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Built for Real Life

A garage storage makeover created better organization—and an unexpected gathering place

Over the summer, Head of Editorial Kirsten Schrader welcomed the *Family Handyman* build team to her garage for the storage makeover featured on the cover. Every detail—the cabinetry, the slatwall system and more—was designed around the way her family lives. A few months later, we checked in to see how the space was holding up.

"I'm surprised how organized everything has stayed since the install," Schrader says. "Now that we have this amazing system, my husband, son and I are all working really hard to keep it looking nice!"

The makeover didn't just improve organization—it changed how Schrader's family uses the space. The garage has become an extension of their home, with room for projects, play and even entertaining. "We had family over for the Fourth of July," Schrader says. "It rained for much of the day, so we moved one car out of the garage, set up lawn chairs and watched *The Sandlot* (a summer classic!) on the TV while we ate. That's something we never would have done before this makeover."

Turn to page 24 to see how the project came together, from planning and installation to outfitting a slatwall with accessories and adding custom DIY touches—including Carmen De La Paz's lathe-turned wall hooks on page 32. You'll find plenty of ideas to help create a garage that works harder for your family too. **—CHRISTINE CAMPBELL, Editor**



"Working with the build team was wonderful," says Schrader. "They found real solutions that worked for us."

COMING UP IN OUR NEXT ISSUE...



Celebrate the holiday season the *Handyman* way! Our December/January issue is packed with giftable projects and editor-approved gear.

Holiday Serving Tray
Patrick Vang's wooden tray is ready for cookies, cocktails and beyond. Painted red stripes and a decorative glaze give it heirloom charm.

Stained Glass Ornaments
Sharpen your soldering skills with Carmen De La Paz's colorful, light-catching ornaments. They make thoughtful gifts or festive decorations for your own tree.

Year-End Gift Guide
Shopping for a woodworker, new homeowner or gadget lover? Find buy-it-for-life tools, editor favorites and a few splurges worth the price.

TAKE OUR SURVEY

As we celebrate 75 years of turning doubt into "I did it," we'd love to hear what you thought of our anniversary issue. Scan the code or visit *surveymonkey.com/r/oct75* to share your feedback.

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PAMELA ANDERSON'S GARDEN SECRETS

The actress and activist shows how a thoughtfully designed landscape can create a memorable first impression

In *Pamela's Garden of Eden*, Pamela Anderson transforms her grandparents' former property into a peaceful, sustainable retreat. In the second episode, Anderson and her team reimagine the landscape surrounding the "roadhouse," a tree-shaded home with plenty of character but an undefined entrance and overgrown gardens.

By rethinking how visitors move through the space—from the first step onto the property to the front door—they create a lush landscape that's both welcoming and romantic. Here are a few ideas worth borrowing for your own yard. **—KELLY AIGLON**

Create a Welcoming Entry
A latticed wooden arch sets a clear threshold, making the transition into the garden feel inviting and purposeful rather than purely decorative.

Skip Perfectly Straight Paths
Flagstone pavers set in an irregular pattern create a path that feels naturally worn rather than newly laid.

Save Existing Plants
A landscape refresh doesn't have to mean starting over. Anderson and her team transplanted existing plants with their roots intact, preserving established growth while reshaping the layout.

Add Interest with Outdoor Textiles
What could have been an all-white patio setup is elevated with subtle patterns and soft colors, adding personality without overpowering the space.

Refresh with Paint
Swapping gray trim for white and introducing black window frames adds contrast and gives the exterior an updated look without structural changes or a major investment. ⬢







Watch *Pamela's Garden of Eden*!

Follow along with Anderson's "roadhouse" renovation and other projects on At Home with Family Handyman, streaming free on Samsung TV Plus, the Roku Channel and more. Visit *www.FamilyHandyman.com/tv* for details.

SEE THE PROPERTY

Scan to stream *Pamela's Garden of Eden* Mondays at 8 and 9 p.m. ET.

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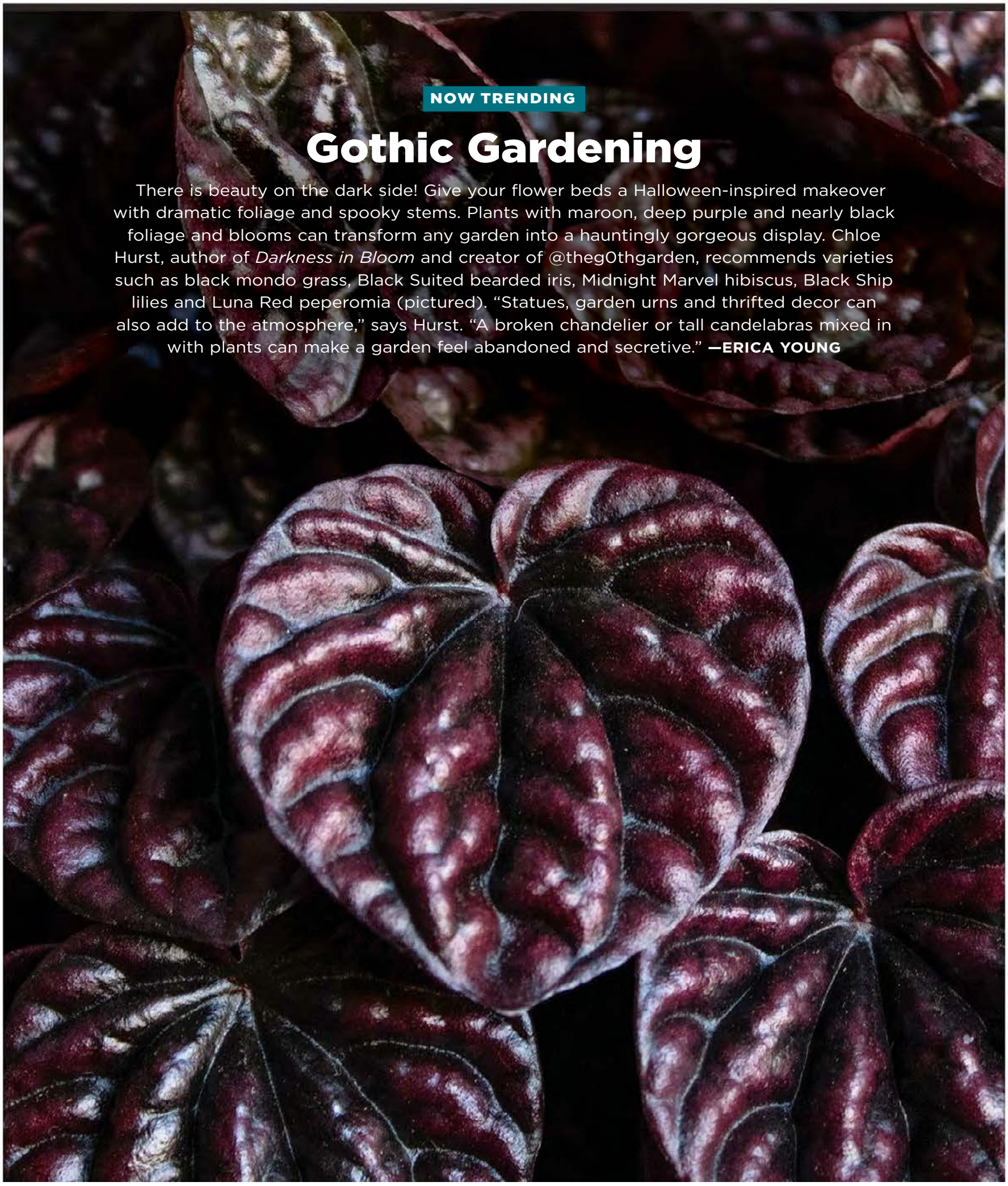
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What's New

NOW TRENDING

Gothic Gardening

There is beauty on the dark side! Give your flower beds a Halloween-inspired makeover with dramatic foliage and spooky stems. Plants with maroon, deep purple and nearly black foliage and blooms can transform any garden into a hauntingly gorgeous display. Chloe Hurst, author of *Darkness in Bloom* and creator of @theg0thgarden, recommends varieties such as black mondo grass, Black Suited bearded iris, Midnight Marvel hibiscus, Black Ship lilies and Luna Red peperomia (pictured). "Statues, garden urns and thrifted decor can also add to the atmosphere," says Hurst. "A broken chandelier or tall candelabras mixed in with plants can make a garden feel abandoned and secretive." **—ERICA YOUNG**



CHLOE HURST | THE GOTH GARDEN



GEAR UP

ELEVATED HOME FINDS

Furnishing your living spaces is a long-term commitment. Our editors tested popular picks to find the ones worth living with day to day.

VIA POVISON



Luxury Sleeper Sofa

POVISON AURORA-POWER SOFA BED

The Aurora-Power Sofa Bed looks like a clean, modern sectional. But press a button on the included remote and the seats smoothly glide outward, transforming it into a home theater pit or, when fully extended, a comfortable sofa bed—the best I've ever slept on.

One of the biggest surprises has been how soft, velvety and inviting the chenille fabric feels. It's cozy without being overly plush or fuzzy, it holds up well against my Australian shepherd's pawing and shedding, and it never gets hot, even in my Florida home.

I hosted overnight guests nearly every weekend during testing, and everyone noted how comfortable the uninterrupted sleeping surface was. When fully extended, the sofa creates one large mattresslike surface with no noticeable gaps or bars.

After a month of daily use, I'm impressed by its comfort and versatility. It's the sofa I'll be sticking with for the foreseeable future. The Aurora-Power Sofa Bed comes in several sizes, including the two-seater shown at left; the three-seater I tried is available for $3,099 at *povison.com*.

—PAUL RANKIN, product tester



Dreamy Lounger

LOVESAC PILLOWSAC CHAIR

This chair has the cloudlike feel of the original LoveSac, but with a durable oak frame and thick straps that cradle the oversized pillow. It's fully customizable with tan or black base straps; brass, gunmetal or black hardware; and more than 175 fabric options (most machine washable).

Assembly took about 30 minutes, but getting the PillowSac to look just right was tricky. It initially looked like a giant bean bag, but the more I sat in it, the more it started to resemble a traditional chair.

While I'd ultimately prefer a more refined look for my living room, the PillowSac is an extra-comfortable option for reading, lounging and family movie nights. If space is tight, consider the new Junior size. The PillowSac starts at $1,550 at *lovesac.com*. **—MARY HENN, shopping editor**



Faux Fur, Real Comfort

LOLA BLANKET

The Lola Blanket might be my all-time favorite luxury blanket. The texture is next-level soft, almost like rabbit fur or a giant plush stuffed animal. I own the Baby and XL sizes, which measure 30 x 36 in. and 80 x 90 in., respectively. The Baby is ideal for family trips and travel, while all three of us can snuggle beneath the XL for movie nights—it's magical.

I love giving the Lola Blanket as a baby shower gift because it's not only ultra cozy but also great for photo ops. The faux fur texture creates a fuzzy backdrop for capturing sweet early moments. Cuddle up with the Baby size for $125 or the XL for $425. Find them at *lolablankets.com*.

—MARY HENN, shopping editor

FROM TOP: VIA LOVESAC, VIA LOLA BLANKET



A Table for Making Memories

CASTLERY SEB DINING TABLE SET

I'll always remember my parents' kitchen table, so when it came time to choose one for my own family, I took the task seriously. Castlery produces furniture in midcentury and contemporary styles and promises high quality at reasonable prices, so I decided to put the Seb Dining Table Set to the test.

During assembly, I could already tell the solid-acacia table was super sturdy, and everything from the cozy wood tone to the rustic, distressed finish met my expectations. After more than a year of daily use, the set still looks good as new. It does require some TLC, though. Castlery recommends using coasters and place mats and wiping up spills immediately to prevent discoloration, so it may not be ideal for messy young kids. Still, it's our go-to eating area and I look forward to enjoying it for years to come. Find it for $1,615 at *castlery.com*. **—KATIE BANDURSKI, deputy shopping editor**



Solid Wood, Smart Storage

IKEA HAVSTA TV UNIT WITH BASE

Some Ikea furniture requires intense assembly, but this TV stand was surprisingly easy to build by myself. The boxes were quite heavy, though, so I appreciated the delivery team's dropping them off at my doorstep.

Unlike many other ready-to-assemble products that are made of particleboard, the Havsta is made of sturdy solid pine that has been painted and coated with a thin acrylic lacquer. The back of the unit is open if you want the shelves to hold a router or extension cords; just be sure to tuck cords neatly since they're visible through the glass doors. Decorative bins or a film for the doors are both good options for keeping things looking tidy.

For solid pine, the stand is a smart value. It doesn't feel bulky, but it comfortably holds my large TV at the perfect height, and the strong shelves easily hold all my candles, books and craft supplies. Visit Ikea to get the Havsta for $450. **—CAROLINE STANKO, updates editor**

FROM TOP: VIA CASTLERY, VIA IKEA

ATTO SPORT

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Where engineering excellence meets sleek design - a lightweight, safe, customizable, and stylish scooter for **UNLIMITED FREEDOM.**
In the past, you had to choose between a scooter that was portable and one that was comfortable. With the ATTO SPORT, you can have both.

How did John start to enjoy life to the fullest?

At the age of 56, a back operation left me dependent on a cane, significantly impacting my daily life. Simple tasks like going to the store or meeting friends became challenging, and I even had to cancel a long-awaited anniversary trip to Italy. My wife purchased a scooter for me, but it was cumbersome and uncomfortable for everyday use, leaving me feeling more constrained than liberated. However, everything changed when I came across the ATTO SPORT. This remarkable scooter proved to be a game changer. Not only is it robust and reliable, but it also conveniently splits into two pieces, allowing me to effortlessly lift it into my car trunk on my own. I was even able to stow it in the overhead compartment on the plane, enabling us to finally take that trip to Italy! I am now independent once more, able to go wherever I please and do so with a striking sense of style. In fact, I now find that my wife struggles to keep up with me!

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- **Go Anywhere:** Conquer any terrain with puncture-proof, shock-absorbing tires and a 4-inch ground clearance. Equipped with electronic stability control for added safety on descents and turns, it is also flight-approved, ideal for air travel and cruise ships. With a driving range of up to 12.5 miles (25 miles with the XL battery), a top speed of 6.2 MPH, and a maximum weight capacity of 300 pounds, this durable scooter is designed for longevity.
- **Top-Notch Engineering:** Guaranteeing both comfort and durability, this scooter offers ample legroom and a big comfortable seat. The ATTO is super portable and lightweight, and still rides like a heavy-duty scooter.
- **Unmatched Stylish Design:** You deserve a mobility solution that doesn't just get you from A to B but makes you feel great while doing so. ATTO stands out from the crowd with its stunning design.



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Boho Bedroom Upgrade

GRANDIN ROAD BODHI BED

The arched silhouette and natural rattan caning of Grandin Road's Bodhi Bed bring a warm, boho feel to my guest bedroom—cozy without trying too hard. Nothing was overlooked in the design of this bed frame, from its mixed textures and milled wood details to its tapered, hand-carved feet. The natural finish gives it an earthy look that suits almost any sleeping space.

Some assembly is required, but it took just under 30 minutes to complete with two people. The instructions were clear and simple to follow, and all the necessary hardware and tools were included.

Every guest who has slept on this bed for an extended period says it's very sturdy, with no issues with movement or squeaky pieces. Despite its substantial feel, the frame isn't overly bulky, making it a standout piece that won't overwhelm a room. It's hard to imagine someone not liking this bed frame!

While the frame is available in two wood finishes (natural and dark brown), it's offered in only queen and king sizes. If those sizes work for your space, it's a timeless and versatile choice ideal for someone who wants something simple—but not too simple—that they know they'll love for a long time. Find it starting at $1,899 at *grandinroad.com*. **—CAITLYN FITZPATRICK, senior shopping editor**





Wash-and-Go Rug

TUMBLE OLIVIA WASHABLE RUG AND CUSHIONED RUG PAD



I tested Tumble's 8 x 10-ft. Olivia washable rug in my husband's office for a year, drawn in by its lower price compared with brands such as Ruggable and the fact that it fits in a standard washing machine.

The soft yet durable rug topper comes with a 12-piece cushioned pad. Putting the jigsaw-like pad pieces together was simple, but every time I connected a new piece, another one loosened. After 45 minutes of finagling, I got the pad where I wanted it and easily attached the topper. The pad does provide a nice cushion, akin to a thick yoga mat.

My husband's rolling chair—something Tumble doesn't recommend using on its rugs—causes the rug to wrinkle, but the material has held up well against the chair's wheels over a year of use. Plus, the rug washes like a dream, even after I purposely stained it with coffee and ketchup. Get your own for $399 at *tumbleliving.com*. **—KATIE BANDURSKI, deputy shopping editor** ●

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: VIA TUMBLE (2), VIA GRANDIN ROAD








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BUILD IT

Acrylic Vanity Organizer

Keep go-to products handy and visible without the clutter

BY CARMEN DE LA PAZ

I HAVE VERY LITTLE COUNTER SPACE in my small bathroom, and there are several makeup products and toiletries I use every day that I don't want stashed away in a crowded drawer. My storage needs were simple: something easy to clean, not too bulky, and transparent so I can actually see what I'm looking for while I wait for my coffee to kick in. To solve the dilemma, I made a bathroom counter organizer from clear acrylic and added brass-toned standoff screws for a touch of extra glam. It's a small build that has had an outsize impact on my morning routine.

OPPOSITE PAGE: CAIA IMAGE/GETTY IMAGES; THIS PAGE: TMB STUDIO

MATERIALS

- ⅛" x 6" x 12" clear acrylic sheets (4)
- 1½" 18-gauge brad nails
- Acrylic cement
- Assorted sandpaper
- Standoff screws with spacers
- Wood glue
- Wood scraps for jig

TOOLS

- 18-gauge brad nailer
- 3⁄16" drill bit
- Clamping square
- Clamps
- Drill
- Miter saw

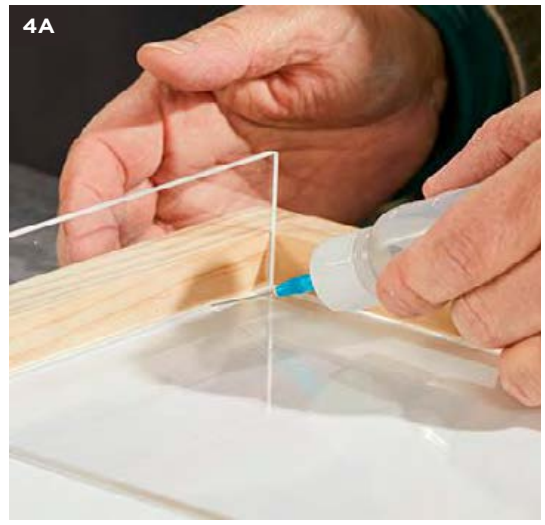
1 / MAKE A CORNER JIG

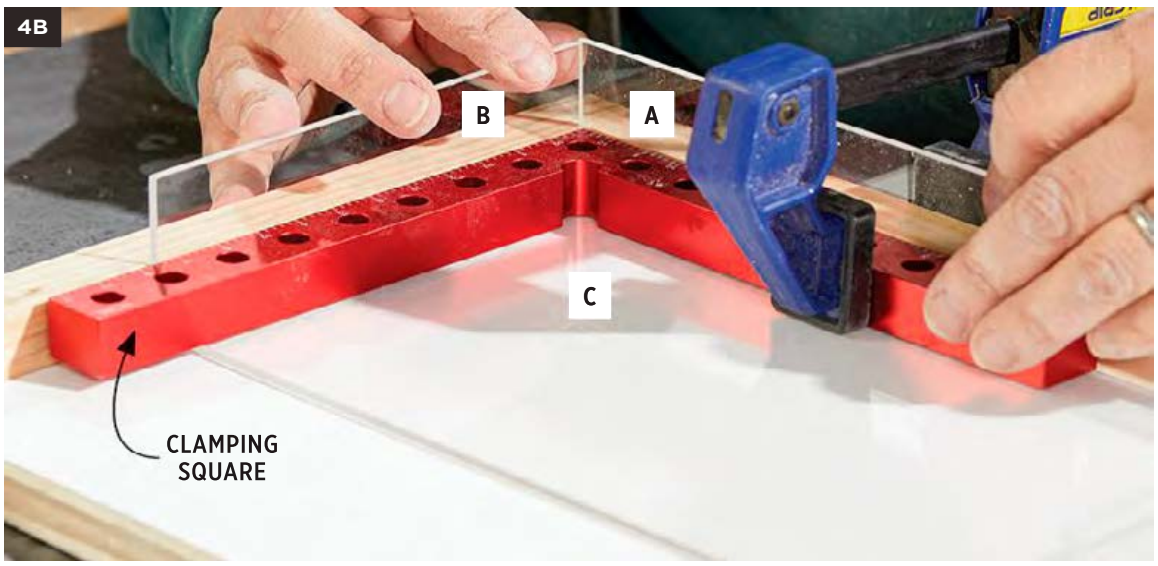
To hold the acrylic pieces square while I joined them with acrylic cement, I built a corner jig from a painted plywood scrap and 1×2s (see Figure A), securing the pieces with wood glue and brad nails. Be sure your jig can accommodate a 12 x 6-in. acrylic sheet and that the plywood is cut at 90 degrees where the 1×2s meet. Attach the 1×2s square to the plywood edges to keep the seam between them plumb to the plywood corner. The 1×2s can extend past the plywood edges—their length isn't critical. What matters is achieving a perfect 90-degree corner where they meet.

Pro tip: To keep the acrylic pieces from sticking to the jig as the acrylic cement cures, use a painted surface, plastic laminate or melamine as a base instead of unfinished plywood.



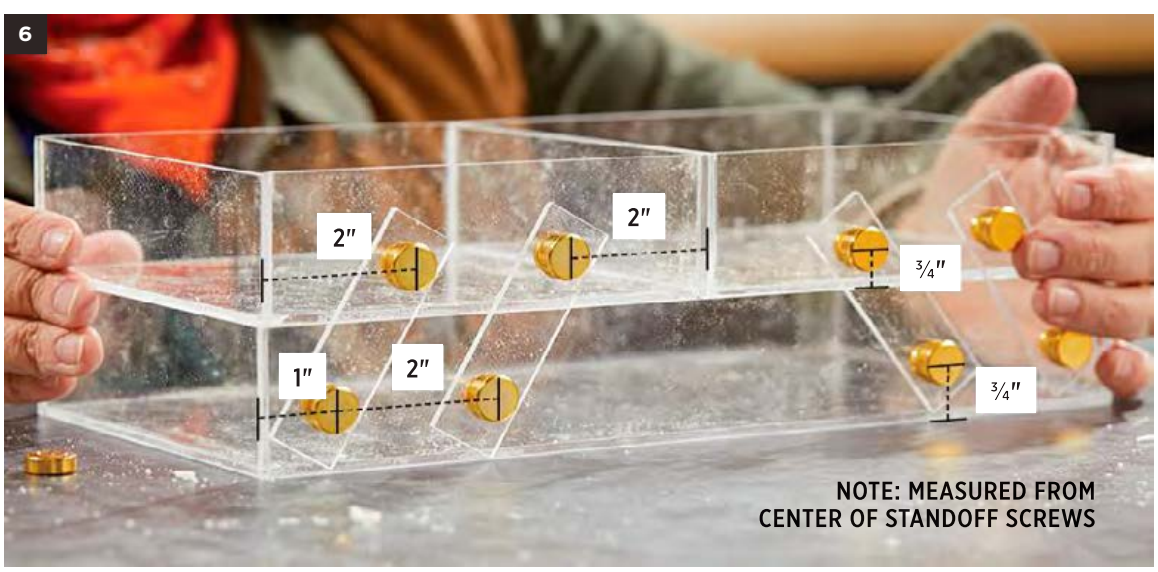












2 / CUT THE ACRYLIC SHEETS

Using a miter saw, cut all the acrylic pieces to the dimensions specified in the cuts list. To avoid breakage, support each cut with a scrap piece of wood against the miter saw fence.

Always wear safety glasses when cutting or drilling acrylic—the process produces shards that can injure your eyes.

3 / SAND THE EDGES

Sand all four edges of each acrylic piece to remove saw blade kerf marks. Start with 150-grit and work your way up to 1,000-grit. Keep the sandpaper on the flat surface of your worktable as you sand to keep the pieces square.

4 / ASSEMBLE THE BOXES

The organizer consists of one large bottom box and two smaller top boxes. To build the bottom box, use clamps and a clamping square to hold one long side (A)



What Is Acrylic Cement?

For this project, I used Berkland Acrylic Cement to join the sides and bottom of each box. Unlike a traditional adhesive, this solvent-based bonding agent briefly dissolves the acrylic surface, creating a chemical weld as the solvent evaporates. The result is a near-invisible and super strong bond.

TMB STUDIO; VIA AMAZON FOR BERKLAND

and one short side (B) against the 1×2 sides of the jig from Step 1, then butt the bottom (C) against their bottom edges. Once you are satisfied with the fit, apply acrylic cement to the seams a few drops at a time and add more as needed—squeezing out too much will make a mess. The thin cement will find its way along the seams, so introducing it slowly helps achieve a cleaner look.

Work your way around the box, joining one side to the next with acrylic cement until all four sides (A and B) and the bottom (C) are secured.

Repeat for the two top boxes, using the top box sides (D and E) and bottoms (F).

5 / DRILL HOLES IN THE HINGE STRAPS

On one hinge strap (H), mark the locations for two standoff-screw holes, centered on the strap and ½ in. from each end. Drill the holes with a 3⁄16-in. drill bit, then use that strap as a template to drill holes in the remaining seven hinge straps.

6 / DRILL HOLES IN THE BOXES

In each long side (A) of the bottom box, drill four 3⁄16-in. holes: two ¾ in. from the bottom edge and 1 in. from each end, and two ¾ in. from the bottom edge and 3 in. from each end.

In each long side (D) of the two top boxes, drill two 3⁄16-in. holes, ¾ in. from the bottom edge and 2 in. from each end.

Thread standoff screws through the holes to connect the hinge straps to the boxes.

Pro tip: Use a piece of wood as a support to prevent blowout and cracking as you drill the acrylic.

7 / INSTALL DIVIDERS (OPTIONAL)

Secure any desired dividers (G) into place with acrylic cement. I divided the two top boxes in half, but you can customize the layout of the organizer to fit your needs. Waiting until this final step ensures that the dividers won't interfere with the standoff screws.

Figure A
Jig

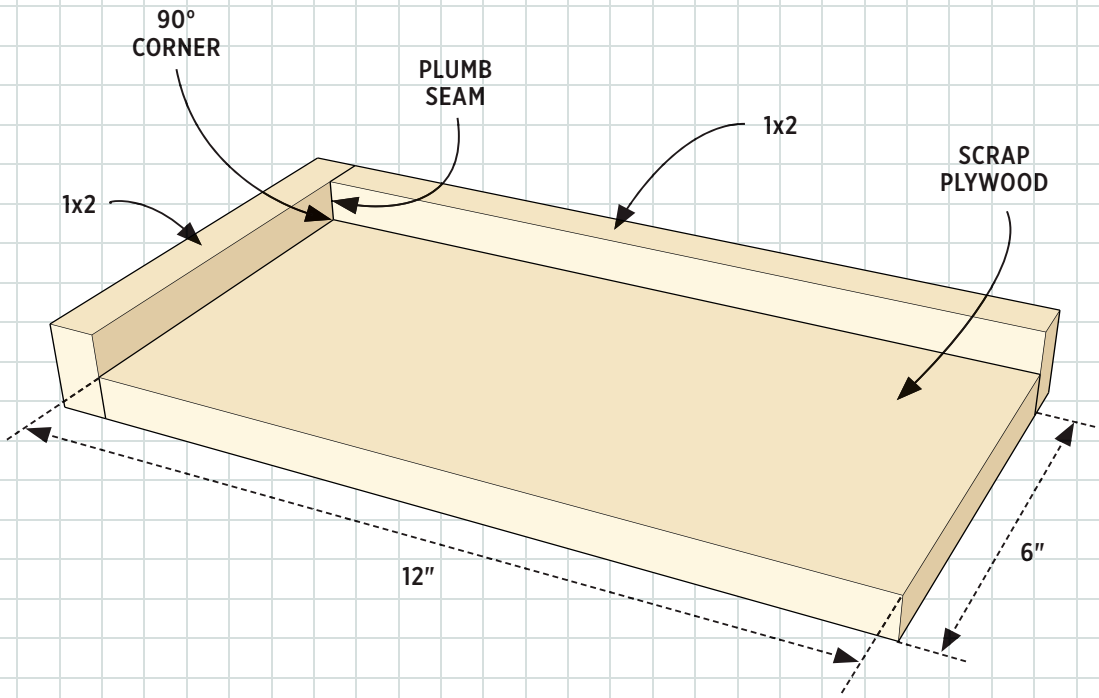


Figure B
Project Overview

CUTS

Key	Part	Qty.	Dimensions
A	Bottom box side (long)	2	⅛" x 1¾" x 12"
B	Bottom box side (short)	2	⅛" x 1¾" x 5¾"
C	Bottom box bottom	1	⅛" x 5¾" x 11¾"
D	Top box side (long)	4	⅛" x 1¾" x 6"
E	Top box side (short)	4	⅛" x 1¾" x 5¾"
F	Top box bottom	2	⅛" x 5¾" x 5¾"
G	Top box divider	2	⅛" x 1½" x 5¾"
H	Hinge strap	8	⅛" x 1" x 3"

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DESIGN IT

10 Ways to Make a Small Bathroom Feel Bigger

Design pros share simple features that create a brighter, airier bathroom with a more spacious feel

1. Frameless Shower Door

Shower curtains and framed doors can act like an extra wall, making a small bathroom feel even more enclosed. New York City–based interior designer Alyssa Alon recommends a frameless glass door to maintain uninterrupted sight lines. Clear glass keeps the space feeling open, while textured or frosted options can block light.

2. Large Mirror

Don't be afraid to go big. "One of the best ways to make a bathroom feel more open is to install a large mirror above the sink," says Daniel Jensen of NYC Interior Design. In rooms with low ceilings, mounting the mirror higher on the wall can create the illusion of extra height.

3. Floating Vanity

Exposing more floor creates the illusion of added square footage. "Vanities often take up a lot of room under sinks," says Jensen. "If you're willing to compromise on storage, a floating vanity will open up floor space."





FROM LEFT: TULCARION, DEEKENS/GETTY IMAGES (2)



4. Wall-Hung Toilet

Like a floating vanity, a wall-hung toilet reveals more floor. "Being able to see tile instead of a bulky porcelain throne creates the illusion of space," says Alon.

5. Large-Format Tile

Larger tiles mean fewer grout lines, making walls and floors look less busy. Alon recommends large-format tiles in soft tones, paired with matching grout for the most seamless appearance.

6. Right-Size Fixtures

Oversized vanities, sinks and toilets can overwhelm a small room. "Select fixtures that are the right scale for the space," says Jensen. Before buying, sketch your layout or use painter's tape on the floor to visualize how everything will fit.

7. Continuous Flooring

"Sectioning off the bathroom with different patterns and tones can make a small space feel crowded," says Alon. Use the same flooring throughout the bathroom—and into the shower—to create a seamless look.

8. Light Colors

Light colors reflect more light and make walls appear to recede. "Light, soft and neutral colors open up any small room," says Alon. Extending the color onto the ceiling minimizes visual breaks.

9. Minimal Clutter

"Keeping surfaces clean and storing away bottles makes your bathroom feel bigger," says Alon. Store everyday items in dedicated drawers or cabinets, or move backup supplies to a nearby linen closet or other storage area to keep visual clutter to a minimum.

10. Strategic Stripes

Horizontal stripes make walls appear wider, while vertical stripes draw the eye upward, making ceilings seem taller. Whether they're created with paint, wallpaper or tile, keep the contrast subtle so the pattern enhances the space instead of overpowering it.











ACCESSORIZE IT

Bathroom Storage MVPs

These hardworking organizers maximize space, reduce clutter and keep everyday essentials within reach

BY CHRISTINE CAMPBELL

1. SHOWER CADDY THAT STAYS PUT

Keep bottles, soap, razors and loofahs off the tub or shower floor with a sturdy shower caddy. Simplehuman's Adjustable Shower Caddy ($60) stays securely in place with damage-free suction cups and a clamp that attaches to the showerhead pipe. Reposition the shelves vertically or side to side to fit your setup.

2. CART THAT FITS ANYWHERE

A slim rolling cart makes use of unused gaps beside a vanity, toilet or shower and rolls out when needed. Ikea's Vesken cart ($18) is less than 8 in. wide and features drainage holes, making it ideal for shower essentials or extra toiletries.

3. MODERN MEDICINE CABINET

Today's medicine cabinets do a lot more than hold toothpaste and pill bottles. Kohler's Collage Lighted Framed Medicine Cabinet ($1,469) includes an integrated outlet, interior mirrors, sensor-activated lighting, defogging technology and storage compartments for daily essentials.

4. SLIDE-OUT ORGANIZER

Deep vanity cabinets can quickly become black holes for cleaning supplies and toiletries. Tiered pullout organizers, such as the Container Store's Sliding 2-Drawer Organizer ($30), make it easy to see and reach items in the back, even around plumbing.

5. STORAGE ABOVE THE TOILET

The wall above the toilet is prime real estate for adding storage without sacrificing floor space. Pottery Barn's freestanding Everson Over-the-Toilet Ladder ($599) requires no installation, making it a renter-friendly option. Skip bulky cabinets and use the open shelves for towels, storage baskets and decorative accents. ⬢

1. VIA SIMPLEHUMAN; 2. VIA IKEA; 3. VIA KOHLER; 4. VIA THE CONTAINER STORE; 5. VIA POTTERY BARN

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PUT YOUR GARAGE TO WORK

Don’t let a lack of storage turn the space into a cluttered catchall—bring order to the chaos with a system built for real life

BY CHRISTINE CAMPBELL

TMB STUDIO



GARAGES HAVE A WAY OF becoming the hardest-working—and most cluttered—spaces in a home. That was certainly true for Head of Editorial Kirsten Schrader, whose family's garage had become the launching pad for activities from barbecues to bike rides but lacked the organization to keep up. "No one ever told me how much time you spend in your driveway once you have kids!" says Schrader, who lives in the Milwaukee area with her husband, Jim, and their 5-year-old son, James.

To make the space work better, Deputy Editor Ethan O'Donnell and the *Family Handyman* build team designed a multipurpose storage system tailored to the family's routines, hobbies and growing collection of gear. The result is a more organized, functional space built for the way the Schraders actually live. Read on for a start-to-finish look at the makeover, plus smart storage ideas, planning tips and DIY touches you can use in your own garage.



Five years after moving into their home, the Schraders needed better garage storage. Toys, outdoor equipment and entertaining supplies had piled up, making everyday activities harder than they needed to be.

Cut the Clutter

If you have a garage, chances are there's plenty of stuff inside it. A 2022 survey commissioned by Craftsman found that 36% of homeowners have a garage so cluttered they can't park a car inside.

Fortunately, that wasn't the Schraders' problem. Their 2½-car garage offered ample space, but with storage limited to a small bank of upper cabinets, outdoor toys, grilling supplies, sports equipment and lawn gear ended up stashed wherever they fit. The result? "Piles! So many piles!" says Schrader.

Before shopping for cabinets or shelving, decide what actually deserves a place in your garage. Donate items you no longer use, toss broken or expired supplies and consider whether seasonal or infrequently used gear is better stored elsewhere. Decluttering first reduces what needs to be organized and helps identify the items you reach for most often.

For the Schraders, that meant finding new homes for toys James had outgrown and taking stock of their most-used gear. "Jim grills multiple times a week year-round," says Schrader, "so we wanted a dedicated spot for grilling tools and accessories—and a way to hide the ever-present bag of charcoal."

Design for Your Space

Once the clutter is cleared out, evaluate the garage itself. Existing features, from appliances and outlets to windows, floor slope and ceiling height can have a big impact on what's possible.

Utilities: "Plumbing and electrical are things we always think about," says O'Donnell. Plan around existing outlets, switches and appliances, and be sure there aren't plumbing stacks or hidden wiring where you'll be mounting cabinets. Add outlets (or call an electrician) if you'll need power for new features such as a TV, refrigerator or workbench.

> "With no storage systems in place, we just stacked everything on the wall. Accessibility aside, it was an eyesore!"
> —KIRSTEN SCHRADER

Traffic flow: A good storage system should make your garage easier to use, not create new obstacles. Leave plenty of space to move comfortably around parked vehicles, open drawers and cabinets, and access entry doors. In the Schraders' garage, O'Donnell suggested a large slatwall panel near the exterior door to keep frequently used items handy without disrupting foot traffic.

Space constraints: Consider garage door tracks, windows and ceiling height before finalizing your layout. Tall ceilings create good opportunities for overhead storage, but reserve those areas for seasonal or rarely used items.

Flooring: Most garage floors, including the Schraders', slope toward the door to direct water outside. Account for the slope during installation by shimming cabinets as needed to keep

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countertops, shelves and work surfaces level.

Lighting: Most garages could benefit from additional lighting. Task lighting over a countertop or workbench provides focused illumination, while overhead LED shop lights are a good option for bright, general light during larger auto, DIY or woodworking projects (look for bulbs with a color temperature around 4,000 K to 5,000 K).

… and Your Lifestyle

"This garage holds all our 'lifestyle' stuff—everything we need to hang out as a family or entertain," says Schrader. "Toys, lawn chairs, bikes, golf clubs, a hose for the kiddie pool … and of course the beer fridge!"

That mix of gear, along with the family's daily routines, shaped the final design. Built around the existing refrigerator, O'Donnell's layout combines drawer stacks, wall cabinets, open shelving and slatwall to hold everything from small toys and art supplies to bulky outdoor gear. A countertop adds needed prep space for grilling and a work surface for small projects, like repairing James' toy cars, while a slatwall-mounted TV makes the garage more inviting for the whole family.

Base cabinets are a popular storage option, but lower drawer stacks became one of Schrader's favorite features: "Everything is laid out in a drawer versus stacked up in a cabinet," she says. "Plus, you don't have to crouch down to dig around in a deep cabinet."

When planning your own garage, consider how you'll use it beyond storage to help guide your decision-making. Workshops benefit from extra outlets, bright task lighting, dust collection, large work surfaces and organizers for tools and small parts. DIY mechanics may prefer rolling tool carts that can move around a vehicle or out into the driveway, while garages that double as gathering spaces can benefit from Bluetooth speakers and comfortable seating.

Don't overlook temperature control, either. Insulating a garage









Above: Schrader and O'Donnell fine-tune the garage storage system's design. **Below:** Decluttering clears the way for a more organized, intentional space.

door or adding a portable or permanent heater can make the space more comfortable year-round, helping it function as more than just a place to park the car.

Why RTA Cabinets?

Although O'Donnell has years of experience building custom cabinetry, he chose ready-to-assemble (RTA) cabinets due to their appealing balance of cost, quality and convenience. Compared with custom cabinetry, RTA systems typically have much shorter lead times, with many arriving within days rather than weeks or months. Their flat-packed boxes are much easier to transport than assembled cabinets or sheet goods, especially if you don't own a pickup truck.

RTA systems are also surprisingly customizable, with a wide range of sizes, finishes and configurations. Mixing in DIY elements, such as open shelving and countertops, can accommodate gear that won't fit neatly inside standard cabinets and give the installation a more custom, cohesive look. Upgraded hardware is another easy finishing touch; using a simple jig speeds up installation and keeps the placement consistent.

Schrader and O'Donnell chose Hampton Bay's shaker-style Leyton cabinetry in Fern Green, with a mix of drawer stacks and wall cabinets. Soft-close drawers and an easy-to-clean finish added everyday convenience in the busy space.

Assembly takes patience, but most RTA cabinets are DIY-friendly. "There's a learning curve with the first one, but then knocking them out is easy," says O'Donnell. "A novice DIYer with a drill could finish assembly in a few hours."

Don't Skip the Prep Work

Before installation day, the team cleared out the garage, patched drywall, cleaned and primed the walls, then applied a fresh coat of paint. Garage walls don't need to be perfect, but taking time to prep creates a more professional result.

Light-colored paint helps brighten a dim garage, while a satin finish offers a balance of durability, scuff resistance and light reflection without emphasizing every drywall imperfection.





Above: Supervising Project Editor Carmen De La Paz assembles RTA drawer stacks before installation. **Below:** Shims compensate for the sloping floor, and soft-close drawers complete the assembly.





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Don't overlook the floor, either. If you're planning to seal the concrete, now's the time to do it, says O'Donnell—especially if you do automotive work or live where road salt gets tracked inside during winter. Electrical upgrades, such as adding outlets, are also easier while the space is empty.

Installation at a Glance

With the garage prepped and the cabinets assembled, keep a few things in mind to help installation go smoothly.

Depending on your cabinet system, it may be easier to install the wall cabinets while the floor is still clear. For this project, the wall cabinets would sit directly on the countertop, so the team began with the base drawer stacks next to the refrigerator, using the appliance as a fixed point for the layout.

Be prepared for sloping floors from the start. Locate and measure from the floor's high point (standard base cabinet height is 34.5 in.) and use shims and a laser level to establish a level base before installing countertops.

If you're adding custom features, plan them into the install. To give the lower cabinet run a cohesive look, O'Donnell built and paint-matched an open shelving unit to fit between the drawer stacks, topped the run with biscuit-joined butcher-bock countertop slabs, and installed a scribed, painted toe-kick for a seamless transition along the floor.

With the cabinets installed, take advantage of open wall space with cut-to-fit slatwall or pegboard, or add hooks for go-to gear (see "Lathe-Turned Wall Hooks," page 32). Secure the panels to the studs or use appropriate anchors, and plan ahead for electrical needs such as a TV or additional outlets so you can route and conceal cords before everything is in place.

Finishing Touches

As you load your things back into place, keep everyday items within easy reach and expect to fine-tune the layout over time. Give less frequently used gear a home in upper cabinets or higher shelves, keep tools close to your workspace, and use adjustable storage for items that change with the seasons. Slatwall is especially versatile (see "Stock Your Slatwall," page 30), with accessories for bikes, sports gear, yard tools, small parts and more.

For the Schraders, the result has been a garage that finally keeps up with daily life. James can find and put away his own toys, Jim's grilling gear is neatly organized, and there's room for the whole family to gather—without a single pile in sight.





The best storage keeps gear tucked away yet easy to reach. Roomy drawers with smaller organizers keep toys contained, accessible and ready for play.

VIDEO ONLINE

Scan the code for a closer look at our garage storage build, install and grand reveal.


1
2
3
4
5



Stock Your Slatwall

The panels are up—now it's time to customize them. These six accessory types turn a blank wall into a storage system tailored to the way you work.

1. HOOKS & HANGERS
Use a mix of single, double and J-hooks to hang hand tools, extension cords, folding chairs and more. Rubber-coated hooks help prevent slipping and protect finishes. Be sure to choose hooks rated for the weight of the items you plan to store.

2. BINS & BASKETS
Keep loose items organized and easy to find with bins and baskets. Group cleaning supplies, boots, pet gear or car-care products for grab-and-go access. Choose deep, solid-sided bins for smaller items that tend to tip, roll or get lost.

3. SHELVES & LEDGES
Shelves provide a stable spot for lubricants, spray cans, glue bottles and other frequently used supplies. Wire shelves promote airflow, while solid shelves better support small containers and bottles.

4. STORAGE BAGS
Mesh storage bags are ideal for lightweight, bulky gear such as basketballs, soccer balls, pool toys and life jackets. The breathable fabric helps equipment air out while keeping contents visible, so you spend less time rummaging before heading out.

5. SPECIALTY HOLDERS
Some accessories are designed for specific jobs. Use them for items you'll always keep on hand, such as garden hoses and paper towels, along with racks for fishing rods, skis, golf clubs, bicycles and other gear. These holders secure awkward items better than standard hooks, helping protect equipment while freeing up valuable floor space.

6. SMALL-PARTS ORGANIZERS
If your garage doubles as a workshop, dedicate part of your slatwall system to small-parts storage. Tip-out bins keep screws, nails and anchors sorted, while cups hold pencils, markers and zip ties. Clear containers make it easy to find what you need—and know when it's time to restock.

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Pegboard vs. Slatwall

Both pegboard and slatwall turn empty garage walls into organized storage, but the best pick depends on your needs, budget and style.

Pegboard is affordable and easy to install, though it requires furring strips or spacers behind the panels so hooks fit properly. It's ideal for organizing hand tools and other lightweight gear, and its hooks and accessories are generally less expensive than slatwall's. However, heavier loads and frequent rearranging can wear out the holes over time, causing hooks to loosen. Traditional hardboard pegboard is also more susceptible to moisture than PVC or metal systems.

Slatwall costs more but offers greater versatility. Available in a variety of finishes and panel sizes, it gives garages a cleaner, built-in look. With the right accessories, it can hold everything from hand tools to bikes and ladders, but accessories may not be interchangeable between brands.



Getting Started

TIME A half day
COST $10-$40
SKILL Beginner

MATERIALS

- 1½" x 1½" x 4" wood blanks
- ¼" hanger bolts
- ¼" threaded inserts
- ¼" toggle bolts
- Assorted sandpaper
- Wipe-on finish

TOOLS

- 5/16" drill bit
- Center finder
- Drill press
- Nail set
- Outside calipers
- Parting tool
- Roughing gouge
- Spindle gouge
- Wood lathe

LATHE-TURNED WALL HOOKS

Give everyday items a dedicated home with this DIY storage solution

BY CARMEN DE LA PAZ

SPINDLE WORK IS OFTEN ONE of the first techniques woodturners learn. By mounting a workpiece between centers, you can quickly transform small blanks or shop scraps into practical projects—without spending time creating a foot for chuck mounting.

For this set of wall-mounted hooks, I used a double-axis spindle turning technique, the same method used to shape the curved feet of Queen Anne–style tables and chairs. The hooks can be completed in just a few hours. Along the way, I'll share tips for producing consistent results and securely mounting the finished pieces in a garage, entryway or anywhere else in the home.

1 / MARK THE AXIS POINTS

Use a nail set to create a divot at the center point on both ends of a 1½ x 1½ x 4-in. wood blank. A center finder helps with accuracy—the closer you are to the true center point, the less vibration you'll encounter when you start the lathe.

On one end of the blank, make a second divot ½ in. from the center point. This second axis point will be used later to offset the blank and create the hook's curved end.

2 / DRILL THE MOUNTING HOLE

At the end of the blank that has a single divot, drill a centered 5/16-in. hole 1½ in. deep. Use a drill press to keep the hole plumb.

3 / BALANCE THE BLANK

To mount the blank on the lathe, place the drilled end in the tail

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drive and the other end in the spur drive attached to the headstock. Be sure to seat the spur well.

Start the lathe at a low speed to ensure that everything is tightly secured and that the lathe doesn't bounce or vibrate excessively. Slowly increase the speed to 1,200 to 1,300 rpm. Adjust the tail drive pressure as needed to keep the blank secure without excessive force. The key to safe wood turning is to make sure the blank is tightly secured, well balanced and centered.

Use a roughing gouge to work from one end of the blank to the other, slowly removing the corners until the blank has been turned into a cylinder. The blank will run smoothly once it is balanced.

4 / TURN AND MARK THE CYLINDER

Set an outside caliper to 1½ in. and use a spindle gouge to turn the entire cylinder to this diameter. After the cylinder has reached its final dimension, sand it with 150-grit sandpaper, working through consecutive grits until you reach 400-grit. Be sure to sand the entire piece, removing any visible tool marks and never skipping a grit.

Once you've sanded the piece, mark three lines with a pencil:

Mark the first line 3½ in. from the tail-drive end. The remaining ½ in. of the blank should be left untouched because the spurs and center point of the spur drive are embedded in this part of the blank.

Mark the second line 3 in. from the tail drive. This is where you will part off the piece when you are done turning.

Mark the third line 2½ in. from the tail drive. This will define the width of the "hook" at the end. The goal is to maintain the cylinder's 1½-in. diameter between the second and third lines and never reshape or change the dimension within this section.

5 / CHANGE THE AXIS AND CONTINUE TURNING

Change the axis of the mounted piece on the headstock end to the second axis point marked in Step 1.

With the blank secured into the second axis, use a spindle gouge to shape the end of the cylinder into the desired hook profile up to the third line. Set an outside caliper to 1 in. and turn the neck of the hook to this thickness. Keep these measurements consistent to produce matching hooks. Dedicating one caliper to each measurement will make this process easy to repeat.

Sand the newly turned body of the hook to 400-grit while it is off-center in the second axis point.

Pro tip: Always sand from the underside of the workpiece. That way, your arm isn't hanging out over the top of the lathe as it spins. Keep your fingers out of the way so the hook shape won't catch them. Finally, never wrap the sandpaper around your fingers—you should be able to quickly release the sandpaper if it gets hung up on your piece.

6 / PART OFF THE HOOK

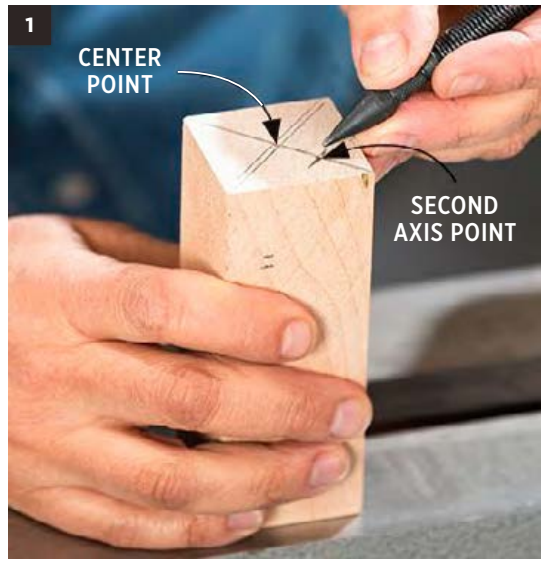
Use the spindle gouge to remove most of the material between the first and second lines. Use a parting tool to cut off the final ¼ in. on the second line, leaving a flat end.

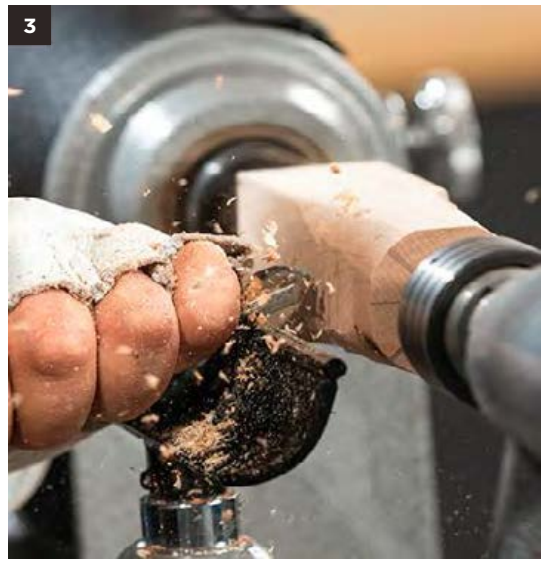
7 / CLEAN UP THE PARTING NUB

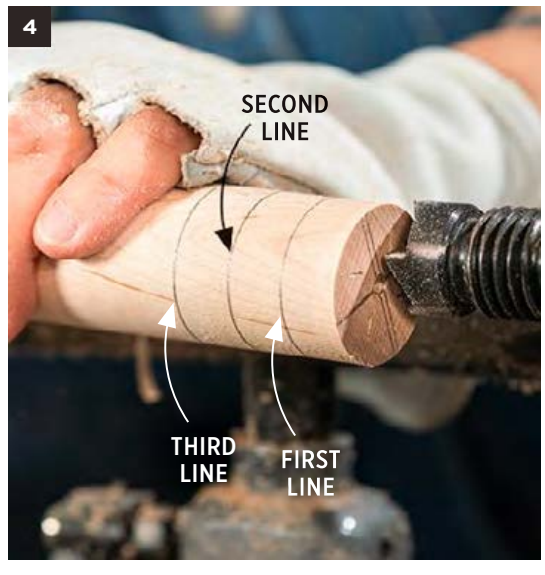
Parting off the hook will leave a small nub where you have separated the hook from the rest of the blank. To help this area blend in, first sand off the nub, taking your time to run through all the grits of sandpaper. Then apply a coat of a wipe-on finish to the entire hook. Let the finish cure fully before handling or hanging the hook.

8 / HANG THE HOOKS

Screw a ¼-in. threaded insert into the hole you drilled in Step 2. Then hang the hooks in your desired location. If there is a wall stud at the location, screw a ¼-in. hanger bolt directly into it. If no stud is present, use a ¼-in. toggle bolt with short lengths of threaded rod to screw the hook into place. ●









HOW TO SEAL BASEBOARDS

Stop drafts in their tracks and take control of energy loss in your home

BY PATRICK VANG



TMB STUDIO

SEALING BASEBOARDS IS ONE OF the simplest ways to improve your home's comfort and energy efficiency year-round. Even small gaps along the floor can become pathways for unwanted air movement, a problem driven by something called the stack effect. In winter, warm air naturally rises and escapes through upper parts of your home, drawing cooler outside air in through gaps near the floor. In summer, the process reverses, with conditioned air escaping through lower gaps while warmer air enters from above. In both cases, the air exchange forces your heating and cooling system to work harder than necessary.

The EPA estimates that air-sealing and insulating a home can cut heating and cooling costs by about 15%, and a DIY fix such as sealing your baseboards is a great first step. Plus, beyond the savings, there's nothing like a cozy, draft-free living space when temperatures start to drop for the season.

I'll walk you through the simple steps to seal baseboards cleanly and effectively, reducing energy loss while keeping out dust and pests. A more comfortable home and lower energy bills are closer than you think.

Getting Started

TIME 1 day or less • **COST** Less than $100
SKILL Beginner

MATERIALS

- 1½" 18-gauge brad nails
- 220-grit sandpaper
- Backer rod
- Caulk
- Clean shop rags
- Paint
- Painter's tape
- Quarter-round or shoe molding
- Wood filler

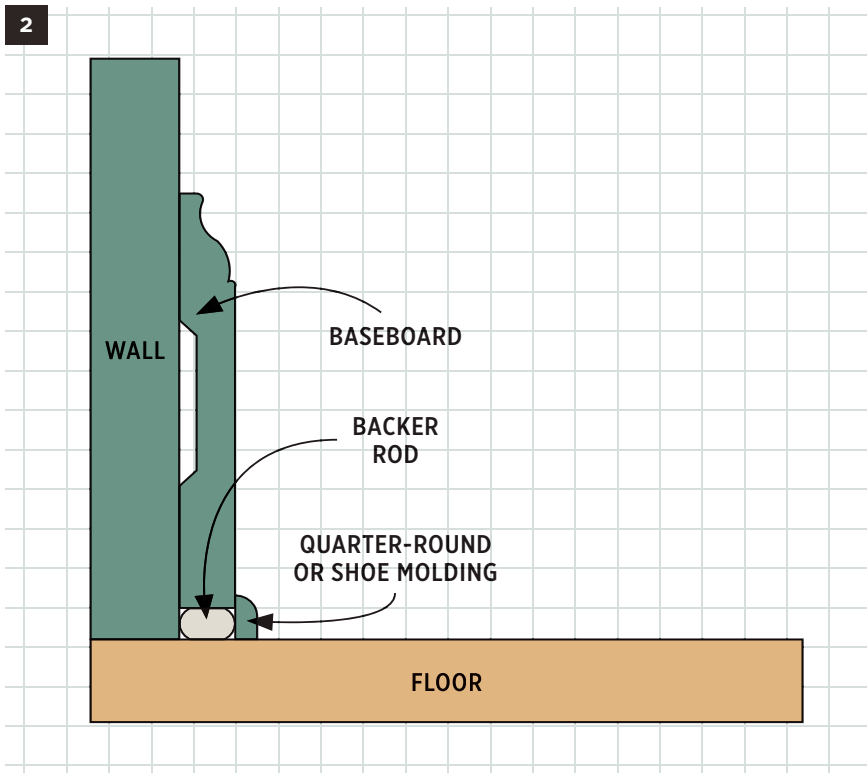
TOOLS

- 18-gauge brad nailer
- Caulk gun
- Hammer
- Paintbrush
- Pliers
- Trim puller
- Utility knife

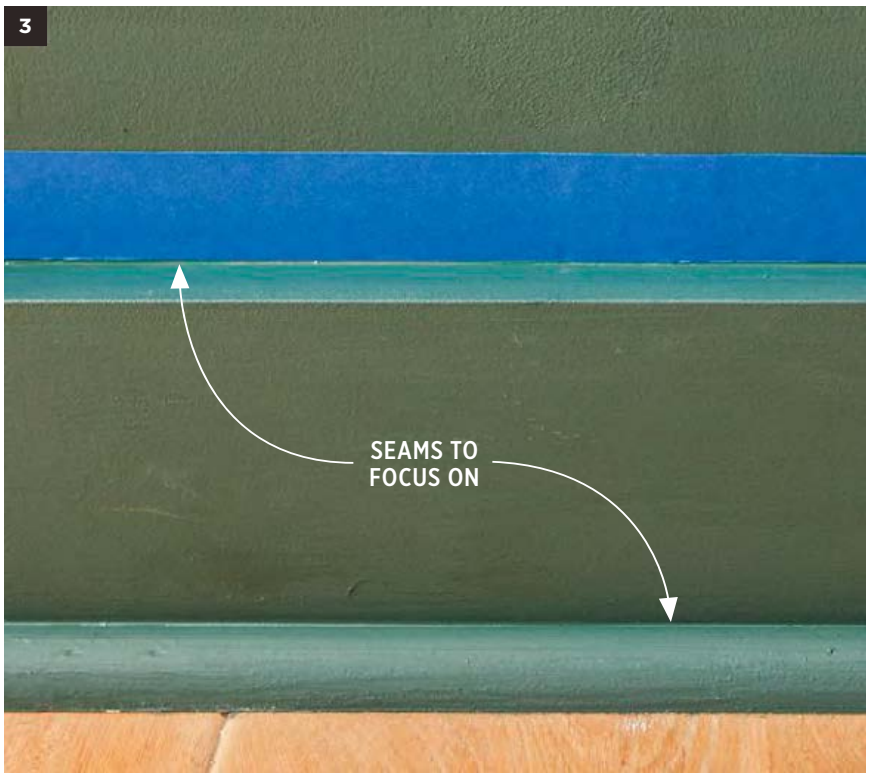
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2



3



4



1 / REMOVE EXISTING CAULK

If your baseboards were previously caulked and the caulk has dried out or separated from the wall, you will need to remove it before applying new caulk. Depending on the type and condition of the caulk, this can be a tedious process. You may be able to remove it with the baseboard in place, but in my case it was easier to remove the baseboard entirely and then clean the caulk off the wall and the back of the baseboard.

To remove the baseboard, first score the seam between the wall and the baseboard with a utility knife. Then, starting at one end of the baseboard, use a hammer to drive a trim puller into the gap. Repeat along the length of the baseboard until it separates completely from the wall.

Once you've removed the baseboard, use pliers to pull any nails from it. Clean away the old caulk with a putty knife, then reinstall the baseboard, fastening it to the studs or bottom plate with 18-gauge brad nails.

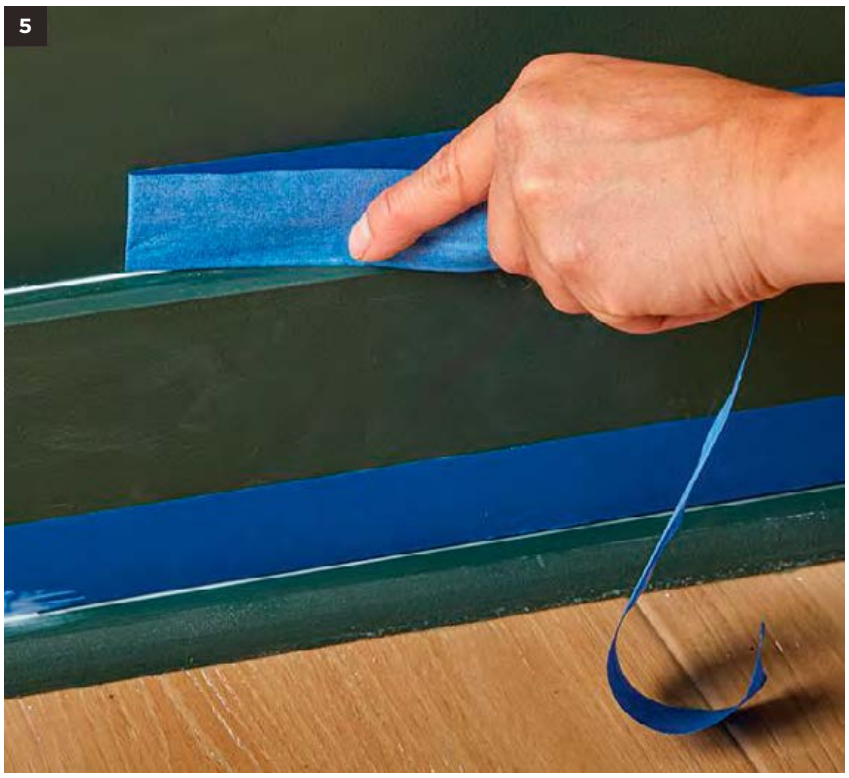
2 / INSTALL QUARTER-ROUND MOLDING

Our baseboard already had quarter-round molding installed from a previous project, but if your baseboard doesn't have quarter-round or shoe molding, that may be contributing to drafts. If there are any gaps between the bottom of the baseboard and the floor, insert backer rod before installing the quarter-round molding.

3 / MASK OFF DRAFTY SEAMS

Apply painter's tape along the seams you're sealing to keep your

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caulk beads in check and minimize the need for paint touch-ups later on.

The two main areas to focus on are the seam between the top edge of the baseboard and the wall, and the seam between the top edge of the quarter-round molding and the face of the baseboard. Tape along the floor as well, especially if it's carpeted, to keep it protected from caulk and paint.

4 / CAULK THE SEAMS

Cut the tip of the caulk nozzle at a 45-degree angle for a smooth, controlled application. Starting in a corner, apply a thin bead of caulk to the gap between the top edge of the baseboard and the wall. If your trim is painted, apply a bead of caulk to the seam between the top edge of the quarter-round and the baseboard as well. Use your finger to smooth the bead, and wipe away any excess caulk with a damp rag.

5 / PEEL OFF TAPE

While the caulk is still wet, peel off the tape. Clean up excess caulk with a damp rag before it dries. To preserve the leftover caulk in the tube for later use, cover the tip with tape or a caulk cap.

6 / FILL AND PAINT

If you removed and reinstalled the baseboard, fill the nail holes with wood filler. Then lightly sand them smooth with 220-grit sandpaper. Clean up the dust afterward to prepare the surface for paint.

Touch up the nail holes with paint while the caulk dries. After the caulk has dried, touch up the paint on the baseboard. You may need to remask off the areas you don't want to paint. ●

More Ways to Keep Cold Air Out



Chimney Balloon Co. Chimney Balloon, $43

Door Sweeps

Attach a silicone sweep to the bottom of exterior doors to seal the gap between the door and the threshold, blocking cold air and pests from sneaking in at floor level.

Draft Stoppers

These fabric tubes—often filled with rice, sand or batting—sit along the bottom of doors to immediately reduce drafts. They're an inexpensive solution and easy to make yourself.

Thermal Curtains

Heavy, insulated curtains add an extra layer of protection at windows, reducing heat loss in winter and helping block warm sunlight in summer. For best results, keep them closed on winter nights.

Weatherstripping

Foam tape, V-strips and adhesive seals close gaps around window and door frames where air commonly leaks. Weatherstripping is especially useful for older or warped openings that are letting in both drafts and light.

Fireplace Plugs/Chimney Balloons

Inflatable inserts seal off unused chimneys, stopping cold downdrafts and heat loss through an open flue. You can remove them when the fireplace is back in use.

TMB STUDIO; VIA AMAZON FOR THE CHIMNEY BALLOON

Ultimate Guide to

STONE COUNTERTOPS

Whether you're drawn to dramatic veining or family-friendly durability, here's what to know before choosing a countertop for your home

BY GEMMA JOHNSTONE





TULCARION/GETTY IMAGES

If you've been exploring a kitchen renovation, you've likely noticed that natural stone countertops never seem to go out of style. Even with today's growing selection of engineered materials, homeowners continue to choose stone for its long-lasting durability, timeless appeal and one-of-a-kind beauty. Variations in color, veining, flecks and fissures mean no two slabs are exactly alike, giving every countertop a look that's uniquely its own.

"Printing and manufacturing have come leaps and bounds, and some laminate products do a decent job of mimicking stone from a distance," says Paul Dore, an experienced stonemason and the managing director of County Stone in Arundel, England. "But close up, that illusion breaks down, as they lack the depth you get from natural stones that have been formed by nature over millions of years."

Compared with easier-to-manufacture laminate or butcher block, natural stone countertops take much more work to get to your kitchen or bathroom—and with that extra work comes a higher price tag. Slabs must be quarried, transported, fabricated to fit your space and professionally installed. Costs climb even higher when the stone is rare or sourced from remote locations.

However, Dore says natural stone is a shrewd long-term investment. "Cheaper surfaces can dull or show wear in a way that stone, when properly maintained, doesn't." With proper care, a stone countertop can last for decades and remains one of the few kitchen upgrades that consistently boosts a home's resale value.



Which Stone Is Right for You?

Every natural stone has its own strengths, weaknesses and maintenance needs. The best choice depends on how you use your space, how much upkeep you're willing to do and the look you want. Understanding the differences will help you choose a countertop that fits your lifestyle and budget.

Granite: The Reliable All-Rounder

When durability is your top priority, it's hard to beat granite. A perennially popular choice for high-use kitchens, this igneous rock is packed with hard minerals, making it highly resistant to chips, scratches and heat.

Karla Martinez, director of operations for Florida at Armina Stone, a luxury natural stone and specialty surface fabricator, describes granite as one of the most versatile and affordable natural stones available. "It's a countertop material we can use for interior and exterior surfaces, in bathrooms, for barbecues, even for walls, and there's almost no maintenance."

Granite complements nearly any interior design style, from farmhouse kitchen to sleek and contemporary, and comes in a wide range of colors, including dramatic blacks, soft grays, warm creams and subtle pinks.

Like most natural stone, granite contains microscopic pores that can absorb liquids over time. Fortunately, sealing the surface is straightforward, and in most kitchens it needs to be repeated only every 6 to 12 months.

Marble: Timeless Luxury

Marble's soft veining and classic appearance have been prized for centuries, with no other countertop conveying luxury in quite the same way. It's a favorite for homeowners seeking a refined, high-end look.

Martinez often recommends "sophisticated and exclusive" marble for bathrooms or second kitchens where aesthetics take priority over heavy-duty food preparation. That's because this softer, more porous stone scratches and stains more readily than granite or quartzite. Rather than seeing those marks as flaws, however, Martinez encourages homeowners to embrace marble's naturally developing patina as part of its character.

Quartzite: Marble's Tougher Cousin

If you love the elegant veining of marble but need a surface that stands up better to daily wear, quartzite is worth considering. Its low porosity and exceptional

TMB STUDIO

hardness make it scratch-resistant and well suited for busy households.

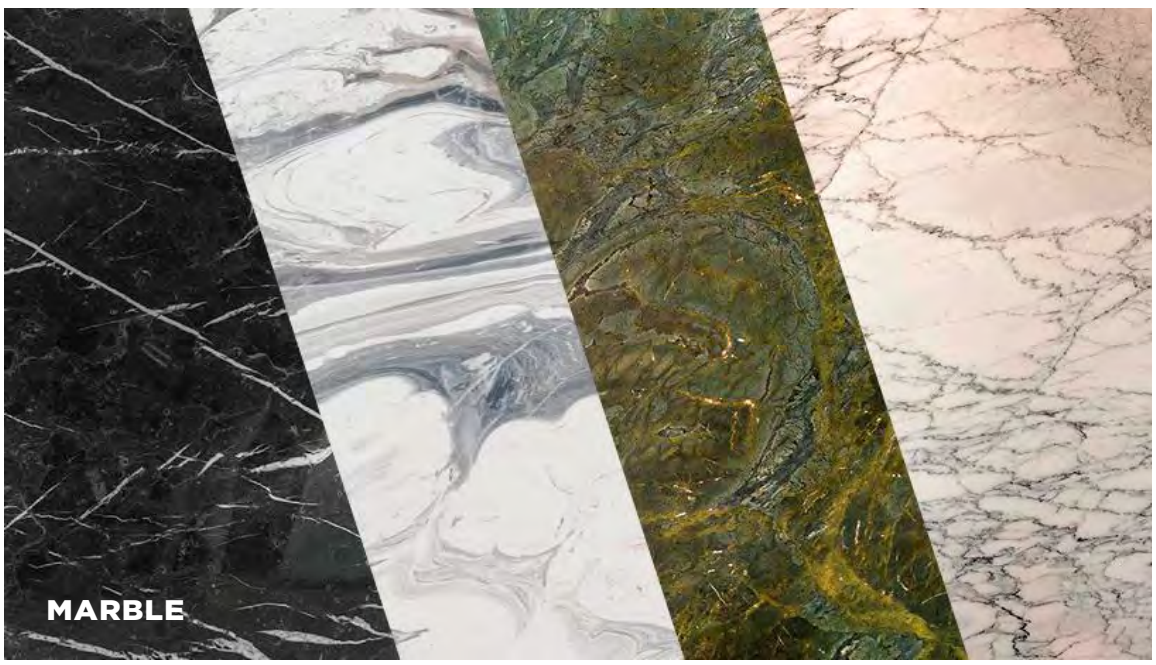
"Quartzite is stronger than marble and has more colors and tones," Martinez says. "You can use this super-durable stone for busy kitchens and other high-traffic surfaces."

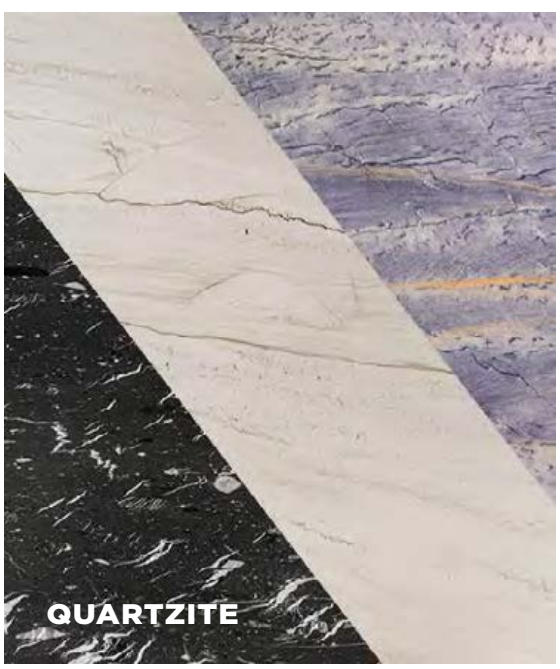
Don't confuse quartzite with the more economical and widely available quartz. Higher-priced quartzite is a natural material formed when quartz-rich sandstone is subjected to intense heat and pressure over time. Engineered quartz, on the other hand, combines crushed quartz with resin binders to create a manufactured surface. Those binders make quartz non-porous and more resistant to moisture and staining, but they also make it more susceptible to heat—hot pans can scorch the surface.

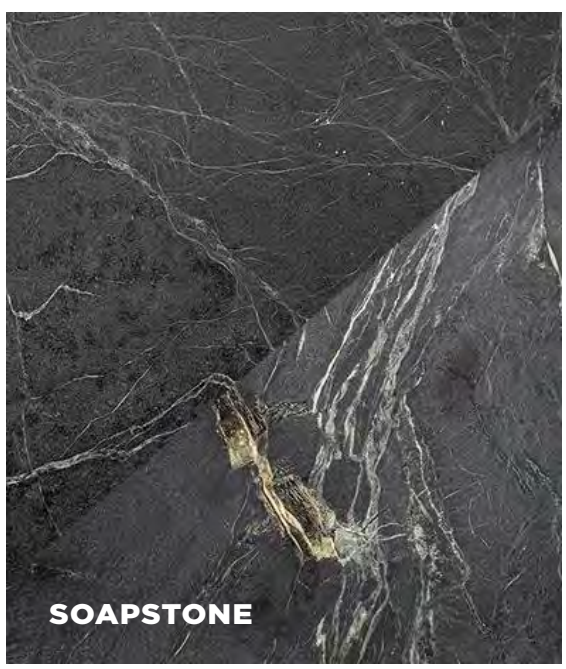
Soapstone: Warm, Understated Character

Soapstone isn't as popular or widely available as granite or marble, but it's a favorite for farmhouses, cottages and historic homes, where warmth and character are key.

This naturally dense, nearly non-porous and heat-resistant surface develops a rich patina over time and often doesn't require sealing. Although soapstone is softer than granite, minor scratches can often be sanded away, making this stone a surprisingly forgiving choice for everyday family life.







Suppliers such as Pittsburgh- and Miami-based Armina Stone stock hundreds of natural stone slabs. If possible, visit a showroom to compare full slabs before choosing one for your project.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: THOMAS-BETHGE/GETTY IMAGES; SOAPSTONE, QUARTZITE, MARBLE: ARMINA STONE



The Worst Offenders for Staining Stone

Most spills won't permanently stain a stone countertop, but some common kitchen staples deserve immediate attention. Martinez says homeowners should be especially careful with red wine, particularly on more porous stones such as marble. Coffee, tomato sauce, berries, cooking oils and dark fruit juices can also leave stains if they're allowed to sit too long.

Acidic foods such as lemon juice and vinegar have the potential to etch marble, leaving behind dull patches and discoloration. Rust from cast-iron cookware or metal cans can also discolor stone if moisture gets trapped underneath. In bathrooms, toiletries such as shaving cream, cosmetics and hair dye are common culprits.

The best defense is a quick cleanup. Mop up spills as soon as they happen so liquids don't have time to penetrate the surface.

If a stain does develop, don't panic. Many stains can be lightened or removed with stone-safe cleaning products or by a stone restoration professional. "You can gently buff the stone to remove the marks," Martinez says.



What to Know Before You Buy

Shopping for stone countertops is a more hands-on process than choosing a uniform laminate or engineered quartz. It's important to see your options in person and ask the right questions before making a final decision.

Visit the Showroom

Because natural stone can vary dramatically from slab to slab, Dore emphasizes the value of viewing the actual pieces before you buy. "What looks lovely on a small swatch can look completely different across a 10-ft. worktop," he says. "Any reputable supplier should let you view them—ideally with the slab laid out so you can see how the veining will run through your cuts."

Color is important, but also be sure to consider to how the pattern will coexist with the cabinets, flooring and lighting in your space. Dramatic veins can become a striking focal point on a large island, while softer, subtler lines often suit compact kitchens by adding depth and visual interest without overwhelming the space.

Don't Forget the Finish

The finish you choose affects both the look of your countertop and how much maintenance it will need. If you want a glossy surface that enhances color and veining and offers great stain resistance, opt for a classic polished finish. Honed finishes, with their softer matte appearance, are better at hiding the fingerprints, water spots and fine scratches that come with everyday use, but be prepared to seal them more frequently.

According to Martinez, leathered finishes are becoming increasingly popular. The tactile, dimpled surface, which mimics natural leather, highlights the stone's natural texture and rich color, tightens pores to improve stain resistance, and disguises smudges and other small imperfections.

Compare Contractors

Stone countertop projects often include several specialists: Stone yards supply the slabs, fabricators measure and cut the stone, and installers transport and fit the countertops. However, some retailers handle the entire process in-house, which can simplify scheduling and give you a single point of contact if any issues arise.

Before placing your order, Dore recommends asking where the stone was quarried to establish quality and credibility, what the maintenance requirements are and whether sealing is included in the installation. It also pays to discuss slab size, seam placement, backsplashes and appliance cutouts early in the process, as all these influence both the final appearance and overall cost.

Caring for Your Countertops

With routine care, a quality stone countertop can remain one of the hardest-working and most attractive features in your home for decades.

Day-to-day maintenance is straightforward. For everyday cleaning, simply wipe down the surface with a soft cloth and pH-neutral cleaner. Avoid using abrasive pads or harsh chemicals, which can damage the finish or protective sealer. Martinez also recommends resealing your countertops every six months to a year to help prevent stains.

To work out when it's time to reseal, simply sprinkle a few drops of water onto your stone surface. If the water beads up, the sealer is still doing its job. If it soaks into the stone or makes the surface look darker, then it's time to apply another coat.

Be aware that even the toughest countertop isn't indestructible. To maximize longevity, use cutting boards for food preparation, place hot cookware on trivets and wipe up spills promptly, especially acidic liquids such as lemon juice, vinegar and wine, which can etch marble (see "The Worst Offenders for Staining Stone," page 41).

You can sand and refinish superficial scratches on some stone surfaces yourself, but for larger cracks, widespread etching or structural damage, it's best to hire a stone restoration specialist.

Keep in mind that neglect, not heavy use, is the biggest cause of premature wear. A few minutes of routine maintenance—addressing spills quickly, cleaning regularly and resealing when needed—will help your stone countertops provide decades of reliable performance.

LIUDMILA CHERNETSKA/GETTY IMAGES

Countertop Edges, Explained

The shape of your countertop's edge influences its style, safety and everyday performance

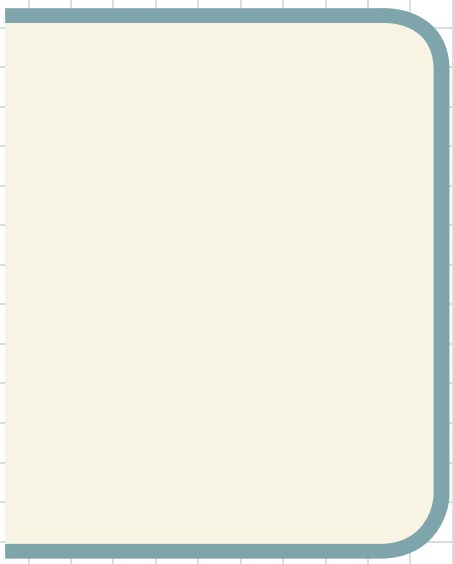
While an edge profile may seem like a small detail during a countertop remodel, it can have a big impact on both the look and functionality of your space. The edge profile is simply the shape of the countertop's exposed edge, from simple squared-off styles to more decorative and ornate designs. Dore says today's homeowners are gravitating toward two very different trends.

"The first is a move back toward simplicity, especially eased or pencil edges in modern and Scandi-style kitchens where clean lines do the talking," he says. A beveled edge is another good option when you want to introduce a clean angular detail, while a cove edge, with its gentle inward curve, offers a softer look that's also easy to wipe clean.

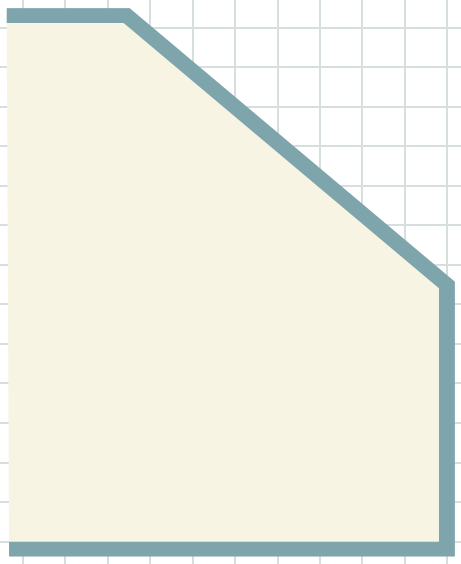
At the opposite end of the spectrum, decorative profiles are making a comeback. Dore says S-shaped ogee edges are growing in popularity: "While once reserved for more traditional or country-style kitchens, they're now being used with modern, Shaker-style cabinets to add that wow factor."

As attractive as ogee edges are, they aren't the most practical choice for busy family kitchens. Their grooves can collect crumbs and grease, making them more time-consuming to clean.

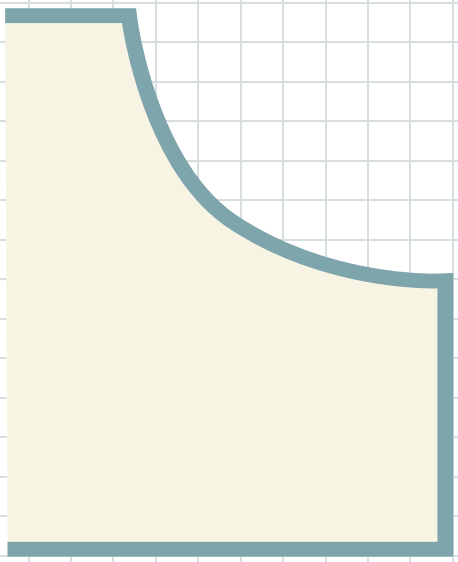
"In homes with young children, bullnose and half-bullnose are always popular, since the rounded edge is safer around little heads at worktop height," Dore says. ⬢



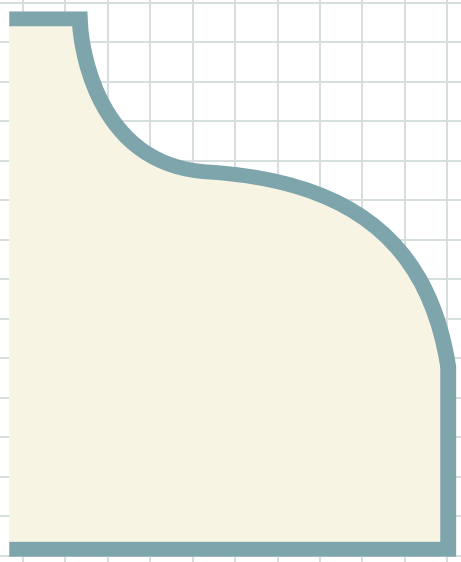
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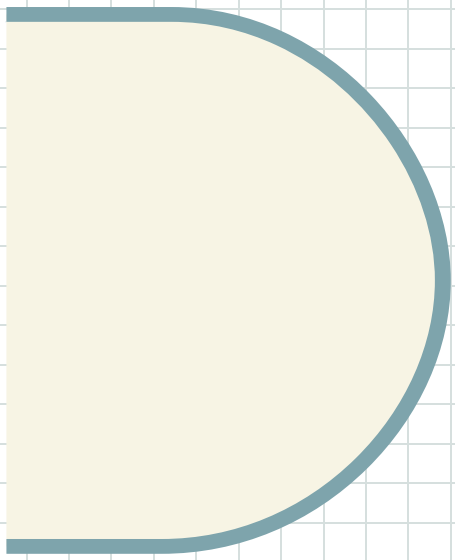
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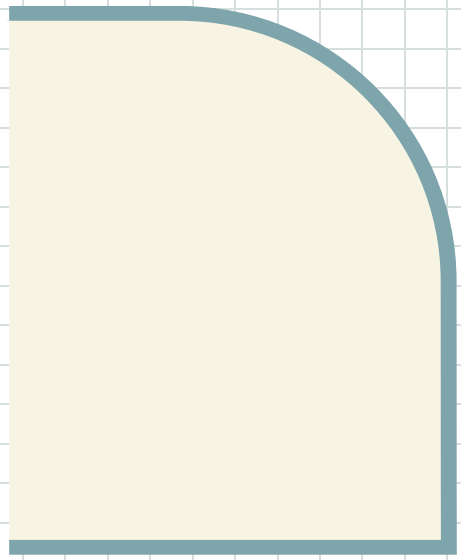
COVE



OGEE



BULLNOSE



HALF-BULLNOSE

DRIVEWAY DETAILING

Ready to kick dirt, dust and pet hair to the curb? These four easy projects deliver a fresher, cleaner ride—without the professional price tag.

BY PATRICK VANG







Make Leather Interiors Shine

Regular cleaning and conditioning keeps leather soft, supple and looking its best

LEATHER SEATS ELEVATE A VEHICLE'S interior, but they need regular care to prevent dirt buildup, stains and premature wear. Whether you're dealing with muddy paw prints, sticky spills, or everyday dust and grime, a monthly cleaning helps preserve their appearance and extend the life of the leather.

Here's how I clean and condition leather seats using a few basic tools and products. The process takes less than an hour, restores a fresh like-new appearance, and protects against cracking and fading.

OPPOSITE PAGE: JUPITERIMAGES/GETTY IMAGES; THIS PAGE: TMB STUDIO

MATERIALS

- Car interior cleaner spray
- Heavy-duty double-sided tape (optional)
- Leather conditioner or 3-in-1 leather cleaner, conditioner and protectant
- Microfiber towels

TOOLS

- Boar's hair detailing brush
- Vacuum

1 / VACUUM

Start by vacuuming the entire car interior, including the floors, door compartments and seats. A clean interior prevents dirt and debris from transferring back onto the seats as you clean. Pay close attention to the seams, stitching and crevices.

If any seats have tears, apply a small piece of tape to the back of the tear to hold it flat. This temporary fix helps keep the surface flat as you apply the cleaner and conditioner. You can simply work around the tears if you prefer, but taping them down will make the process easier.

Pro tip: Use an air compressor with an air gun nozzle to dislodge crumbs, dirt, pebbles and other debris from seat perforations and tight seams.

2 / APPLY INTERIOR CLEANER

Spray a generous amount of cleaner onto a clean microfiber towel. Using circular motions, wipe down the entire seat, including the headrest. For the seams and crevices, scrub back and forth in the direction of the seam. To clean deep into the seams, wrap the microfiber towel around a plastic card or your fingernail and trace the seams.

You will likely notice a difference in the color tone of the seat as you clean it. The clean parts will have a satin sheen instead of matte. Reapply the cleaner as needed, then let it dry.

Pro tip: Griot's Garage Interior Cleaner Spray has been one of my



Leather or Leatherette?

Many "leather" seats in today's vehicles are actually made from synthetic materials, commonly called leatherette. Automakers often use trademarked names for these surfaces, such as Toyota's SofTex and BMW's SensaTec.

Not sure what you have? Start with your owner's manual or the manufacturer's website. You can also enter your vehicle's VIN into an online decoder for trim-level details. Some seats may also have manufacturer labels on their underside.

Genuine leather, typically found on higher trim levels, offers a natural look, soft feel and better breathability. It also develops a patina over time that many owners find appealing. Leatherette is more uniform in appearance, is generally more durable and costs much less to produce. It's also an animal-free option.

Whichever material your seats use, choose cleaning products specifically labeled for it to avoid damaging the finish.

go-to cleaning products for years. I've noticed that my seats look cleaner for longer than they do when I use other brands, and I like that the cleaner doesn't leave any slippery or greasy residue.

3 / DEEP-CLEAN WITH A BRUSH (OPTIONAL)

A microfiber towel is sufficient for routine cleaning, but for a deeper clean, use a soft-bristled boar's hair detailing brush on tight seams and perforations. Apply two to three sprays of cleaner directly to the seat, then gently scrub the area with the brush, moving it in a circular motion on flat surfaces and back and forth along the length of the seams. Small white suds may form as you brush, but they will clear up quickly. Apply more cleaner to other areas as needed. Once finished, wipe any residue off the seat with a clean microfiber towel and let it dry completely.



4 / APPLY CONDITIONER

Next, condition your leather seats with a 3-in-1 cleaner, conditioner and protectant or a standalone conditioner. I prefer to use a 3-in-1 product because it conditions the seats and removes any light dust that may have accumulated on them as they dried. Be sure to use a product that is formulated for the material in your car (see "Leather or Leatherette?"). My car seats are made from synthetic leather, so I used a 3-in-1 product that works with synthetic materials. For cars with genuine leather seats, use a standalone conditioner for best results.

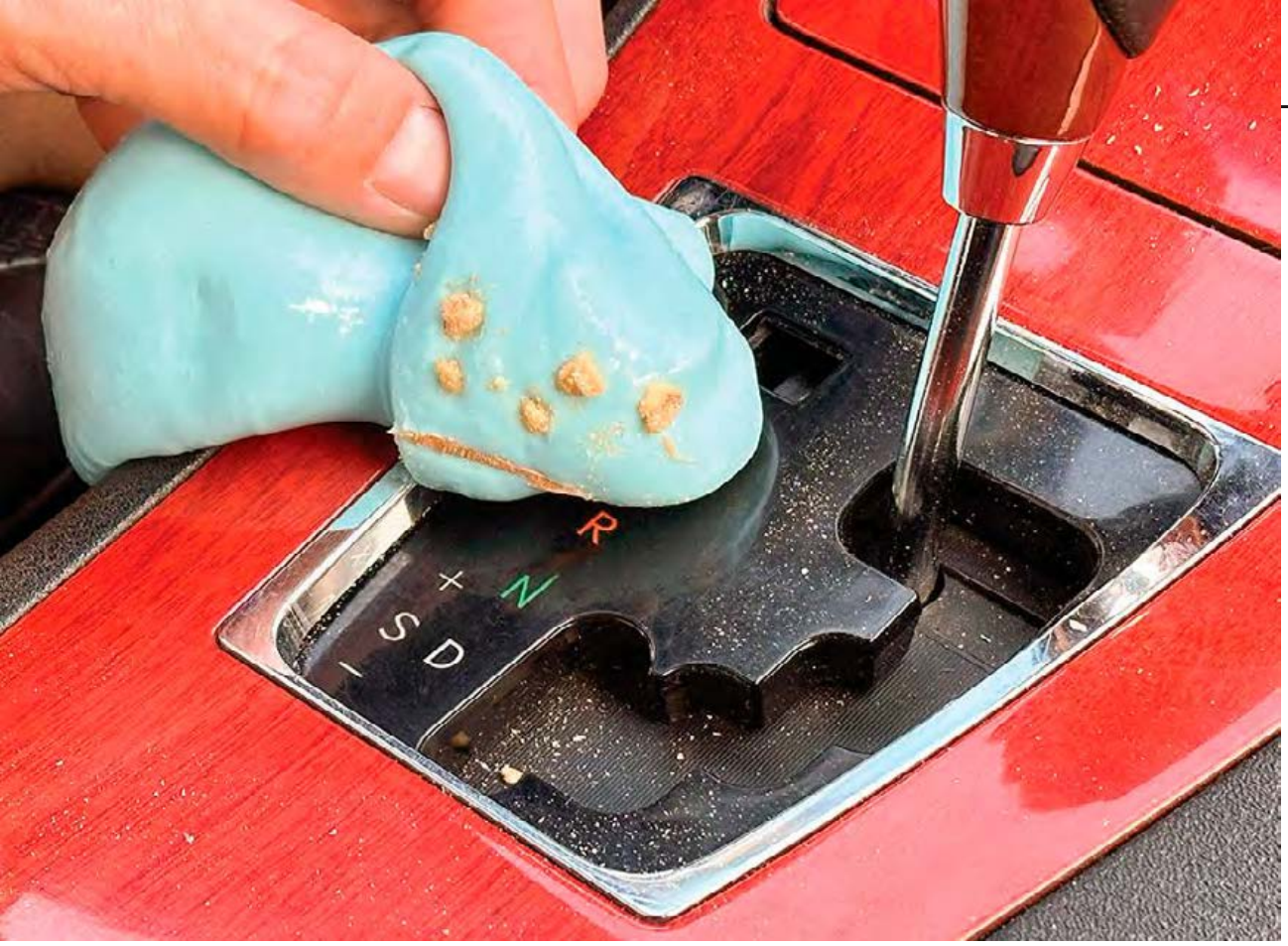
Spray or apply a generous amount of conditioner onto a clean microfiber towel and work it into the leather, using a side-to-side or circular motion as with the cleaner. Get into every seam and crevice and all around the headrest for complete protection.

Reapply the conditioner as needed (a little goes a long way). Wipe away any residue to prevent buildup and streaking. If your car has perforated seats, be sure you don't oversaturate them, as this can clog the holes and create ventilation problems.

After applying the conditioner, avoid sitting on or touching the seats for 12 to 24 hours. If you sit in the car when the conditioner is not yet fully absorbed or dry, it may transfer to your clothes. Once finished, your leather seats should look refreshed and protected.



FROM TOP LEFT: ALGRE/GETTY IMAGES; TMB STUDIO



DIY Car-Cleaning Gel

Turn this childhood favorite into a secret weapon for cleaning hard-to-reach spots

REMEMBER WHEN HOMEMADE SLIME TOOK over every kitchen table? This grown-up version turns that childhood craze into an effective car-cleaning tool. The gel molds into tight spaces to lift dust and crumbs from air vents, cup holders and other hard-to-reach areas. It's quick to make, fun to use and a handy addition to your car-care toolkit.

MATERIALS

- Baking soda
- Contact lens solution
- Elmer's white glue
- Food coloring (optional)
- Plastic spoon

TOOLS

- Measuring spoons
- Medium glass bowl
- Small glass jar or zipper-lock bag

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1 / PREPARE THE MIXTURE

In a medium glass bowl, combine 4 oz. of Elmer's white glue, 2 tsp. of baking soda and 3 drops of food coloring (if desired). Stir with a plastic spoon until the mixture is smooth, then add 1 to 2 tbsp. of contact lens solution to the bowl.

Note: Use a contact lens solution that contains boric acid or sodium borate—these ingredients react with the glue and baking soda to give the gel its slime-like consistency. A glass bowl makes cleanup easier and helps prevent sticking.

2 / MIX AND KNEAD

The mixture will begin to thicken immediately. Fold it over itself with the spoon until it forms a ball, then set the spoon aside and begin kneading by hand. It's normal to have excess contact solution in the bowl at this stage, but once you start kneading and stretching the gel over it, the gel will soak up the excess. At first, the gel may stick to your hands, but after a few minutes of kneading, the gel should become smooth and elastic. That means it's ready to use.

Note: Some people's skin may be sensitive to glue or boric acid. Wash your hands thoroughly after mixing or handling the gel.

3 / TEST AND USE THE GEL

Before cleaning your car, test the gel in a small, inconspicuous area. The gel works best on hard plastic surfaces such as cup holders, air vents and buttons. Avoid upholstery and other porous surfaces, where it may stick or leave residue. If the gel leaves some residue or is too soft, add a little more contact solution to firm it up.

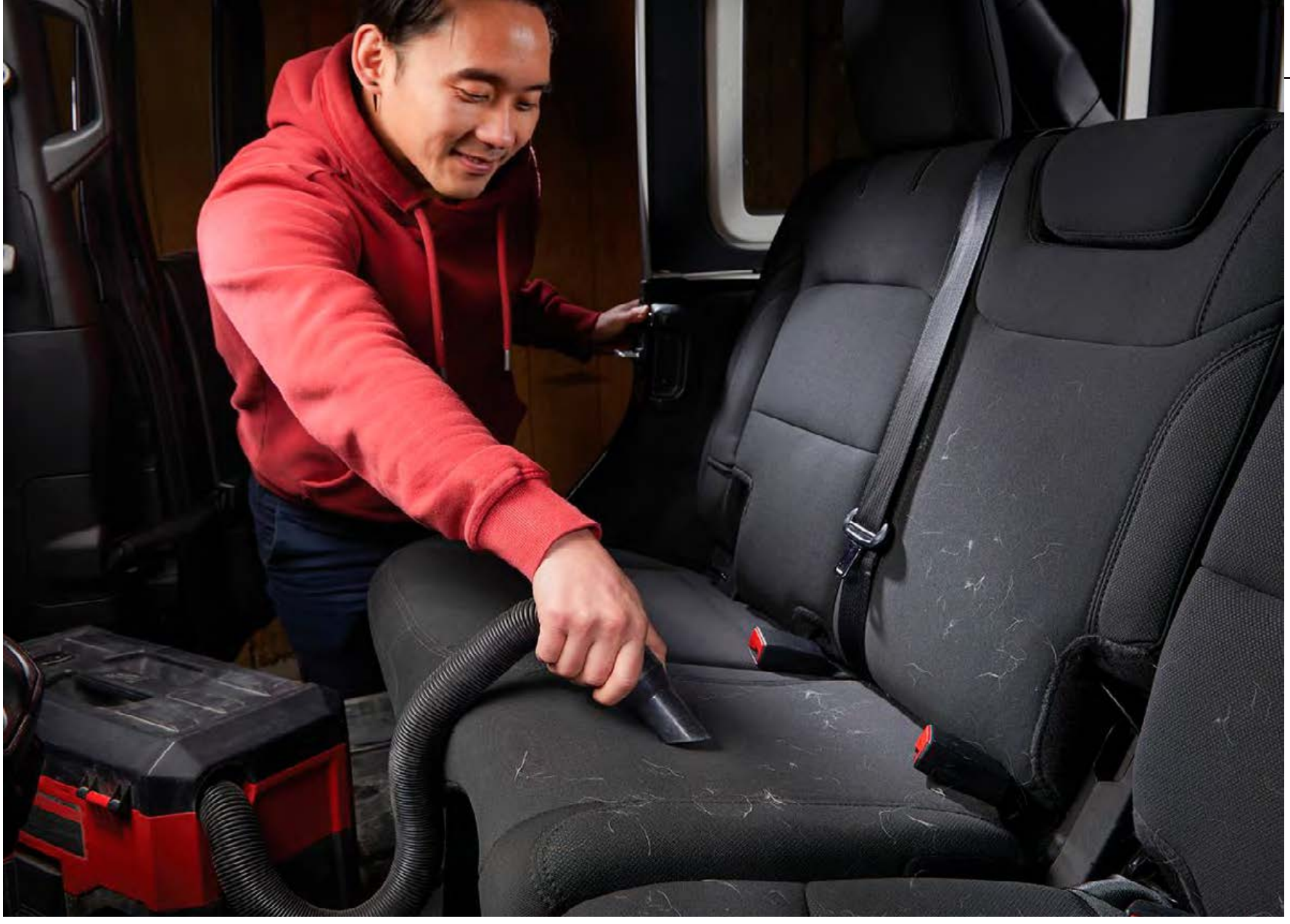
Press the gel onto surfaces to lift hair, crumbs and debris. When you need to pick up more, fold the cleaning gel over itself to reveal a new, clean side and repeat.

Store the gel in a small glass container or a zipper-lock bag in a cool location, and discard it when it stops picking up dirt and debris.

Note: Don't store the gel in your car—high heat can cause it to melt.







Send Pet Hair Packing

Don’t let every trip to the dog park turn your car into a fur trap—learn a simple technique to lift stubborn pet hair fast

DOGS MAKE EVERY ROAD TRIP, errand run and Sunday drive better, but every dog owner knows the trade-off: a never-ending battle with the fur they leave behind. If your car is starting to feel more like a fur-mobile than a family vehicle, this project is for you.

A little water and basic cleaning tools are all you need to remove embedded dog hair from car seats and carpets. The result is a refreshed interior and one less mess to worry about before your next adventure (nose prints on the windows are a project for another day).

MATERIALS

- Water

TOOLS

- Fan
- Lint roller
- Pet hair removal tool
- Shop vacuum
- Spray bottle

1 / VACUUM EVERYTHING

Start by using a shop vacuum to remove loose dirt, debris and dog fur from the seats and carpets. Pay extra attention to seat cracks and corners, where hair and dirt build up. You don’t need to use any attachments with your vacuum—just remove the loose stuff.

2 / NEUTRALIZE THE STATIC

If the pet hair seems “glued” to the upholstery or carpet, static electricity is likely the culprit. To neutralize it, fill a clean spray bottle with water, set the nozzle to the widest spray pattern, and lightly mist the seats and carpet.

Moisture neutralizes the static charge and helps release the hair from the fabric, making it easier to remove. There’s no need soak the seats—a light mist is enough.

3 / SCRAPE

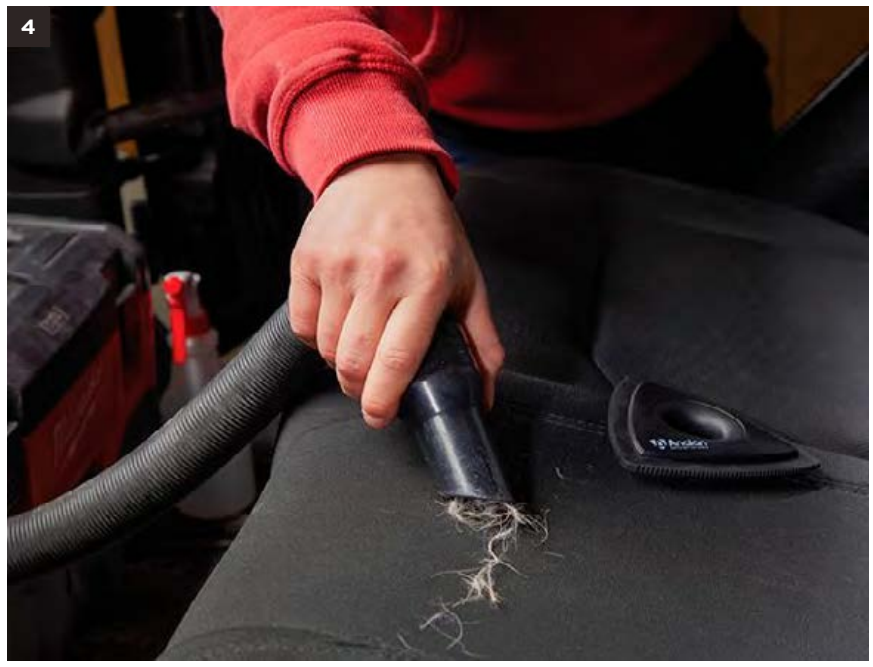
Using a rubber-toothed pet hair removal tool (I use Analan’s Mini Pet Hair Detailer), agitate the seat fabric and carpet to pull hair from the weave. This step requires some patience and elbow grease, and it works best when pulling the tool toward you. Work in sections, cleaning the tool as you transition from one section to the next. Pile

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the accumulated hair into one spot or line the hair across the floor or seat for easy vacuuming later. If your tool has different-sized rubber teeth, start with the largest and work your way to the smallest for best results.

4 / VACUUM AGAIN

Make a second pass with the shop vacuum, again without using any attachments. Vacuum the hair you've piled up, then vacuum the seats and carpet to get rid of any dirt or debris loosened by scraping.

5 / FINISHING TOUCHES

Use a lint roller to pick up any stray hairs. Run a fan inside the car or leave the windows down to help dry any residual moisture from the static-neutralizing step.

FROM TOP: TMB STUDIO; DOG: EKATERINA KOBALNOVA/GETTY IMAGES

Pick Up Pet Hair Around Your Home

If you're battling a fur blizzard in your car, chances are you have a few trouble spots at home too. We asked cleaning professionals to share their best strategies for keeping pet hair under control, from smarter laundry and vacuuming habits to surprising ways to reduce static cling.

FUR-BUSTING TIPS

Scan the QR code for more expert-approved strategies to keep pet hair under control.



Clean Out Cruddy Cup Holders

These catchall spaces fill up fast with coins, clutter and mystery gunk. Here's how to reclaim them for your drinks again.

FEW THINGS IN A CAR are more embarrassing than a cup holder that's a makeshift trash can. If your passengers have started suggesting they drive instead, good news—you can fix the problem fast.

Here's how to clean your car's cup holders and restore them to like-new condition so you can stop apologizing and start offering rides again. The process works just as well whether you use a store-bought cleaning gel or the DIY version on page 47. Best of all, this deep clean takes just 30 minutes from start to finish.

MATERIALS

- Car-cleaning gel
- Car interior cleaner spray
- Car interior protectant spray

TOOLS

- Boar's hair detailing brush
- Microfiber towels
- Vacuum

1 / EMPTY THE CUP HOLDERS

Remove any cups, trash and debris from the cup holders. Take out any removable inserts or separators.

2 / VACUUM

Vacuum the inside and around the outside of the cup holders to remove any remaining small debris. If your cup holder has a lid, close it and vacuum along the edges to pull out any dirt or crumbs wedged in the cracks.

3 / USE A CLEANING GEL

After vacuuming, follow up with a car-cleaning gel to pick up debris the vacuum couldn't reach. Form the gel into a ball and roll it around in the cup holder, occasionally pressing it into the edges and corners. Its sticky surface will lift and trap leftover particles.

You can reuse the gel a few times before discarding it—just fold over the dirty side to expose a fresh surface for the next pass.

4 / SCRUB

Spray an interior car cleaner inside the cup holder. Use a soft-bristle boar's hair brush and a microfiber towel to scrub the inside and outside, paying special attention to cracks and corners.

For cup holders with inserts or separators, use the brush to remove caked-on grime, then wipe with a microfiber towel and cleaner.

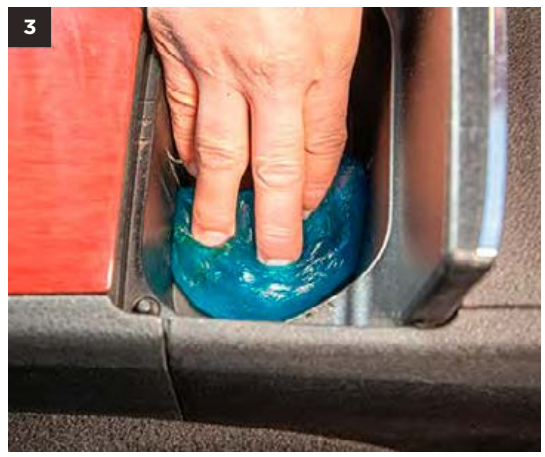
Once the cup holders have been scrubbed, wipe them down with a clean microfiber towel. Use your fingernail or a plastic card to push the towel into cracks and seams to remove any remaining cleaner.

5 / APPLY PROTECTANT

Spray an even layer of car interior protectant onto a clean microfiber towel. Apply the protectant to the cup holders, ensuring it is evenly distributed on the inside and outside of the cup holders and any inserts. When it's dry, wipe away the excess and reinstall any cup holder inserts.

The protectant leaves a clean, shiny finish and helps protect your car interior from UV damage, which can cause fading, discoloration and cracking over time.


2


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TMB STUDIO



10 Good Habits for a Cleaner Car

How you treat your car between deep cleans can make all the difference in controlling mess, odors and everyday clutter



Keep a microfiber towel in the glove box for on-the-go touch-ups.

1. Don't Eat or Drink in the Car

Crumbs, wrappers and sticky spills can quickly make a vehicle feel dirty. They also attract pests and create lingering odors.

2. Wipe Up Spills Quickly

If a no-food rule isn't realistic for your family, clean up messes as soon as they happen. Fresh spills wipe up easily, but dried soda, coffee and sauces become sticky and much harder to remove.

3. Keep Cleaning Supplies Handy

Store a microfiber towel in the glove box for quick touch-ups. Wipe the dash, console and door handles once a week to prevent dust and grime from building up.

4. Manage Trash

Keep a small trash bag or bin in the vehicle and empty it regularly. A good reminder: Toss trash whenever you stop for gas.

5. Vacuum Weekly

If you use your car daily, vacuum the seats, floor mats and carpeting at least once a week. Remove any floor mats before vacuuming—debris tends to collect around the edges of the mats and get ground into the fibrous floor carpeting.

6. Use All-Weather Mats

If you live in an area with dirt roads or frequent rain or snow, install all-weather floor mats. They trap sand, mud and water and can be easily hosed off.

7. Avoid Clutter

Stow pens, receipts and other small items in the glove box or designated compartments, and keep the passenger seat clear. Likewise, avoid turning your trunk into a storage closet—carry only the essentials so it stays functional.

8. Watch What Passengers Bring In

Before passengers climb in, check for muddy shoes, open containers or messy bags. A simple rule helps: If something comes in with a passenger, it leaves with them.

9. Don't Smoke in the Car

Smoking leaves behind odors, ash and residue that are difficult to remove and can reduce a vehicle's resale value. Professional detailers can help restore a fresh smell, but prevention is far easier.

10. Make Cleaning Part of Your Routine

A few minutes of maintenance each week prevents dirt buildup and makes deep cleanings faster. Wash the exterior every two to three weeks and give the interior a quick weekly clean to keep things looking their best. ⬢



Tackle crumbs weekly with a hand-held vacuum.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: CANART7/GETTY IMAGES; ARTEM STEPANOV/GETTY IMAGES; VOLODYMYR BUSHMELOV/GETTY IMAGES

A RUNG ABOVE THE REST

Whether you need a single-step stool or an ultra tall extension ladder, learn how to choose the best option for safe, confident work

BY LAURIE NICHOLS



Stepladders

Freestanding stepladders simplify everyday tasks. Look for one that's easy to set up and stable enough for the job.

Length and Weight

Add about 4 ft. to a stepladder's folded length to estimate its maximum working height. Following this guideline, a 6-ft. stepladder is suitable for rooms with standard 8- to 9-ft. ceilings, while a 10- or 12-ft. model provides a working height of roughly 14 to 16 ft.

"Make sure to choose a ladder of sufficient size, and always keep your body centered between the side rails to avoid overreaching," says Joe Zgrabik, account executive for the American Ladder Institute. To maintain your balance, never stand on the top cap or top step.

Also consider the ladder's weight: A typical 6-ft. aluminum stepladder weighs just 8 to 15 lbs., while larger, heavier-duty models can exceed 50 lbs., making them more difficult to carry and set up.

Material

Rigid fiberglass ladders offer excellent stability for climbing and working. They're also the safest choice for electrical work because fiberglass is nonconductive.

"Aluminum conducts electricity, so if the work to be done is near a source of electricity, an aluminum ladder should not be used," Zgrabik says. "Electrical shock can trigger a fall or even cause your heart to stop."

Aluminum ladders are lighter, easier to carry and generally less expensive than fiberglass, making them a fine choice when electrical hazards aren't a concern. However, they can flex more than fiberglass, especially in taller sizes.

Duty Rating

Always look for an American National Standards Institute (ANSI) duty rating before buying a ladder. It indicates the maximum weight the ladder can safely support, including the user, tools and materials.

"If a ladder's unrated, don't touch it," says Reuben Saltzman, president of Minnesota-based home inspection company Structure Tech.

ANSI duty ratings range from Type III (light duty, 200-lb. capacity) to Type IAA (special duty, 375-lb. capacity). Also check for a safety label, typically affixed to the ladder rails, explaining proper setup, use and storage.

Cost

Think about how often you'll use the ladder before deciding how much to spend. A 6-ft. light-duty aluminum stepladder typically costs $60 to $100, while a 12-ft. extra-heavy-duty fiberglass model can run $500 to $800. Premium ladders often feature helpful add-ons such as wider steps, built-in tool trays, paint-can hooks and slip-resistant feet.



INNOVATIVE TOP

DeWalt 8-ft. Fiberglass Stepladder

This ultra stable fiberglass ladder supports up to 300 lbs. for extra-heavy-duty use. Its versatile magnetic top includes a hardware tray, tool slots, and holders for a pipe or 2x4 and a paint bucket. The slip-resistant feet keep it steady as you climb. Find it for $308 at Home Depot.



ULTIMATE FOOT COMFORT

Gorilla 5.5-ft. Fiberglass Dual-Platform Step Ladder

Weighing just 22 lbs. with a 10-ft. reach, this ladder features two 10-in. standing platforms for comfort on long jobs. The handy project bucket is an added perk. Available for $169 at Home Depot.



LIGHTWEIGHT

Werner 350 6-ft. Aluminum Type II Step Ladder

At 13.5 lbs., this medium-duty ladder is a breeze to carry and set up. Designed for painting, it has a multipurpose top for brushes, fasteners and more, plus a built-in pail shelf. This affordable pick is $109 at Lowe's.

FACING PAGE: MASTERZPHOTOIS/GETTY IMAGES; THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: VIA HOME DEPOT FOR DEWALT, VIA HOME DEPOT FOR GORILLA, VIA LOWE'S FOR WERNER

Extension Ladders

To reach gutters and rooflines, you'll need more than extra length. Choose a ladder that keeps you safe at those heights.

Length

Leaning extension ladders typically come in lengths from 16 to 40 ft. Keep in mind that you may need one 8 to 10 ft. longer than the height you need to reach. "You lose height when you lean ladders at an angle against the house, and the top 3 ft. are unusable," Saltzman says. When setting up an extension ladder, follow the 4-to-1 rule: For every 4 ft. of height to the top support point, set the ladder base 1 ft. away from the wall. "Never place a ladder on sloped or slippery surfaces," says Zgrabik, and have someone hold the ladder with a firm grip on both side rails whenever possible. Always maintain three points of contact as you climb.

Material

Fiberglass is the strongest and stiffest option and the best choice for taller ladders, heavy-duty work, and jobs near electrical hazards. Aluminum ladders are lighter, easier to maneuver and more affordable, but they can flex or feel bouncy during use.

Style

Traditional extension ladders offer the best stability and highest weight ratings. Most extend with a rope-and-pulley system and lock securely in place.

Multi-position ladders transform into extension ladders, stepladders and other configurations, making them highly versatile. The tradeoff is weight, as they're usually heavier to carry and set up.

"If you're looking for something light and easy to transport, consider a telescoping ladder, like the ones made by Xtend+Climb," Saltzman says. These ladders store easily and set up quickly but require occasional cleaning and lubrication to keep the telescoping sections operating smoothly.

Duty Rating

Choose an extension ladder with an ANSI duty rating that exceeds the user's full working weight, including tools and materials.

Cost

How much you should spend depends on how often you'll use the ladder and the type of work you're doing. "If you're a contractor working on ladders all day, the cost of a fiberglass ladder makes sense," Saltzman says, "but it's harder to justify for occasional homeowner use."

Traditional extension ladders typically cost about $150 for basic aluminum models to more than $700 for premium fiberglass versions. Multi-position and telescoping ladders generally range from $200 to $600.

SPACE SAVER

Xtend+ Climb Pro Series 785P+

This heavy-duty, aluminum-alloy telescoping ladder collapses to just 36 in. when not in use for easy storage and transport. In seconds, it fully extends to 15.6 ft., providing a safe working height of 12.5 ft. Buy it for $475 from *xtendandclimb.com.*



SUPER STABLE

Werner 16-ft. Type IA Fiberglass D-Rung Extension Ladder

Boasting slip-resistant D-rungs and "twist-proof" technology, this ladder won't bend or bounce, even when fully extended. Separate the fly sections from the base to use it as a single ladder too. Available for $400 at Home Depot.



VERSATILE

Little Giant Velocity Multi-Position Articulating Ladder

"The only ladder a homeowner may ever need," according to Saltzman, this multi-position ladder from Little Giant works like 33 ladders in one, with ratchet leg levelers for uneven terrain and wheels for easy transport. Buy it for $538 from *littlegiantladders.com*.



FROM LEFT: VIA PAINT LIFE SUPPLY FOR XTEND+CLIMB, VIA WERNER CO., VIA LITTLE GIANT LADDER SYSTEMS

Step Stools

Get the boost you need for quick tasks, from reaching pantry shelves to changing bulbs



TMB STUDIO

1. FOLDING STEP STOOL
A folding step stool is an easy-to-store, lightweight option when you need a bit more height. It's ideal for occasional tasks such as reaching upper cabinets, door frames or low ceilings.

2. ROLLING STEP STOOL
Often found in libraries and warehouses, a rolling step stool is also handy in the garage or anywhere frequent repositioning is needed. Spring-loaded casters retract when the stool is stepped on, providing a stable surface.

3. TODDLER TOWER
Designed to support young children's independence and curiosity, a toddler tower features enclosed sides and a large standing platform. It helps a little one safely reach a countertop, table or sink for activities such as cooking, crafts and handwashing.

4. WOODEN STEP STOOL
A furniture-style wooden stool blends form and function. It's often used in a bathroom to help kids reach sinks.

5. PLATFORM STEP STOOL
Sometimes just a small boost will do to reach kitchen, laundry room or garage shelving. The wide, stable base and low rise of a platform stool make it a helpful aging-in-place aid for seniors. ⬢

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BEST PRO TIPS

FIREPLACE SMARTS

A chimney sweep shares the cleaning and maintenance habits that keep your home safe all burning season long

BY ALLY CHILDRESS



GLADIATHOR/GETTY IMAGES



Wood-burning fireplaces bring character—and extra maintenance.

After working in the chimney industry for most of her life, Tracy Zarriello traded the office for the rooftop—and she's never looked back. Now the owner of Queen Sweep Chimney, Plumbing, Air Conditioning & Heating Services, she has seen firsthand what causes the most common fireplace problems and knows exactly how homeowners can avoid them. Here are her top tips for a safe, warm and worry-free fall and winter.

Know Your Fireplace

The maintenance your fireplace needs depends largely on the type of unit in your home. While you may not always get to choose your fireplace—many homeowners simply inherit the one that came with the house—it pays to know how it works and how to care for it to avoid unnecessary service calls.

Wood-burning fireplaces create an undeniably cozy atmosphere with real flames and soothing crackling, but they're also the most labor-intensive option. They produce ashes, require regular chimney maintenance, and mean hauling firewood and keeping fireplace tools nearby, including a poker, tongs, broom and ash shovel.

Gas fireplaces offer the convenience of an on-demand fuel supply and don't produce messy ashes. They carry a much lower risk of chimney fires than wood-burning fireplaces and require less care and maintenance overall, but regular inspections are still recommended to ensure the burner and venting system are working properly.

> "A fireplace should provide warmth and enjoyment—not become a hidden fire hazard."

Electric fireplaces have simulated flames and produce no combustion byproducts. They're primarily decorative, but most models also include a heating element and function as a space heater.

When it comes to heating efficiency, "many homeowners are surprised to learn that a traditional open wood-burning fireplace can actually pull heated air out of the house," Zarriello says. "If your goal is heating, a gas insert or an EPA-certified wood stove is usually far more effective than an open masonry fireplace."

The Hidden Hazard in Your Chimney

If you have a wood-burning fireplace, it's important to understand creosote.

"Creosote is a highly flammable residue created when wood smoke cools and condenses inside the chimney," Zarriello says. "Think of it like grease accumulating inside a kitchen exhaust hood."

Creosote begins as light, flaky soot but can progress into crunchy, tarlike deposits and eventually a hard, shiny glaze. Zarriello says this last stage is the most dangerous because it's much harder to remove and can ignite with only a spark or hot burst of exhaust.

OLEG BRESLAVTSEV/GETTY IMAGES



Chimney caps keep rain and pests out and help contain sparks.

A chimney fire can exceed 2,000 degrees, Zarriello says, and sound like a roaring freight train. But some of the fires aren't so dramatic.

"Many homeowners don't realize they've had a chimney fire because some are slow-burning and occur inside the flue," she says. Yet even an unnoticed chimney fire can cause a cracked flue liner, structural damage and the potential for dangerous levels of carbon monoxide to enter your home.

Simple Habits That Pay Off

Preventing creosote buildup starts with smart burning habits and regular maintenance.

Zarriello recommends burning only seasoned hardwoods such as ash, maple and oak. "Wood should generally be dried for 6 to 12 months or longer and have a moisture content below 20 percent," she says. Burning wet or green wood produces more smoke and creosote.

Make sure the damper is fully open before lighting a fire, and leave it open while the fire burns. "Airflow is everything," Zarriello says. "A properly drafting chimney pulls smoke upward and out of the home." That airflow helps create a hotter, more efficient fire.

Use a fireplace screen to contain sparks, and remove excess ash from the firebox only after it has completely cooled. Once a month during burning season, inspect the firebox for cracked bricks or deteriorating mortar joints. Test the damper to make sure it opens and closes properly, then go outside and look at the chimney cap from the ground. A missing or broken cap lets in rainwater and gives animals an opening to nest in your chimney.

"A properly installed chimney cap is one of the best investments a homeowner can make," Zarriello says.

Don't Skip Your Annual Inspection

Have your chimney professionally inspected at least once a year. "While homeowners can perform visual checks, they cannot see most of the flue system without specialized equipment," Zarriello says. A qualified professional can inspect the flue liner and other parts of your chimney; check for creosote buildup, water damage and masonry problems; and confirm proper ventilation.

"A fireplace should provide warmth and enjoyment—not become a hidden fire hazard," Zarriello says. "A yearly inspection helps protect your home and your family." ●

Are Chimney-Cleaning Logs Worth the Hype?

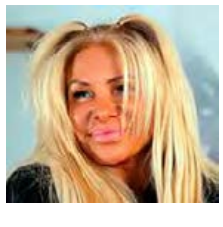
Commonly sold at home centers and online, chimney-cleaning logs (also called creosote-sweeping logs) release chemicals as they burn and are marketed as an easy way to reduce creosote buildup. Simply burn the log like a piece of firewood, then sweep out any loosened debris after the fire goes out.

But Zarriello warns they aren't a substitute for professional chimney maintenance. As she puts it, "Don't be fooled by chimney-cleaning logs!"

"While some products may help loosen light deposits, they do not eliminate the hardened creosote that sticks to the inside walls of your chimney," she says. "The only way to properly remove creosote is through a chimney inspection and a cleaning using the proper equipment."

Creosote is a serious fire and safety hazard, and relying on a cleaning log alone can create a false sense of security. "Protect your home and your family—don't rely on a log when your chimney needs a real cleaning."





MEET THE PRO

Tracy Zarriello is the owner of Queen Sweep Chimney, Plumbing, Air Conditioning & Heating Services, a second-generation family business serving Ocean County and Monmouth County, New Jersey.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: RONSTIK, DIGITALFARMER/GETTY IMAGES (2); TRACY ZARRIELLO

FIX-IT FOCUS

FIX YOUR FRIDGE

Frustrated by refrigerator issues? Use these tips to handle common problems and routine maintenance.



Is it a bad sign when the water dispensed from a refrigerator isn't cold?

Not usually. In older refrigerators, water is often stored in a reservoir near the crisper drawers. But in many modern models, water flows through tubing that runs up the back of the refrigerator to the water filter, then down to coiled tubing that serves as a storage tank, and back up to the door dispenser. Along the way, it's exposed to warmer parts of the refrigerator. Because the water is constantly flowing through the tubes instead of chilling in a reservoir, it may not be as cold as you'd like. Here are a few ways to enjoy colder water:

- Keep a small glass handy for the first 4 oz. or so of water, then fill your drinking glass.
- Make sure your refrigerator is full (but not overcrowded). The fewer items in your fridge, the harder your fridge must work to maintain a cool temperature (usually 34 to 38 degrees on newer models).
- Wait at least 15 minutes between fill-ups. If you've just filled a big glass or pitcher, give the water in the coiled tubing time to cool off before dispensing more.

BRETT HOLMES PHOTOGRAPHY/GETTY IMAGES



What's the process for cleaning an ice maker?

If the ice from your refrigerator has an unpleasant smell or taste, it's probably time to clean the ice maker. Do this once or twice a year, depending on how often you use it:

- **Turn off the ice maker.** Raise the metal arm to the up ("off") position. If your model doesn't have a shutoff arm, follow the directions in the owner's manual.
- **Remove the existing ice.** Take out the ice bin and discard all the ice.
- **Clean the ice bin.** Wash the bin with a sponge and warm, soapy water. Dry with a clean towel. A 50-50 vinegar-water solution can be used in place of dish soap.
- **Clean the interior of the ice maker.** Wipe down all accessible parts, including the dispenser chute (if applicable), with a cloth saturated with warm, soapy water. Dry everything thoroughly with a clean towel.
- **Reinstall the ice bin.** Return the bin to its original position.
- **Replace the water filter.** Install a new filter if your refrigerator uses one (check the owner's manual if you need help finding it). Take the old filter with you to the store—or take a photo of it—to make sure you buy the correct replacement.
- **Run the ice maker.** Lower the shutoff arm (or follow your model's instructions), let the ice maker run and discard the first couple of batches to flush out the old water still in the lines.

What's the ideal temperature for a freezer?

We all learned in school that water freezes at 32 degrees. While that temperature is fine for making ice cubes, it's too warm for safely storing frozen food because mold and bacteria can continue to grow on food surfaces. According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the ideal freezer temperature is zero degrees. This is also the recommended factory setting for most major refrigerator brands, helping keep food safely frozen while conserving energy and extending the life of the appliance.

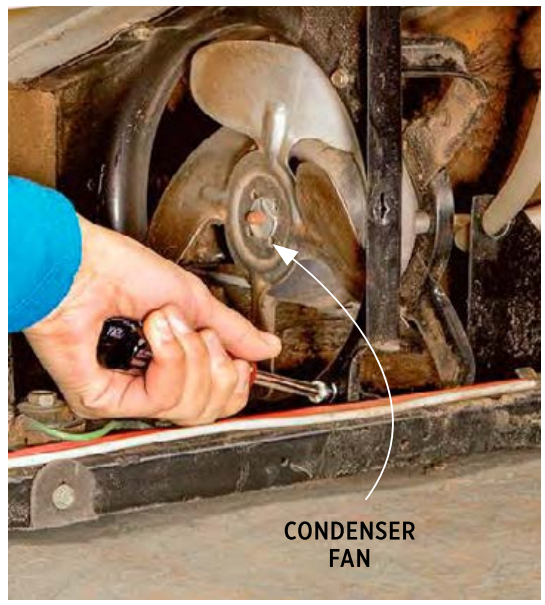
TMB STUDIO

Why would a fridge run but not get cold?

Dirty condenser coils are a common culprit. When they're clogged with dust, the refrigerator can overheat, causing the compressor's overload protector to shut it down. The refrigerator may restart automatically once the compressor cools, but by then your food may already be warming up. Vacuum the coils regularly to clear debris and prevent overheating.

Also check the condenser fan. If it's blocked by debris or not spinning freely, the fridge can't release heat efficiently. Remove any obstructions and clean the fan thoroughly.

Finally, check the interior light. A stuck or misaligned door switch can leave the light on even when the door is closed, raising the temperature inside the refrigerator. To test it, close the door and use a butter knife to pull the door gasket slightly away from the frame. If light shines out, the switch may be faulty or out of alignment.







How do you clean stainless-steel surfaces?

Dish soap is a trusty staple. Put a drop on a microfiber cloth with warm water and wipe with the grain of the metal. Wipe again with a clean damp cloth, then towel-dry to prevent water spots and soap residue.

For tough grease or fingerprints, use a stainless steel cleaner. These products are formulated to cut residue without leaving streaks, making them a good step up when soap and water aren't enough.

For a quick polish after cleaning, a little olive oil can help restore shine. Apply it with a microfiber cloth and buff with the grain until smudges disappear. Follow with a dry microfiber cloth to remove excess oil and prevent a greasy finish; this leaves behind a thin protective layer that resists fingerprints.



Why is it important to clean refrigerator coils?

Dust and debris can easily accumulate on refrigerator coils, forcing the appliance to work harder and use more energy. Fortunately, cleaning the coils is simple. First, unplug the refrigerator and access the coils (they're usually behind the front kickplate or on the back of the unit). Use a shop vacuum to remove dust and debris. For hard-to-reach places, use an air compressor with a blower nozzle to loosen the dust, then vacuum it up. Remove any stubborn dirt with a soft-bristled brush or duster, then vacuum again. Finally, clean the floor around your work area, reattach any panels and plug the fridge back in.

How do you fix an ice maker that's not making ice?

First, listen. Do you hear anything? There should be a rumbling from the auger inside the ice bin. If there's a rumble and no ice, ice is likely stuck in the door chute and needs to be cleared out. If you hear a hum but no rumble, the auger is probably stuck and can't spin; emptying the bin and reloading the ice may fix it. If you don't hear any sound at all, the dispenser switch may be broken and will likely need to be replaced by a pro. If you hear the auger turning and nothing's clogging the chute, move on to these steps:

- **Check the water supply.** Behind your refrigerator you should find a valve for the water line. Turn the valve counterclockwise as far as it will go to open the supply. If there's still no water, the line may be frozen and needs to be thawed.
- **Check the temperature.** The freezer temperature should be set to zero degrees. If it's set to minus 3 degrees or colder, the lines to the water dispenser and ice maker can freeze. To thaw them, move the freezer contents to the refrigerator (along with any available ice) and unplug your refrigerator for eight hours with the freezer door open. This will thaw ice buildup while keeping the refrigerator section cold. Then plug it back in, return the frozen food to the freezer and reset the temperature to zero degrees.
- **Check for a clogged ice bin.** Pull out the bin and find the round metal auger that runs the length of the bin. It needs to turn to move ice toward the chute, so make sure no ice is blocking it from spinning.
- **Check the auger assembly.** Reach to the back of the compartment where the ice bin sits. Below the ice maker, you'll find a two-pronged metal fork that spins the auger. Turn it clockwise or counterclockwise. If it won't turn or just spins freely, call a pro to fix the auger motor and gear box.

FROM LEFT: S-CPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES; ANDREY ZNAMENSKYI/GETTY IMAGES



Is it possible to give a dirty white fridge a facelift?

A great place to start is with the handles, which tend to yellow and collect grime over time. Instead of replacing them, clean and repaint for a quick, budget-friendly refresh. You'll need spray paint formulated for plastic, plus a degreaser and a scrubbing pad.

Pry off the caps that cover the side screws, then open the door and remove the remaining screws. Take off the handles and wash them with degreaser and hot water, scrubbing any textured areas to remove buildup. Wipe them with a dry cloth and let them air-dry completely. Mask off any emblems or chrome trim, then spray-paint, coating the sides first, followed by the flat surfaces. Once the paint has dried, reinstall the handles.

Why do some people keep baking soda in the refrigerator?

Baking soda is a highly effective odor neutralizer. As bacteria break down food, they release smelly molecules that can be either acidic or alkaline (basic). Baking soda, aka sodium bicarbonate, reacts with these compounds to help reduce odors. Stash an open box in the refrigerator and replace it about every three months.

Tip: Date the box so you know when to replace it. ●



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: TMB STUDIO, FANCY/VEER/CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES, TMB STUDIO



Simple Fixes for a Refrigerator that Isn't Cooling

If your refrigerator isn't cooling properly, start with these quick checks. You may be able to solve the problem yourself before calling a pro.

- Make sure the refrigerator is plugged in and getting power. The interior light should turn on when you open the door.
- Check the thermostat to make sure it hasn't been adjusted by mistake.
- Move food or containers away from the vents at the back of the freezer and refrigerator compartments. Blocked airflow can prevent proper cooling.
- Vacuum the condenser coils under or behind the fridge. Dust buildup prevents the coils from releasing heat efficiently, forcing the compressor to work harder, reducing cooling performance and shortening the appliance's lifespan.
- Inspect the condenser fan to make sure nothing is obstructing it and it spins freely.

HANDY HINTS

KITCHEN WINS

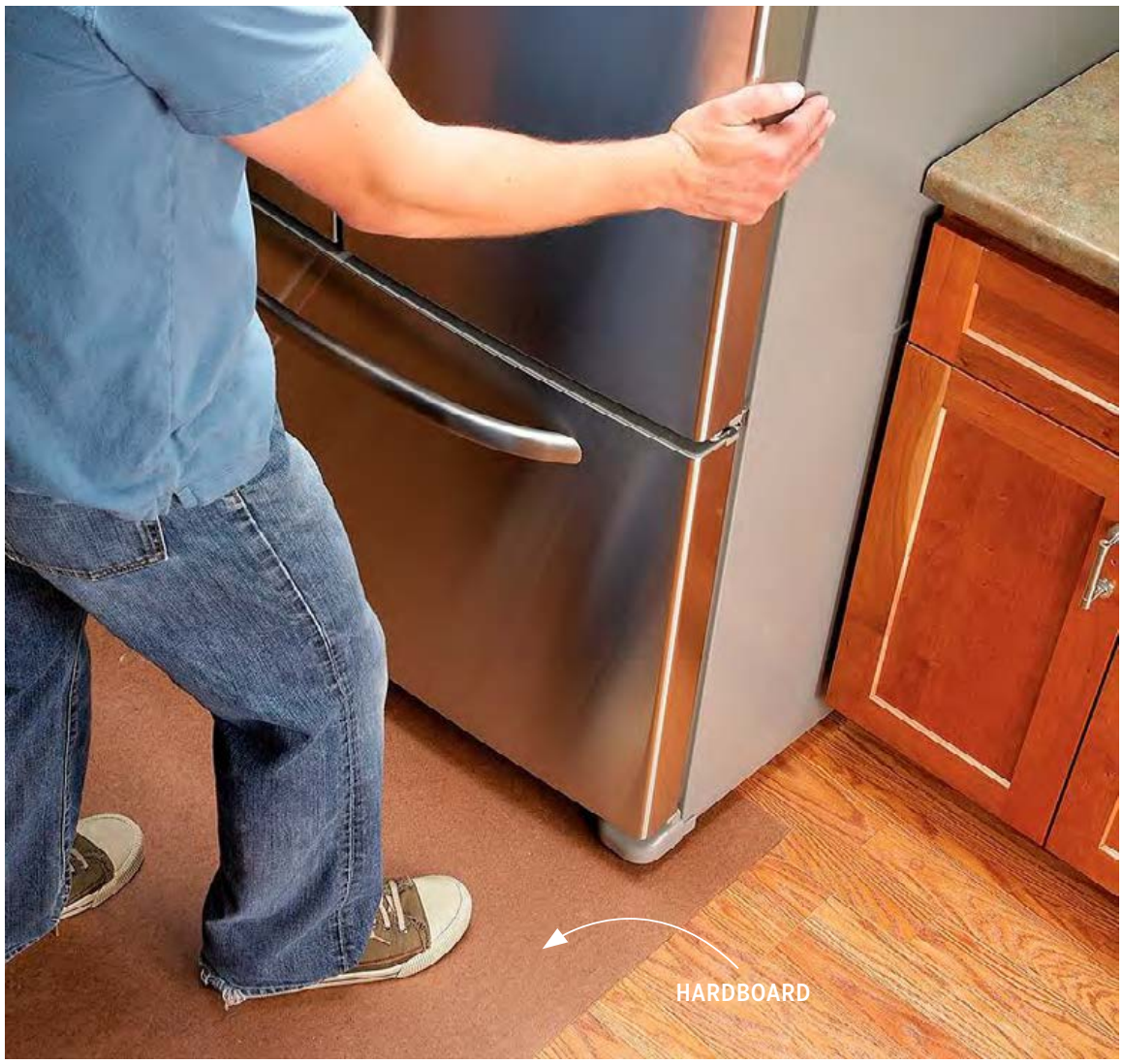
Readers share smart solutions for everyday problems in the heart of your home

Spice Storage Shake-Up

I gave my bulk spices and baking supplies a practical upgrade by threading old Parmesan shaker lids onto small Mason jars. Now I have an easier way to sprinkle and measure ingredients.

—SHARON GOLDFARB





A Better Way to Move Appliances

The metal wheels of a refrigerator can scratch, dent or gouge just about any flooring surface. Laying down stiff cardboard or a piece of leftover carpet provides an effective barrier, but for the best protection, use a sheet of ⅛-in. hardboard. The smooth surface protects floors and helps appliances slide into and out of place. **—ANTHONY LOMBARDI**



Monitor Power Outages with a Penny

To find out if power outages ruined the food in your freezer while you were away on vacation, freeze a container of water and rest a penny on top of the ice. If the penny is at the bottom when you get back, it means the power was off long enough to melt the water—as well as thaw (and likely spoil) everything in the freezer. **—JOHN NAKAMURA**

TMB STUDIO



Easy Jar Labels

If you don't have a label handy, use a rubber band instead. Stretch it around your Mason jar, then write the contents with a permanent marker. The grippy rubber also makes the jar easier to open. **—DAVID KOWALCZYK**



Picture Frame Message Board

I wanted a nicer-looking place for my weekly grocery list and family notes, so I turned a picture frame into a dry-erase board. I simply cut decorative paper to fit the frame and put it behind the glass, creating a surface I can write on with a dry-erase marker. **—JESSIE DAWSON**

"For a minor scorch mark on a laminate countertop, skip the abrasive cleaner. Buff it out with car wax or a mixture of toothpaste and baking soda instead."
—ELAINE WHITFIELD



Catch Sink Rim Leaks Early

Leaky seals around faucets and sink rims can lead to slow but severe damage (they can destroy a countertop, for example). So after installing a new sink or faucet, dribble water around the area and wait a few minutes. Then get under the sink and look for leaks. **—GREGORY PRITCHARD**



Trash Bag Dispenser

Build a simple dispenser for your trash bags using ½-in. pipe and a few fittings. Screw a floor flange to the cabinet, thread in a 3-in.-long pipe nipple, and then thread a 90-degree elbow onto the nipple. Cut the vertical pipe so it's a bit longer than the width of the roll of bags. Finally, thread the vertical piece into the elbow and slip on the roll. **—TRAVIS LARSON**



Cordless Drill Kitchen Mixer

Sometimes it's tough to mix foods such as old-fashioned oily peanut butter in a small jar by hand. But if you enjoy reaching for a power tool to solve a problem as I do, head out to the garage. As it turns out, the handle of a mixing spoon fits perfectly in the chuck of a cordless drill. **—CLIFF MERCER**



Double Your Resealable Bags

I turn sandwich-size bags into snack-size bags by heating up an old butter knife with a lighter and slicing the bag in half. The hot knife cauterizes the edges of the two new bags, and the cauterized edges are just as strong as the factory-sealed edges. **—JULIA TRENTON**

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Ceramic Mug Sharpening Stone

Need to sharpen a utility knife, pocket blade or scissors but don't have a sharpening stone on hand? Flip a ceramic mug and use the unglazed ring on the bottom as a sharpener. Hold the blade at a 45-degree angle and slide it across the ring in one direction, from the base to the tip. This won't replace a proper sharpening kit, but it can quickly clean up a dull edge in a pinch. **—RONALD ALVAREZ**



Arrange Spices A to Z

Alphabetizing spices helps you quickly find what your recipe calls for and makes putting away jars just as fast. Another benefit? You can easily figure out which spices are missing from your pantry, so you're less likely to discover you're out of a key ingredient halfway through making a meal. Take a quick glance before grocery shopping to keep staples stocked. **—MARTIN SUTHERLAND**





DIY Ice Packs

Ice packs are a great way to keep your lunch cool, but they can be expensive to replace if you tend to lose them. To make your own reusable version without spending a lot, soak a sponge in water, then place it in a small resealable plastic bag. Freeze it overnight, then pop it into your lunch container. As the ice melts, the bag holds the water until the sponge reabsorbs it. When you get home, simply refreeze the pack for next time. I like to keep several on hand to use in lunches and coolers, as well as for first aid. They're inexpensive to make, easy to reuse and help reduce waste. **—TOM SHERIDAN**



Pasta Lighter

When your favorite candle burns too low for a lighter or match to reach the wick, don't risk burning your fingertips. Instead, light a piece of uncooked spaghetti. It is long enough to reach deep into tall candle holders and burns long enough to light the wick. **—PATRICIA HART**

"For an extra-fresh garbage disposal, toss in a few lemon or lime peels. Run the disposal with cold water until you can't hear any more grinding, then run it for another 30 seconds (with the water still on)." **—GREGORY HOLT**





Pegboard and Dowel Drawer Organizer

My kitchen drawers used to be an absolute wreck, with pans and dishes crammed in however they'd fit. And seemingly every time I needed something, it was at the very bottom of the drawer. My solution was to cut a piece of ⅛-in. pegboard to the size of the drawer bottom and attach dowels using screws from underneath. Now my pans are organized and easy to access. The 10 minutes it took to build was easily made up with how much frustration it has saved me. **—JIM DAVIDSON**



Right-Height Cookbook

A countertop isn't the best place to keep a recipe while you're cooking. It takes up counter space, is difficult to read and is bound to get splattered. Instead, use a clothes hanger with pants clips to hang the recipe from a cabinet handle. Open the book or magazine to the desired page (or use a printout), clamp it in place and you have a simple hanging stand. This trick works best with smaller cookbooks, magazines or single-sheet recipes. **—GLENN WHITE**



No-Mess Refills for Sink Soap

Crawling under a kitchen sink to refill the soap dispenser was a hassle, so I tried filling it from above. But when I did, the soap formed an air-lock bubble and overflowed, creating a mess. That's when I came up with the idea of inserting a drinking straw in the dispenser neck to relieve "bubble block." Now when I refill the dispenser, the air escapes through the straw and the soap stays where it belongs. **—PAUL SNYDER**

TMB STUDIO



Wash More Than Dishes

A dishwasher makes quick work of disinfecting washable toys such as plastic building blocks. Drop the blocks in a mesh laundry bag and run your dishwasher as usual. Remove the bag before the drying cycle, letting the blocks air-dry on a towel. This method also works for items such as seashells, dish brushes, sponges and rags. **—ROBERT VALENTI**



Instant Counter Space

An ironing board with the cover removed can be used as an extra cooling rack when you're doing a lot of baking. Better yet, it frees up valuable counter space for other kitchen tasks. Just be sure to use pans, paper liners, parchment or some other barrier between baked goods and the board. **—LIZ GRABOWSKI**



One Twist Does the Trick

If your refrigerator stops dispensing water after you change the filter, make sure the new filter is fully seated. Many people don't twist it in completely, and one final turn may be all it takes to get the dispenser working again. **—STANLEY BEAUMONT**



Scrub It Clean

When the rubber sink baffle on my garbage disposal gets grimy or starts to smell, I switch off the power at the breaker and scrub it with an old toothbrush dipped in hot, soapy water and baking soda. I lift the rubber flaps to clean underneath, where food and grime collect. Then I restore power, rinse it with cold water and run the disposal briefly to flush away the debris. **—CHARLES MCALLISTER** ⬢

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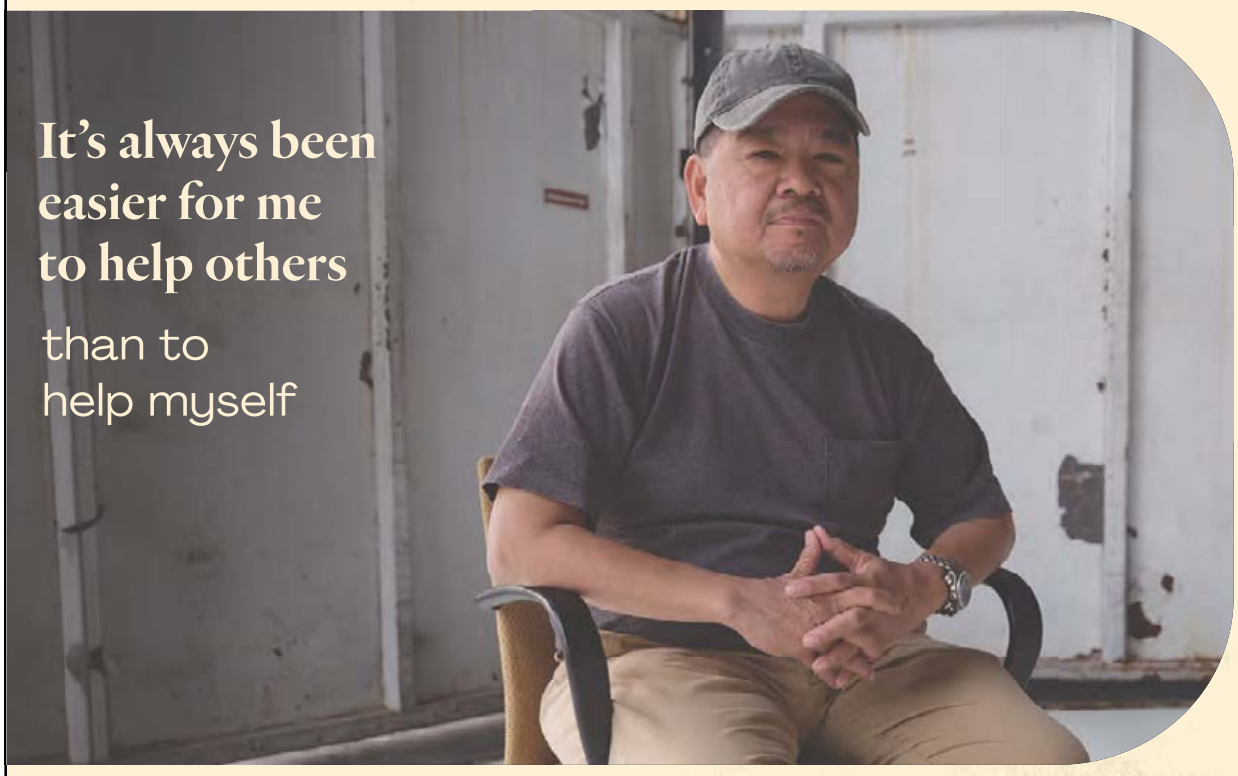
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My father-in-law, Ken, refined my drawing, set up a makeshift shop in our garage and built a red oak mantel to complement the home's original trim and floors. Because the century-old fireplace was far from square, he built the mantel in sections, fitting each piece to account for curves and unevenness.

Although staining and varnishing the sanded pieces became a team effort, Ken handled the installation mostly on his own, even using brooms to hold up the final front molding piece as he adjusted it into place—just one example of the creativity the project required.

Looking at the mantel now, with its rich red oak glowing in the evening light, we see more than wood. We see our father's expertise, our family's patience and the final piece that completes our home.

—CASSI MEITL, Detroit, MI ●



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