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ORDER IN THE HOUSE

Finally, room enough to park the car

By Anne Brennan
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It's one of the universal laws for garages.

"If you want to get a car in, something's gotta go," says Jim O'Connor of Clutter Control in Lake Forest.

That's especially true as the weather warms and out come bikes, lawnmowers, garden tools, and even kiddie pools, kayaks or canoes from storage.

Although cleaning and organizing the garage often tops spring to-do lists, the job usually elicits a big moan. If having a pristine garage doesn't motivate you, consider that it's the only "room" your neighbors see every day, says Ron Mackey, co-owner of the Des Plaines franchise for GarageTek, a national company that specializes in garage organization systems.

The challenge is to find enough room for everything that's stored in the garage and the family vehicles too. Items such as cheap plastic toys, scooters and big cars, especially SUVs, make the garage a dumping ground and a tight squeeze for cars.

"We didn't have so much stuff in the past," says Jamie Martin of Destination Organization in Glen Ellyn. "Garage organization is an area that's growing."

"I had a client with a four-car garage but no room for a car," O'Connor says. The guy lived there for 45 years and never threw anything away."

Here are the key steps to organizing the garage, according to the experts:

Plan. "Usually people are overwhelmed. The hardest part is getting started," says Doreen Collins of Organizing 4U in Chicago. "Seek help from family and friends. If not, hire an organizer."

Before you hit the home centers or grab a broom, pick a nice spring day and set aside an

hour or two (or more) for this chore. It will make it much more pleasant than a hot day in August.

Schedule a pickup date for donations. This will save you time and hassle. It also can serve as a deadline for organizing your garage, Collins says. She uses the technique to help motivate clients.

Use what you have--for now. This is not the time to run to the home center and buy new shelves and containers.

"I try my best to use what shelves [clients] already have," O'Connor says. "It's rare that I have to buy new ones."

Hang rakes and shovels on strong nails and L-brackets-- cheap but effective. Use standbys such as Pegboard, metal rails and slatboards for hanging other things.

Purge. Throw out old or broken items. "If it's broken, that's a no-brainer. Same with dried-up paint cans and baby strollers when your youngest is 10 years old now," Collins says.

In fact, you should decide whether to save or purge something before you even put it in the garage, she says. Items such as clothes or old tax files should be in a moisture-controlled environment in the first place.

Leftover materials, like tile and wood from home projects, tend to take up space, O'Connor says. Save some pieces for repairs and pitch the rest.

For packrats, it may be worth investing in a Dumpster. Laws vary regarding disposal of some items. Call your local recycling center to find out how to dispose of paint and chemicals.

Sort. Think like a department store, says Amber Kostelny-Cussen of Amber's Organizing in River Forest. Put like things together--garden, sports and tools, for example. "Divide and conquer," she says.

Common sense applies here: Put bikes toward the front of the garage so you don't have to drag them past cars. Same with lawn care or anything else that needs easy access. Keep household supplies near the interior door. This will help you maintain your organizing system. You'll also be able to see what you have and what you don't have.

"I had a guy who had five 50- pound bags of ice melt. I asked him why. He said he didn't know he had five bags of ice melt," Mackey says.

Think vertical. With most garages, there's no place to go but up. Once you've purged the old, you can consider storage ideas. Free-standing shelves or railing systems are two options. Kostelny-Cussen recommends Rubbermaid's garage system for its ease of use. For grander options, consider Garagetek, which has different price points, all the way up to thousands of dollars for a system.

The important thing is to get things off the floor, Mackey says. However, some items, such as heavy lawn mowers and snow blowers, will need to stay on the floor.

Installing a loft or deck over car space maximizes storage, but make sure to place seldom-used things, such as holiday decorations, in these spaces, which are more difficult to access.

Maintenance. "The goal is to set up a system that's easy to maintain," Martin says. Toys are the biggest problem, she says. You need to train kids to put away toys and sports items.

Mackey, who has four children of his own, suggests a basket near the door, where kids can toss their balls and toys before they go into the house.

Bikes and scooters can challenge the most organized homeowner. Mounting bikes on the walls or suspending them from ceilings works for some homeowners, but plain old bike racks might be the best bet for children, the experts say.

Whether it's a one-car garage or more, homeowners are almost guaranteed to find some surprises--maybe tax files or a bracelet that fell off months ago--as they clean out the garage, Collins says.

"It can be financially advantageous to organize the garage," she says.

Plus, once you can see what you have and what's valuable, it may encourage you to have a garage sale, she says.

But organizing a garage sale--that's a whole different story.

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