

Free at Last:

Declare Independence From Your Clutter

by Nancy Bean

So, it's July. The sun is out, and summer is officially in full swing. Long gone are the days of winter and its cold chill. Remember January? Remember your New Years' resolution? Maybe so or maybe not...after all, it was 6 months ago! Did yours include "getting organized"? If so, you were not alone. "Getting organized" is one of the top 10 resolutions in our country. Getting there without a plan can be an overwhelming task. Where do you start: garage, closet, home office or kitchen?

Perhaps back in January your motivation came from sheer frustration. Or an injury resulted from falling contents of an overstuffed closet. You may have taken some time to do research, read the latest, greatest books about organizing and getting rid of clutter. But, alas, six months later, you're back back where you started. What's missing? Perhaps your space isn't configured correctly – furniture needs to be moved (or purchased), your belongings don't have an assigned home, or maybe you just got overwhelmed and gave up. Whatever your motivation or results, you'll be happy to know there is hope – and a game plan will take you from good intentions to making it happen!

Each space has its own needs. The tips below will help you troubleshoot four specific areas which most families struggle. So declare your independence from clutter!

THE KITCHEN

Establishing zones is an important step when organizing your kitchen. The four major zones are Prep, Cooking, Baking and Storage. Their location is driven largely by the design of your work triangle (refrigerator, sink and oven/stove). Use your kitchen layout to make life easy!

Prep: Keep knives, mixing utensils, bowls, small appliances, measuring tools and pans ready for use close to the stove and oven.

Cooking/Baking: Keep spices, cooking sprays, pans, bowls and utensils close to the stove (or oven) for mealtime. Date spices. Purchase small amounts and refill spice jars available at kitchen and organizing stores. This will save on space and spending. Ditto for flours and sugars.

Storage: For easy after-meal cleanup, have food storage containers, foil and plastic wrap close to the sink. Also, keep dishes, food storage containers and flatware storage close to the dishwasher and sink for quick and easy cleanup! Keep an envelope or notebook with takeout menus close to the phone.

Avoid freezer clutter by using a permanent marker to date packages before storing them. This will also help you avoid ingesting petrified peas or freezer-burned burgers.



THE GARAGE

Has your garage become so overrun by toys, tools and training gear that it no longer can house your vehicles? We have all seen, or possibly own, a garage that could easily support a Toys-R-Us, Home Depot or REI sign. Sports equipment, footwear, toys/trikes/bikes, tools, lawn/auto care products, trash and recycling all vie for real estate in garages today. So do hobby goods and holiday decorations. As with kitchens, designating zones works wonders when creating order in a garage.

Open Shelving: This is the least costly method of organizing some garage goods so that they can be found when needed. Containers add a neat factor and enable one to stack. For ease of access, keep stacking to a minimum.

Pegboard: This timeless material is ideal for storing tools and other small to mid-size tools. It is inexpensive and available in 3/16" and 1/4" sizes with the latter being the strongest. Each thickness requires specific hook and peg sizes.

Slat wall or Track Systems: These systems have been gaining in popularity. They work extremely well when designed for your specific needs and can be found at Storables and The Container Store. Larger systems can also be purchased thru various garage organizing companies.

Cabinetry: This category comes in a range of pricing. Top features here are custom options and closed storage. Your space is maximized, your clutter looks good behind closed doors and it stays clean.

Pulley Systems or Garage Platforms: These are a great way to make use of air space and clear the floor for frequently-used items. Systems are available for individual bikes or one can go the route of products such as Heavy Lift "Garage Elevator." This consists of a 4x4 platform that can lift camping gear, seasonal toys and decorations to higher levels. With this said, before you raise them to the roof, be sure your stored goods are worth the space, the cost and the effort required to store them.

How Free at Last

THE CLOSET

Closets today come in all sizes. Whether teeny tiny or extra-large, they are considered some of the more valuable real estate a home has to offer.

Double Your Storage: A closet system can take you a long way – there are countless options out there for every budget, from do-it-yourself to full-service installation.

Seasonal Rotation: If it's summer, have the warm weather goods within reach. Put wool sweaters and snow suits away in another location or in containers on that top shelf. When the seasons change, rotate!

Good Hangers: Do your dry cleaner and your clothes a favor by taking those flimsy wire hangers back. Quality hangers will help your clothes look like you actually hung them and didn't just pull them out of the basket.

Purge: Not sure what you really wear? Turn all your hangers backwards. As you wear things, hang them up the "right" way. At the end of the season, have a really good visual aid of what you do and don't wear. Then...

Donate: Still hanging onto your prom dress, the suit that doesn't fit or even your wedding dress? Donate them to a good cause – not only will someone else be thrilled to have them, but you get the added bonus of "paying it forward"! How good does that feel?

GRAND CENTRAL

Where is that place where you process mail or the contents of your children's backpack? Perhaps you simply build architecturally-sound piles of said paper because the mere thought of processing it all is overwhelming. If you are not a creature of habit, practice becoming one here. Dealing with paperwork and household information in a consistent manner will help decrease family strife and improve family life. Whatever tools you choose to use, remember the real estate mantra: Location. Location. Location. Put them in a place that makes sense for your entire family.

Calendar: Rule #1: Use one that is large enough to record necessary dates, times and reminders. This will greatly reduce the cause of scratch paper scrawl and the need for sticky note wallpaper.

Messages: Chalkboards, whiteboards, cork boards or the ever popular refrigerator door are all useful surfaces on which to broadcast the news of the day, week or month. Have family members initial messages and take turns keeping the message center current. When old or excessive information clutters the board it also clutters your brain. The effectiveness of both diminishes greatly.

Paper Processing: Say it with us: R-E-C-Y-C-L-E. S-H-R-E-D. Keep bins for each close at hand and use them frequently. These bins are some of our closest allies in the battle against the paper bulge. Our absolute closest ally can also be our worst enemy and that is our decision-making process for handling the volumes of paper that come our way.

1. You have our permission to recycle or shred, unopened, at least 50% of the mail that comes into your home. It is said that 85% of what the USPS leaves of us are solicitations that encourage us to spend.
2. Give bills their own place and deal with them promptly.
3. The same goes for anything that needs a signature or reply.
4. Assign drawers or fun containers for each child's graded projects. Hang special ones in an assigned place. Before replacing them, take a photo of your child in front of his or her spring collection of art. Save a treasured few and recycle the rest. The photo takes up much less space and will provide fond memories and welcome smiles in years to come.
5. Lastly, before dropping yet another piece of paper into a file, ask yourself if you can reproduce it when and if you truly need it again. Is that list of events available on the internet? Is that memo kept on file at work? Can your medical history be obtained from your physician's office rather than a packed file of paperwork? These are simply a few examples of areas in which paper can have a hold on you. When it works, toss anything that can be reproduced.

If you have been waving the white flag of surrender in your losing battle with clutter, give it a rest and begin the process of putting order into your life. Then celebrate your independence and our country's as well. Wave the Stars & Stripes instead.



Nancy Bean is a Portland-based organizer and designer whose passion is having a positive affect on people, places and spaces. Contact Nancy at nancy@simplybydesign.us.



Brandie Kajino, organizer, interior refiner and author helps busy homeowners create beautifully organized spaces. She can be reached at brandie@organizesimplify.com

