



Organize the Garage

In November and December we discussed cleaning house, preparing bedrooms for overnight guests, cooking holiday dinners, and decking the halls. Afterwards, we packed up the decorations, incorporated the new gifts, and began to assume a more regular schedule.

January or February is the perfect time to concentrate on an area outside the house: a place where things are stored (and sometimes lost and forgotten!), a place that is mainly functional, and often ignored, and a place for storage. Let's take a look at the garage.

The family garage is often considered the man's domain, though it houses and protects items that belong to everyone. Although I am neither a mechanic nor a carpenter, I do have some opinions and suggestions about what we keep and how we utilize the space in the garage.

Like all well designed rooms, storage areas are predominantly about function. The most important elements to consider are editing, organization and functionality, so let's discuss these one by one as they pertain to your storage area, henceforth referred to as 'the garage'.

Editing is a topic frequently discussed in this column. As a redesigner, I often work in homes with an overabundance of possessions, which results in too little usable space. Something to consider: if you don't have enough storage, the simple truth may be that you have too much stuff.

For many people, editing is the hardest part: deciding what they really need to keep, and getting rid of the rest. Fashion experts advise that if you haven't worn something in a year, get rid of it. I daresay the same is true of things in the garage, although maybe a three-year leeway could be allowed instead. But really, what good is that particular tool or piece of equipment if, after four years, all you can say with certainty is "it's in here somewhere"?

So, step one is editing the contents of your garage down to the things you really need or use. If you're not using that four-person tent or exercise machine right now, ask yourself: what are the chances you will use them within the year? You can wait a year and then decide, but the decision has to be made at some point. If you don't personally know someone who would enjoy an item, rest assured that it will be appreciated after you donate it to a thrift or consignment shop.

Start with athletic or camping equipment and work your way around to tools, gardening, car parts, and old furniture...all the things we slowly accumulate; the things that clutter our garages and inevitably our lives.

Once you have decided what you absolutely need in your garage, think about where and how it is to be stored. Workbenches can be constructed with a few pieces of lumber, or purchased from a home improvement store and then assembled. Shelves may be built to supply storage, and, while you're at it, build as many as possible. After all, no one ever complained about having too much storage space.

Pegboard is inexpensive, and great for hanging tools, while making them more visible and available. A large piece of pegboard can be hung and hooks purchased for brooms, rakes, and other large items, while a smaller piece might be installed over the workbench for hanging hammers, screwdrivers, and other smaller tools.

Large plastic storage containers are great for organizing sports equipment like snow gear, soccer cleats, or camping supplies, are easily to label, stack and access. Other things to place in these airtight, convenient containers are holiday decorations, artwork, yearbooks, love letters, music albums...all those things you rarely access, but that are important enough to save. Keep them safe, secure and out of the way on high shelves.

Function demands that you store your most frequently used items within easy reach, and those things less often demanded can be placed further up, out of the way. Bicycles can be hung from the rafters or lined up with a bike rack. Auto parts and supplies may be stored on a shelf near the car, and gift boxes and wrap, home decorating items or paint and painting supplies need separate areas.

To add some color and personality to the walls of your garage, fill them with your hat collection, old posters, or sentimental pictures. A heater, clock, and television or radio will keep you comfortable and entertained while you work. This space is, after all, part of your home, and some handy people spend as much time outside at their workbench as they do inside their house.

We might as well take advantage of the colder, wetter winter months to make improvements in the garage, where we can stay warm and dry. Take time to focus on the contents, organization and function of this area, and you will reap the benefits for many years to come.

Bonus: the next time you need needle-nosed pliers, you'll know exactly where to find them!

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