Currently, there are a handful of manufacturers and dozens of distributors who offer thirty models of a machine designed to help you do one thing: turn a mound of clay into a flat slab.

Some are designed for portability while the rest are floor models designed for use in a larger studio. Some are light-duty while others are “industrial-grade” and built to work under heavy demand, day in and day out. Prices range from under $200 to more than $2000.

HOW IT WORKS

Slab rollers are sold alone or in a complete package with legs and a table.

• With some, the mechanism for moving clay under and past the drum is hand operated using anything from a simple hand crank up to a large “wagon wheel,” while others are motor driven.

• Some have one roller, others have two. Some work by moving the bed under the rollers, while others do the opposite, the roller mechanism moves across the bed.

• They come in a variety of widths, from 16 inches up to 40 inches, and the tables are anywhere from a 18 inches all the way up to 7 feet length.

• The thickness of the clay slab is controlled either by making adjustments to the roller height, or by adding or removing shims from the bed, essentially making it closer or further from the fixed height of the roller, which moves across the bed.

WHAT TO CONSIDER

• WHO is going to use the slab roller?

  Will the slab roller be used by one person, or a group of people? Answering this may help you determine whether or not you’ll need a
model designed to sustain heavy use. Some light-duty models carry limited warranty coverage, explicitly stating that they are not intended for commercial or institutional use. If several people are going to use the slab roller, get input from them as to what they want to do with it and how often they plan to use it. Also, consider if anyone has physical limitations that might interfere with his or her ability to operate the slab roller. If so, test the equipment before you buy it.

- **WHAT do you plan to do with the slab roller?**
  You’re going to roll out slabs of clay, of course, but what will be the width and length of most of your slabs? Will most of your slabs be around one square foot and ¼-inch thick or will you be doing larger projects that require slabs two to three feet wide, several feet long and a ½-inch thick? Bigger isn’t always better. If it looks like you’re going to do mostly small-scale projects, requiring slabs no wider than sixteen inches, then a portable model or a light-duty floor model may fit the bill.

- **WHERE will the slab roller be used?**
  Space is precious in many studios so careful planning is required when adding a floor-model slab roller. It’s sort of like deciding to put a billiard table in a guest room. The space has to be big enough to use the table, not just fit the table. Ideally, you should have an area in the studio equivalent to the dimensions of the slab roller’s table plus an additional two feet of walking space all around. However, most of the floor models on the market can be located against a wall and still be conveniently operated. Some models come with locking casters and others can be outfitted with them so the slab roller can be used in an open area, then moved aside when not in use.

  Bear in mind that slab rollers equipped with tables also make excellent working surfaces for other studio projects. You may find that the table or bench you’re using now can be replaced with a slab roller without losing work space.

  If you need to travel with your slab roller, there are six portable models currently on the market.

- **WHEN will the slab roller be used?**
  This also relates to how often you’ll use the slab roller. Will you use it on a daily basis or just occasionally? Your answer here will help you determine if you should invest in one of the heavy-duty models. These are often equipped with ultra-strong gearing and 4-inch rollers. Look for lifetime warranties when purchasing these types of machines.

- **HOW MUCH money are you planning to spend?**
  While this may be your dealer’s opening question, it may not necessarily be the first question to ask yourself. By evaluating your needs before you budget, you can do a better job of getting the appropriate slab roller.