

HOME & FAMILY

Curbing the Chaos in the Garage

We Get Consultations From Space Organizers; Making Room for the Car

BY PEGGY EDERSHEIM KALB

At some point, our two-car garage morphed into an all-purpose repository for household junk. Amid the tennis gear, soccer balls and old newspapers, it had room for only one car.

We clearly needed help. So we called in professional garage organizers to clear the clutter.

Garage organizing is big business. Including home workshops—comprising everything from auto-repair equipment to upright tool chests—garage gear has become a billion-dollar industry, says Greg Alford, senior partner with Peachtree Consulting Group, an Atlanta-based marketing consulting firm. High-end custom garage-organizing companies have been growing 20%-25% per year, Mr. Alford says. He does, however, expect the growth to flatten a little in 2008, because of the weakening economy.

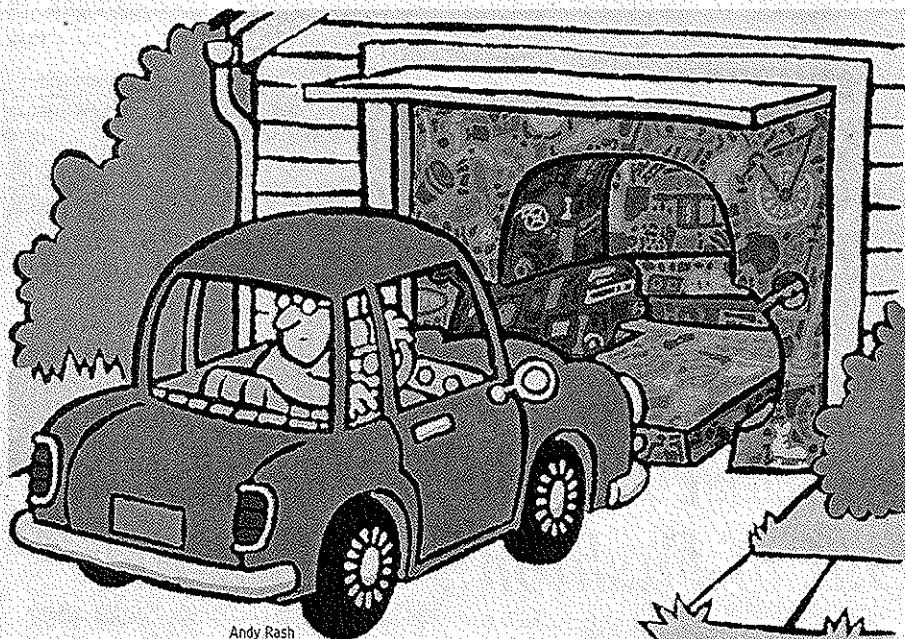
The typical American garage is growing. From 1992 to 2002 the standard width of a two-car garage went from 18 to 20 feet, and the height grew from seven to eight feet, according to the National Association of Homebuilders. In addition, 19% of American houses now have three-car garages, up from 11% in 1992, according to Stephen Melman, NAHB's director of economic services. And Mr. Melman cites NAHB statistics showing that 70% of American home owners now enter their homes mainly through their garages, so they want those garages to look more like entrances than dumps.

We contacted four garage-organizing companies to see if they could help us come up with a workable plan. Our goal: organize the sports equipment, get the recycling out of site, and make room for another car.

We started with San Rafael based California Closets Company Inc., filling out their online questionnaire and requesting a free consultation. We sent the email on a Tuesday night, and by Wednesday morning had an email response about setting up an appointment to come to see the space. It took another week (our scheduling problems) to come up with a good time, but when the California Closets salesperson, Lee Bradford, came to our house, it took her about five minutes to understand what we needed: hooks for sports bags, bins for balls, wall space for skis and deeper shelves.

Ms. Bradford spent about 40 minutes total in our garage, measuring, checking outlets and obstructions, and said she'd be back in a week with a plan and an estimate. She warned us that it would probably be in the thousands of dollars, not the hundreds, even though she was suggesting we start with just one wall.

Ms. Bradford arrived at our follow-up meeting with a plan that needed a little tweaking, but looked about right, and came to about \$4,381; more than we thought it would be, but something to think about. She had included a hook for



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our dry cleaning just inside the garage door (she saw the dry cleaning hanging on the ping pong table), space for two recycling bins, multiple deep drawers (a possible solution for the endless amounts of "mixed paper" we generate between once-a-month mixed paper pickups), bins for balls, and plenty of slat wall to hang things on or lean things against—from skating bags to skis, shovels and brooms. We would have to order the actual hooks and some accessories from another company since California Closets doesn't carry those; Lee suggested going to Racorinc.com. We didn't get to keep a copy of the plan unless we put down a 30% deposit.

For our next inquiry, we went to GarageTek. GarageTek sells wall panels built with tracks to hang and hold GarageTek accessories, such as racks, hooks cabinets and bins. We received a quick email back and the local GarageTek franchisee, Gene Meken, came about a week later to look over our garage. From the beginning, Mr. Meken encouraged us to do the whole garage, while going easy initially on the accessories. That would mean paneling almost all the available wall space with the GarageTek "Tekpanels," making our wood garage look almost futuristic, covered in the company's trademark reflective white surface.

Over the phone, we were advised to expect the price to come in over \$8,000. Mr. Meken's guesstimate: \$9,200, and that's if we opt not to do the floors: GarageTek also sells some very cool floors with shuffleboard or hopscotch designed in. The good news? Mr. Meken said \$6,250 for the Tek-Panels on the walls would not be subject to sales tax, because it counts as a qualifying capital improvement. We got to see a 3-D image of the plan, and could keep a copy without putting down a deposit.

We had a little more trouble getting the ClosetMaid Web site to work for us. ClosetMaid, a division of St. Louis-based Emerson, allows you to do your plan entirely online (assuming your measurements are very accurate). But we found the site a little difficult to navigate, and wound up answering the same questions over and over. (A company representative later explained how we could have bypassed the questionnaire.)

We then wanted to communicate with ClosetMaid's "professional design service," but had a hard time finding a phone number. We emailed, they responded with a phone number, and we called and told them what we wanted to do; they explained what we were doing wrong and we submitted our dimensions and wish list, including wanting somewhere to put balls, skating bags and skis, as well as the recycling (the site only requests the dimensions of your "closet," but we plugged in our garage dimensions anyway). We paid the \$5 design fee by credit card. We got our plan back a few days later; it consisted of a lot of shelves along the three walls, a row of hooks and a tall closed cabinet, very specific measurements, but no price estimate. Because the products are sold through ClosetMaid dealers and big-box stores, pricing isn't available on the site.

Lisa Engel, the ClosetMaid representative, said the Web site is meant for do-it-yourself customers who basically know what they want, rather than those looking to really design their spaces. (ClosetMaid also has a more full-service "MultiSuite program" where a dealer comes to your house for a consultation.)

We found the site for Gladiator GarageWorks, a Whirlpool Corp. brand, easier to use: We came up with a basic design using the click and drag tools on the site pretty quickly. We put in a closed cabinet under the window and a tall one next to it, bins for balls, a rack we could use for things like skis and brooms, and some "GearTrack" paneling for more hooks. Had we known which hardware we needed, we also could have gotten an online estimate, but again we realized that for us, there is nothing like dealing with a real person. So, we sent an email to the company and were directed to two dealers who could help us.

Dan Lajoie came over on a Saturday morning to see our garage and present his plan. His plan applied to one wall of the garage and was the most limited in scope, but he addressed our garage issues. He included three rows of GearTrack channels—to hang hooks and bins—with one tall cabinet, two 30" wall cabinets, two 30" shelves and \$500 of hooks and baskets. His price: \$3,019.

COMPANY/WEB SITE	COST	WHAT THEY OFFER	COMMENT
California Closets www.californiaclosets.com	Free consultation. \$4581 for one wall with a combination of slat wall, shelving, bins and cabinets, plus another 30" of slat wall along a piece of the back of the garage.	Cabinets, bins, shelves, slat wall. California Closets doesn't manufacture the hooks and small bins that fit into the slat wall, but directs you to Racorinc.com for their products.	The Web site was easy to use (and the most elaborately designed that we looked at) and Lee Bradford, our sales rep, was very easy to deal with. When a snowstorm meant she couldn't come on the appointed Friday, she offered to come the following Sunday. She also gave us good advice on how to reorganize our mudroom. The downside: the California Closet Web site offers less specific product information than the others.
GarageTek www.garagetek.com	Free consultation. \$9,200 plus; the most comprehensive system we looked at, three walls covered. Price doesn't include flooring.	Custom fit "TekPanel" (for as many or few walls as you want), ceiling options such as overhead storage racks, and custom tile flooring. Also offers an endless number of possible accessories from cabinets to shoe racks to a wall-mounted work table.	Offers the most variety of products with a focus on flexibility, durability and a complete system, rather than a piecemeal product. We also loved the floor games, but none of it comes cheap.
ClosetMaid www.closetmaid.com	\$5 for the consultation. Project price determined by dealers and "big box retailers," not available with online design.	Shelves, bins and cabinets along with do-it-yourself instructions and a design team that charges \$5 to make a plan (based on their questionnaire). Then you order the products and install them. Recently rolled out the MultiSuite program; dealers come to your house and design your space.	We found the Web site confusing, in part because it isn't tailored to garages. The company says the Web site works best for true do-it-yourselfers (not us).
Gladiator GarageWorks www.gladiatorgw.com	Free consultation. \$3,019 includes 3 rows of GearTrack channels installed with 1 tall cabinet,	"GearWall panels," a good assortment of cabinets, workbenches, hooks, bins and shelves. Also appliances and flooring.	The site is easy to navigate and it didn't take long for us to figure out a basic plan. It was equally easy to have one of their dealers come take a look before we made any decisions. Dan Lajoie came on