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Closet Smarts

Storage tricks for your well-loved wardrobe

steal this look!

Surprise! The photo on this page isn't a closet. It's built-in rolling shelving around the bedroom doorway. In fact, rolling shelves serve as the door to the room. When we discovered this bedroom, we were impressed at its cleverness and efficient use of limited space. Neatly organized possessions are visually appealing, and in this case, only seen by the person on the bed. While the main shelving units are built into the wall, you can create a similar look by adding freestanding book shelves deep enough to hold shoes, wicker boxes or neatly-folded clothing. And if you like the idea of rolling shelf units, casters can be attached to most any flat-bottom furniture. Just make sure it's a stable, evenly-weighted unit.

A closet is a contradiction: the smallest space in the house, but the biggest repository of our stuff. The first place we go to look for that lost jacket or missing shoe, but the last place we think to clean or organize. And therein lies the problem.

"We live our lives out of our closets—it's no place to have mountains of stuff lying around," says Ramona Creel, creator of the organizing and lifestyle blog **ramonacreel.com**. Eliminating excess is the first step. Then, add in some great organizing gear and use some proven tricks for making closets more personal and practical, and you'll never be hunting for that long-lost pair of jeans again.

Minimize the Clutter

Here's our four-part plan for organizing your stuff:

1. Prune your possessions.

It's simple physics: If you add stuff to your closet without removing anything, it becomes an overcrowded mess. So once or twice a year, do a little weeding and pruning, says organizing expert Harriet Schechter, author of *Let Go of Clutter*. If you can't remember the last time you wore or used an item, remove it from your closet and either store or give it away. Once you've pruned your possessions down, keep doing it: never add something to your closet—whether it's a coat, a new blouse or a pair of shoes—without first getting rid of something of equal or greater size.

2. And that includes the "someday" stuff.

The biggest closet space-hogs are all well-intentioned "someday" items we hold onto: the clothes that don't fit right now, the accessories that aren't quite in style anymore, the shoes and other items that need fixing or altering. "If you kept only what works, what fits, what makes you look and feel good right now, closet clutter would be a thing of the past," says Creel. If you're serious about the "someday" part, pack the items up and put into storage somewhere out of the way.

3. Empty it completely.

You can't improve your closet when it's filled. So empty it—completely. Hauling everything out serves three purposes: it gives you a good look at the actual space and storage—rods, shelves and so forth—you have to work with. Second, it gives you a chance to clean a space that rarely gets cleaned. Third, once your stuff is spread out on the floor or bed, it's easier to do the first two tips and identify items you no longer need or want.

4. Organize precisely.

As you gaze at your empty closet, think about how to organize it around the *specifics* of your possessions. "Closets are like puzzles: If you want to solve the puzzle, find a place for every piece," says Scott Roewer of Solutions by Scott and creator of the organizing blog **declutteryou.com**. Divide your closet however you like—office clothes on the top left rack, party clothes on the back, shoes here, umbrellas there. Just have specific spaces for specific items.



Design the Space

Closets in older homes or apartments typically contain a single wood pole and a shelf above it. Closet systems (don't you love the phrase?) being marketed today contain enough built-in drawers, shelves, cubbies and hanger poles to equip a small clothing store. Sanity, we believe, lies somewhere in between. The trick is to have the right storage devices for the things you own, without having to invest a fortune. Here are some ideas from the bold new frontiers of closet-storage products:

Door Storage

The back of your closet door is a vastly underused space. "You can install hooks there for jackets, ties, belts, whatever," says Roewer, who loves the artfully-designed, clothing-friendly Vivaldi hooks (single hooks, \$9.99 at theartofstorage.com). Or hang an inexpensive over-the-door shoe rack—the vinyl or canvas kind with pockets. "They work great for storing other items besides shoes—brushes, hair ribbons, gloves, scarves, belts, socks, flashlights, even car keys," says Roewer.

One other terrific back-of-door option: pegboard. Pegboard hooks come in a trillion shapes and lengths, meaning you can hang everything from purses to makeup mirrors to robes, all at the same time.

Shoe Storage

"A lot of people overlook the space beneath where your clothes are hanging. That space is perfect for shoes," says Tanna Clark of Complete Organizing Solutions in Nashville. Don't sit them on the floor, but get clear, stackable containers so you can see your shoes at a glance. A 10-pack of clear shoeboxes from Shoe Stor lists for \$29.99 at clear-shoe-boxes.com.

Hanging Storage

For more shelf space, get a hanging storage bag—great for lightweight clothes and linens (sweaters, not so much); valuable suits or dresses; shoes; even hats. For example, the 6-Shelf Over the Rod Closet Organizer from Stacks and Stacks (stacksandstacks.com) gives you six canvas shelves for \$26.99.

Sweater Storage

Think boxes, not loose stacks. Sweaters are notorious space-eaters: you hang them, and they take up twice the rod space of a shirt. Fold and stack them, and eventually they slide this way or that and fill up the shelf. Instead, corral them in a box or bin, like the clear plastic sweater boxes from The Container Store (containerstore.com). They're designed to fit standard 12- and 16-in.-deep shelves. Standard boxes are \$4.99, while deep boxes, for your bulkiest sweaters are \$7.99.

Total Storage

Sometimes the only answer is to tear out the existing shelves and replace them with your own custom-made configuration. Creel loves the real-wood kits from John Louis Home (johnlouis.com). A basic closet system offers up to 24 ft. of shelf space and 18 ft. of hanging space that you can configure to the exact dimensions of your closet and install yourself in a weekend. You'll save hundreds over comparable systems—basic kits start well under \$300—and get storage that is literally made for you.

WIRE OR WOOD?

Choice #1 when redesigning a closet is what material to work with. Wire systems—essentially, thick metal wire with a durable coating of rubber or plastic, usually colored white—are much less expensive and far more customizable. You can buy a complete closet set-up with an array of shelves, drawers and hanging bars for under \$150. Installation is easy, and there are unlimited accessories and choices. Ahh, but the durability isn't all that high, and the visual appeal, low.

Closet storage made of real wood looks sophisticated and substantial, but can be ten times the cost. Wood weights a lot too, making installation more challenging. And once installed, wooden closet systems aren't easily changed around or accessorized. Our cost-conscious recommendation: a simple wooden closet set-up, installed on your own. Then supplement with lots of freestanding storage accessories like shoeboxes and sweater boxes, neatly stacked.





Bedtime Storage

So you've maximized every inch of closet space and still have stuff to store. You can't sweep this mess under the rug—but you can store it under the bed.

"There's nothing wrong with using that space for storage," says Scott Roewer. "It's a great spot for out-of-season clothes or other items you don't use but may need from time to time." Most variety and home-improvement stores stock a wide range of long, flat containers designed especially for beds. Roewer recommends canvas under-bed storage bags, which breathe better and allow circulating air for clothes and delicate items. Prices from \$7.99 at organize.com.



Antique Storage

Once upon a time, we *didn't* have closets, we had armoires to hold our clothes. Antique armoires often have wonderful exteriors and highly functional storage space inside. When your closet is overflowing and you've done all else, consider an armoire. Likewise, antique kitchen furniture like sideboards and china cabinets often look terrific in the bedroom, and are wonderful places to store jewelry, sweaters and other personal stuff.

