

# Garages & Basements

## NOT JUST FOR CARS AND COBWEBS ANYMORE

BY SUSAN SHALHOUB

**Photos in home magazines show garages that you could easily mistake for kitchens. They have sleek rubber flooring, sports equipment neatly corralled, elaborate potting benches and sparkling stainless steel work counters. Garages can be used for stacked-to-the-ceiling cabinets, craft workbenches complete with custom spools for crafting ribbon, and yes, even closets—which makes sense if you hang up your coat before coming into the house. Whirlpool's Gladiator Garagework website shows a flat-screen TV in one garage. The company also sells a garage refrigerator for storing—no, not beer—flower bulbs and fishing bait. And a Gladiator garage compactor keeps trash at bay.**

But the reality is, most of us don't go that fancy. Most of us would be thrilled to reduce clutter and store what's there with a system that makes things easy to find. Professional organizer Nicole Gabai of B Organized of Falmouth sums up the goal for regular people like us: "The garage is about storing items less frequently used and for easy retrieval of those items."

My home's garage needs work, but the bikes are up off the floor, at least. We invested in some pieces of the Rubbermaid Fast Track system garage storage last year. What a rush! Three bicycles up off the garage floor and positioned vertically on the wall like they are climbing a hill all by themselves. I'm pretty sure I get in shape just by looking at them like that. And as the system is expandable and versatile, it's easily switched around, depending on what you need to store in any given year.

But whether you are installing pricey stainless steel floor-to-ceiling cubbyhole shelving or merely trying to make more

room in your garage, you cannot avoid the "D" word: Decluttering. It's got to be your first step. And cleaning a garage is dirty work. Everything in there gets filthy. It's not a fun job. It all has to be moved, sorted, deemed trash or treasure, and the whole garage has to be swept out, leaving clouds of dust.

### 'Sort' of Fun?

Ms. Gabai understands that the hardest part of a garage cleanup and organization mission is getting started. It's not fun to think about. But once you start, you don't want to make more work for yourself or get in your own way. That

will impede your progress, Ms. Gabai emphasizes, and that is why we sort.

Sorting is a method regularly used on shows like "Clean House" and "Hoarders" to help people keep track of decisions they've made on certain items: Trash/donate/keep. But the sorting is more than a gimmick, Ms. Gabai says. It can prevent you, the engine driving the decluttering train, from becoming derailed. "You really can't underestimate the importance of this step," she says. "Without it, you will keep going in circles. Once you clearly sort out all the giveaways from the trash from the keepers, you've made the job much more

manageable," she explains, and left tangible evidence of your progress in your wake. The sooner the better to get trash or donated items to the dump or service center, too, so you won't be tempted to put them back in the garage.

To make the process as easy as possible, Ms. Gabai suggests putting your back yard to work as a staging area for the stuff you haul out. This is why fall or spring is a great time to reorganize your garage.

Staying on track involves pacing yourself, experts say. Take regular breaks and eat and drink enough to keep your energy high. "People can get easily overwhelmed and understandably so," Ms. Gabai notes. This is why you have to break it down into smaller chunks. "Take a moment to step back and reflect proudly on a space you've cleared, a box you've filled, the amount of trash you've removed. "You always want to start with the obvious items first, then do a second pass, and keep fine-tuning it all from there," Ms. Gabai says.

### In the Zone

The key is assigning "zones" to similar objects, Ms. Gabai and others suggest. "Once you decide which area within the space the garden tools will go in and which section will be for the coolers, picnic stuff, or sports equipment, then decide how you want to store these," Ms. Gabai says, for example, shelving or hanging items on the walls, closed-door cabinets, et cetera. Ms. Gabai

is a huge fan of shelving "all the way around the wall spaces. Shelving is absolutely necessary in getting organized; otherwise you keep having mountains and piles everywhere," she says.

I didn't tell her about mountains complete with avalanches in my garage.

Shelving may sound expensive, but Ms. Gabai says you don't have to go custom, and low-cost options do exist. She recommends heavy-duty hard plastic shelving, which can be found at Home Depot. A set of five tall shelves cost around \$35, she said. "They are extremely durable, can hold a lot of weight and there's no concern about rust, or mold/mildew from other styles that use particle-board, for example," she said.

Then, she said, basic rules of thumb apply. Heaviest items get placed on the bottom on lower shelves and lighter items go on top. So the heaviest, largest coolers go on the bottom shelves, for instance, lightweight smaller ones on top. Smaller items go in front so they are visible. "The last thing you want to do is hide things behind other items, then you lose track of what you have altogether," she says.

For garden equipment, Ms. Gabai recommends looking in catalogues such as Grandinrod for storage ideas. "You can modify some expensive ideas by going to Wal-Mart, for example," she says. Martha Stewart has garage storage solutions that are even simpler, like drilling a metal bucket onto the wall by its bottom. The inside becomes an area to hold your sprinkler

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and the hose coils around the circular pail. Or hanging a magnetic strip on a garage wall to keep paintbrushes handy, stuck tight by their metal bands. Sports equipment should be sorted by sport and reviewed for usefulness each season, Ms. Gabai says, and recommends The Container Store for great sports equipment storage.

### Basement Basics

Basements, especially finished ones, can be part laundry room/part gym/part storage/part office and part family room or playroom. The modern family is often using the area underneath their houses for many

different reasons. Keeping clutter to a minimum helps ensure each space keeps its designated purpose. Using differing throw rugs can help designate space as well, or attractive room dividers can section off the zones.

The best place to store kids' toys is behind closed doors, Ms. Gabai says. She recommends some low cabinets for easy access for little ones and some up high, to restrict their access to other things. Plastic, labeled bins should be inside those cabinets, she says, such as those sold for LEGO blocks at [www.box4blox.com](http://www.box4blox.com). "Also, a low table in the middle of the room is helpful," says Ms. Gabai,

for art projects and other play needs. If it has drawers built into the bottom or if you can slide some bins underneath, even better.

### No Backsliding

Whether you are working on your garage or basement, your job isn't finished after you declutter and organize. Maintenance methods need to go into effect to ensure clutter doesn't take over again. Internet home organization guru FlyLady has an exercise called the "27 Fling Boogie," where you go around your house putting 27 unused items into a trash bag to throw away or donate.

Ms. Gabai suggests regularly checking what's in your cabinets or on your shelving units—it doesn't have to be all at once, maybe one or two shelves at a time. Then, she says, really ask yourself: Do I need this? Do I use this? As far as sentimental items, she says it's a matter of quantity. How many of each thing do you need to keep of baby clothes, vintage dresses, or prized mementos?

Ms. Gabai is also a subscriber to the one-new-item in, one-old-item out rule. For each thing that comes in, a thing must go out. So if you purchase a new shirt, find one in your

closet that you don't wear anymore, and donate it. Many of my friends do this with their children, especially at birthdays or during the holidays, when they get new toys. If they get three new toys, they must find three to donate to children who may not have any toys. The exercise also helps children develop a sense of empathy. The one-in, one-out rule is a discipline, Ms. Gabai says, but well worth the effort to avoid getting into another clutter rut. "You breathe better, you sleep better, and you keep pests away, such as moths, mice, and other creepy critters with nowhere to hide," she said. ❀

Enterprise Newspapers • October 2010