

Neat & cheap

The best free and low-cost organizers

for every room in your home. You probably already have a lot of these things. Here are cool new ways to use them.

Step into an organizing store and it's easy to feel like a kid shopping for school supplies: Everything's so neat and colorful. But the promise of a place for everything can come with big-time sticker shock—\$20 for a shoe-box bin, \$30 for a linen-lined basket, \$10 for a vinyl sweater bag. Do you really have to pay that much just to store stuff? In many cases, the answer is a definite no. Most trouble spots around the house can be tamed with low- or even no-cost items. We have some favorites, but we also asked a group of organizing pros for their top budget-friendly tools. As you'll see, you might already have a lot of these items around the house; if not, most can be had for just a few bucks at a home center. It doesn't get cheaper or easier than this!

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1. Shoe boxes

COST Free!

BEST FOR Office and craft supplies, CDs, TV remotes, travel-size toiletries, and other small items.

WHY THEY WORK You can spend as much as \$20 on fancy, store-bought boxes, but shoe boxes work just as well. They're sturdy, stackable, and fit nicely on a shelf. (Usually the pricier the shoe, the sturdier the box.) "They keep spaces like closets really well organized and are an excellent way to quickly subdivide the stuff," says Julie Morgenstern, author of "Shed Your

Stuff, Change Your Life" (Simon & Schuster, 2009).

TIP Give shoe boxes a makeover with wrapping paper, contact paper, fabric, or even leftover wallpaper, and they'll look like pricey store-bought storage boxes. Vinyl contact paper adheres tightly and can actually strengthen the box. "Make sure to cover the bottom too," Morgenstern says. To replicate boxes with window labels, attach adhesive-backed clear plastic sleeves sold for loose-leaf binders at office-supply stores.

2. Acrylic cubbies

COST About \$15 to \$25, depending on the size.

BEST FOR Makeup, desk-drawer essentials (paper clips, pens, pencils, Post-it notes, stamps), or vanity clutter like perfume bottles and jewelry.

WHY THEY WORK The see-through compartments come in a variety of boxy shapes and sizes that can give a vanity or desk drawer a fast makeover, and they have flush edges so they can be placed close together in a drawer. "What's nice is this system can grow with your needs, and it's easy to find what

you're looking for and put it away," says Ilene Drexler, owner of The Organizing Wiz, a consulting firm in New York City.

TIP Keep lipstick and nail polish in the small cubbies, makeup brushes in the long ones. Or you can turn a dresser drawer into a customized jewelry warehouse. "Measure your drawer space, then see what size compartments you'll need—necklaces in one size, bracelets and earring in others—before you head to the store," Morgenstern says.



3. Over-the-door shoe bags

COST About \$10 to \$15.

BEST FOR Bathroom, craft-room, and coat-closet clutter.

WHY THEY WORK Hanging bags make things easy to reach and they can hold lots of different stuff, not just shoes!

TIP Hang one on the inside of a closet to store gloves, hats, and scarves. Give each family member a row and label each pouch as a reminder. A bag on the back of a bathroom door can hold your blow dryer, curling and straightening irons, extra shampoo, soap, and other toiletries. Or sling one over the door of a crafts room to store things like scissors and glue. Keep small and often-used items between eye and chest level for easy reach. "Place heavy objects in the bottom rows," says Standolyn Robertson, founder of Things In Place in Waltham, Mass. "You don't want to pull them out overhead."



4. Plastic linens bags

COST Free!

BEST FOR Storing nonwool sweaters or out-of-season clothes, so you don't have to spring for expensive sweater bags. The pillowcase-size ones are handy for stashing small gift-wrapping and craft items like tags, rubber stamps, and ink pads. And large and small can hold napkins, place mats, and seasonal linens.

WHY THEY WORK They're great for stashing things because they're sturdy and see-through. Best of all, you get these zippered bags free every time you buy a new set of sheets or a comforter.

TIP Don't use these bags for antique, heirloom, or wool fabrics. Those delicate items should be stored in fabric bags that let them breathe so they don't discolor.



5. Lazy Susans

COST From \$5 for the small plastic ones up to \$20 to \$40 for fancier types with stainless-steel or bamboo finishes.

BEST FOR Toiletries and cleaning supplies. They're also great in the garage for lawn-and-garden supplies or in the laundry room for things like detergent. And a rotating lazy Susan on a crafts table or tucked away in a cupboard can tame an awful lot of itty-bitty art supplies.

WHY THEY WORK They're known for spinning spices in the kitchen, but lazy Susans are one of the most versatile organizing tools around, says Barry Izsak, an organizer in Austin, Texas.

TIP Put one or two lazy Susans in the linen closet or under the bathroom sink. If plumbing is in the way, put one on each side of the pipe.



6. Baskets

COST Free if you have them; at a store you'll pay \$10 to \$40.

BEST FOR All kinds of stuff! Small square baskets make nice desk organizers. A big basket can house rolled towels in the bathroom; in the living room, it can hold magazines or wood. A basket with a handle, placed at the top or bottom of a staircase, makes a great temporary storage area.

WHY THEY WORK Woven baskets fit neatly on a shelf, and they add a warm, homey touch to a room. And odds are you already have some lying around the house. "Get all your shapes together," Robertson says. "Baskets without handles are better for stacking. Square and rectangle ones maximize shelf space."

TIP Line baskets with cheap cloth napkins or fabric swatches, and they'll look just like the fancy store-bought kind. Let the fabric spill over the edge and hot-glue it down.



LET IT GO! Expert tips on tossing stuff that you can't seem to part with

These are all items that organizing pros say their clients can't help accumulating. Here are their ideas on how to give them the heave-ho.

Plastic food containers

Why you've got a stash You might be trying to be environmentally responsible and feel you'd be wasteful if you threw them out.

How to let go See what shapes and sizes you reach for most frequently and recycle or repurpose the rest. You can turn them into holders for cleaning supplies, travel-size toiletries, or other nonfood items.

T-shirts

Why you've got a stash They represent different times in your life or trips you've taken.

How to let go Think to yourself, "How many T-shirts will I wear before I do the laundry?" "Once you quantify how much is enough, it's easier to get rid of the excess," says Standolyn Robertson, founder of Things In Place in Waltham, Mass. If you're still having a tough time parting with a T-shirt collection, here's a suggestion from Julie Morgenstern,



FILL 'ER UP Give an old mug a new life by turning it into a pretty planter.

author of "Shed Your Stuff, Change Your Life" (Simon & Schuster, 2009): Keep the memories but not the shirts. Take photos of the images on the shirts and combine those snapshots into a montage.

Coffee mugs

Why you've got a stash You always want to be ready for guests, or some mugs might have sentimental meaning, or you just think chucking them is wasteful.

How to let go Turn them into containers for small gifts or plant cuttings. Give one or two a new lease on life as a pencil or toothbrush holder. And throw out the truly

grungy ones. "If you have things that are cracked or stained, let it go," Robertson says.

Newspapers and magazines

Why you've got a stash Many people feel they have to keep newspapers and magazines to be well informed, says Ilene Drexler, owner of The Organizing Wiz, a consulting firm in New York City.

How to let go Be realistic about how much time you have for reading, and remember that you can always find articles on the Internet. Skim the table of contents and clip out what looks interesting. Decide in advance how long you're going to keep reading material before recycling it; a week for newspapers and three months for magazines is reasonable.

Dry-cleaner hangers

Why you've got a stash It's easy to lose track, and hey, they're free!

How to let go Ditch those you don't need. They can often be returned to the dry cleaner, and some municipalities accept them with metal recyclables (check local regulations).

7. Trays

COST Free if you have them; pretty melamine ones can be found for \$20 and mirrored ones run about \$30.

BEST FOR Shoes, vitamins, perfume.

WHY THEY WORK "Trays give things a specific spot to land and define a specific area," says Scott Roewer, a professional organizer in Washington. Instead of leaving a bunch of items on a vanity or a desktop, put them on a tray and they'll look neater. Just one warning: "If the space is there, you will fill it, so limit yourself to the size of the tray," Roewer says.

TIP Put one in the kitchen to corral your vitamins, or use a pretty vintage tray to hold perfume on your dresser. A large sturdy tray in a mudroom or entry is great for keeping messy shoes and boots from wrecking floors.



8. Hooks

COST From a couple of dollars on up.

BEST FOR Jackets, hats, belts, and more.

WHY THEY WORK Hooks are a great way to get stuff off the floor and organized. "Put the right hook where stuff is going to get dropped and you've got a fighting chance that they'll get used," says Jeri Dansky, a professional organizer in Half Moon Bay, Calif. "Go with basic ones in wood, wrought iron, or chrome, to blend in, or choose something more decorative to become a focal point."

TIP Put a row in a mudroom or entryway. Or place staggered hooks on the inside of a closet for handbags. And don't forget the garage. Instead of dropping hundreds of dollars on modular shelving, suspend mesh bags full of sports stuff like soccer balls and scuba gear on large hooks. Mounted in a stud, a hook can keep even a bicycle up and out of the way. But if you're hanging something heavy, be sure to check the package for the weight limit and installation instructions.



9. Metal tins

COST Free!

BEST FOR Small items. Altoids-size tins are great for pushpins and other sharp things and matches. A large tin is ideal for first-aid items and power-outage supplies, such as batteries, candles, and a flashlight. "Unlike a basket or a shoe box, it will keep the items dry," Morgenstern says.

WHY THEY WORK Metal tins that once housed tea, candy, or cookies can be too pretty to throw out. Instead of adding them to the clutter, turn them into organizers. "Square or rectangle ones are preferable because they make better use of space," Dansky says.

TIP If you're going to put a few on display, they should have a common denominator. "It's usually color or size that brings them together to avoid a haphazard look," Robertson says. You can make a few mismatched tins look like a set with a fresh coat of spray paint designed for metal.



10. Plastic wastebaskets

COST From less than \$10 on up.

BEST FOR Toys, sporting goods, and wrapping paper.

WHY THEY WORK They're sturdy, roomy, and generally cheaper than bins, plus they're non-see-through, which is great for concealing clutter. Use labels to keep track of what's in them. The smaller ones are great for kids' and pets' toys, Dansky says. And the round shape lends itself to things that are rolled, like blueprints, wrapping paper, and drawings. Wastebaskets are also great for sports equipment like baseball bats and hockey sticks.

TIP Spray-paint a bunch of cans the same color so they'll look like a set; be sure to use paint designed for plastic, like those from Krylon and Rust-Oleum.



COMMON CLOSET CLUTTER-UPPERS

More than 1,000 women in our new national survey reveal what's hiding behind closed doors.

51% of women cling to clothing they haven't worn in three or more years.

64% find the stuff they no longer wear hard to get rid of because they might need it some day.

60% hold on to clothes that don't fit anymore because they might lose or gain back the weight.

58% have clothes hanging in their closets with the tags still on them.

50% know they have too many shoes, boots, or handbags but cannot part with them.

54% complain that shoes, boots, and handbags are the hardest to store.

32% have too many T-shirts.

33% admit that their closets are bulging.

18% are actually embarrassed by their closets!

Tip When taming closet overflow, here are three things not to buy.

■ **Shoe racks.** They eat up valuable closet-floor real estate and can't accommodate tall boots or bulky sneakers. Better to go with hanging shoe bags or plastic shoe boxes, which can be stacked and use vertical space more efficiently.

■ **Multi-item hangers.** It requires so much effort to get, say, a pair of pants or a blouse off the lower tier that people tend not to use them. Stick with ordinary hangers that let you see at a glance what's in your closet.

■ **Belt hangers.** The hooks are too small for the wide belts now in style. Use hooks or roll up belts and store them in a drawer, says Ilene Drexler, owner of The Organizing Wiz, a consulting firm in New York City.