interest you most.



Lee Becker

Gwendolyn Bounds learns to cut through a felled tree in her backyard.

When I tested several of the new chainsaws recently, I discovered finding critical safety equipment at some big box retailers can be hit or miss. Home Depot and Sears, for example, carry some eight brands of saws between them, but spokespersons for both stores say that chaps aren't an item they choose to stock at this time. Lowe's, by contrast, does stock chaps and offers dedicated how-to clinics in regions where chainsaws are in high demand.

Home Depot this spring plans to market an all-in-one accessories kit with goggles, ear-wear and gloves in the chainsaw aisle. That's a good start, but I'd like see it and others stock chaps and offer clinics the way rival Lowe's does.

Notably, one big maker, Stihl, bypasses the mass-market altogether in the U.S. and only sells its chainsaws and apparel through a vast network of 8,000 independent dealers. The company, which has

taken out ads touting this fact, says it believes these stores give better one-on-one operational and safety instruction -- not to mention better profit margins in some cases. Husqvarna and Echo also sell through such dealers as well as big-box retailers.

I make these points because at day's end, there's a very good case to be made for owning one of these powerful machines. High winds, storms and decaying trees can all drop deadwood that really requires a chainsaw to split easily. Knowing how to use one can save time, money and even real angst in the occasional pinch (imagine having a very sick kid and your driveway's blocked by a downed tree.)

Early on, it's good to have a seasoned chainsaw user by your side; ask a neighbor or hire a pro one time and tip them to teach you. Recently, I tried out a handful of new, easy-to-start chainsaw models and to guide me I tapped a pair of Garrison, N.Y., landscapers, Lew Kingsley -- also a certified arborist -- and John Guinan, who together have about 85 years of experience with some 15 brands of saws.



Lee Becker

Lew Kingsley (l.) and John Guinan (r.) test chaps to see how fast their cut-retardant threads clog and stop a chainsaw's whirling blades. The result: less than a second.

Models we worked with included a Stihl MS 180 C-BE MiniBoss with an Easy2Start feature (\$229.95); Sears "Pull-Lite" Craftsman (\$139.99); Echo CS-370 (\$269.99) and Husqvarna 142 E-Series -- the "E" stands for "Easy" -- (\$199.95). I also threw in an electric Husqvarna 316 (\$229.95), which requires a power cord but starts with just the push of a button.

All the gas saws purported to have systems that reduce the pull effort by anywhere from 30% to 75% using aids such as internal springs -- and indeed, I got each one revved with little ado. The easiest to ignite cold and my favorite saw overall was the Stihl MiniBoss, which required a mere four pulls total. The MiniBoss was super-light, compact, and the least intimidating of the bunch for me. Even John and

Lew, who favored the gas "Husky," gave the Stihl two thumbs up. Said Lew gruffly, "You don't have to yank the snot out of it."

We tried all models on a felled red maple with an 8-inch diameter trunk -- a width no more than roughly 60% to 75% of the usable length of our saws' bars (the part the chain wraps around). This is a good rule of thumb for amateurs. Each one was what's known as a "rear-handle" saw, which is the best kind for on-the-ground work -- the only kind most of us non-pros should attempt. (In other words, no scaling that Oak in your backyard.)

As I carved the trunk into firewood, a pretty-satisfying feeling I'll tell you, Lew and John guided me on proper hand position -- "left wrist locked, not bent, in case the saw kicks back on you," John shouted -- as well as cutting techniques. "Just rest the bar on the wood, don't push," Lew coached, and sure enough the maple split like butter. My confidence grew as the men corrected my stance and bar angle, all nuances I'd argue are better learned in person than by manual.


The gas Husqvarna minced through the trunk in quickest time -- about 6.6 seconds. Meantime its electric sibling earned praise from my initially skeptical pros for being quiet,

environmentally sound (no gas fumes) and extra safe with a power-trigger lock that prevents setting the chain in motion when you pick it up. If you don't have much property and can tolerate an extension cord, an electric might be the chainsaw to cut your teeth on. The Craftsman and Echo models both performed well, though I found them slightly less wieldy and balanced. Their bars were 16 inches in length and the others, 14 inches.

I also wasn't thrilled that the Echo came unassembled -- not so sure I want to use a saw I've put together. An Echo spokeswoman says an independent dealer will handle the assembly for you. All brands boasted features that let me tighten the saws' chain with little hassle, which is good because it loosens while you cut. The Craftsman was the only saw that came with a sturdy storage case included.

At day's end, I was heartened by the strides makers have taken to make these tools, in the words of MarketResearch.com, "irresistible to even the most timid of consumers." The research firm says power tool sales show no signs of slowing. Sales are projected to hit \$11 billion by decade's end, thanks in large part to DIYers. As they take our dollars, hopefully the industry will also take greater strides to ensure the most timid of us are properly dressed, and prepared.

What home improvement project is next on your list? Email "Did It Myself" suggestions to Wendy.Bounds@wsj.com.



Chainsaw Chic
There's a lot of new safety gear for chainsaw users. Our reporter tries them on.

HEAD: All-in-one helmet and ear protection system saves head from wayward branches and ears from whine of motor. (\$42.95 from Husqvarna)

EYES: Many helmets have brush shield protectors that flip up, but it's a good idea to don goggles or sunglasses underneath—lest you forget to flip it back down.

HANDS: Gloves with bolstered grip protection help you hang on; some also have cut-retardant material sewn in. (\$17.99 from Echo)

BODY: First-timers should consider a protective shirt with tough material such as Engtex. (\$59.95 from Stihl)

LEGS: Chaps with Kevlar (see inset) and other threads can clog and halt chain instantly upon contact. (\$45.95 from Husqvarna)

FEET: Think traction. Wear boots with nonskid soles and (not pictured) steel toes.

Barbara J. Norman (photographer); Dan Pleper (illustration)

Tip Sheet

Things first-timers should consider before powering up:

- Buy all recommended safety gear, including leg protection such as chaps, hard hat, gloves, goggles, earplugs or muffs, and boots with steel toes and nonskid soles.
- Seek a retailer with an expert on hand who will demonstrate starting, operating and using a saw. Smaller dealers are sometimes a better bet, especially ones that sell a wide range of safety gear.
- Don't cut branches with a diameter more than 60% to 75% of the usable length of your chainsaw's bar.
- Stay on the ground and don't cut above shoulder height. Leave scaling the trees to the pros.
- When carrying the saw, have the bar pointing behind you in case of a fall.
- Find a seasoned chainsaw user to help you out the first time around; ask a neighbor, or hire a pro.
- If you don't have much property and can tolerate an extension cord, an electric version might be the chainsaw to cut your teeth on.

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