When you’re in the middle of redoing your bathroom, you don’t want to be the guy who hauls a cast-iron tub up four flights of stairs only to discover that the drain hole is at the wrong end. Or turns his thumb into Salisbury steak because he had the bright idea to use a framer’s waffle-faced hammer to drop in a finish nail. We know, because we’ve been that guy. And now that we’ve learned things the hard way, we’d like to save you from making our mistakes. So we’ve assembled this collection of 101 of our most practical around-the-house tips, culled from the pages of our first 100 issues.

Such a body of information couldn’t come from a single source. In addition to a legion of savvy writers, editors, builders, architects, and designers, we’ve also had the benefit of more than a century of collective wisdom accrued by a bunch of guys who were experts before This Old House even came on the scene: master carpenter Norm Abram, general contractor Tom Silva, plumbing and heating expert Richard Trethewey, and landscape contractor Roger Cook. We can’t wait to read what they say—as soon as we retrieve our glasses from the drainpipe, where they fell when we were trying to install the toilet. Luckily, we have Tip #48 to tell us how to get them out.

Compiled by John Kelsey
Illustrations by Edwin Fotheringham
Photographs by Erika Larsen
1. Bare Necessity

“Adding radiant-floor heat to a bathroom is probably the single best investment in comfort you could ever make,” says TDH plumbing and heating expert Richard Fitchewey. “Especially when you consider that you’re going to be there most of the time without any clothes on.”

2. Hire the Best

Ask any contractor you’re considering for at least five references; contact at least three (but skip the first one—it’s usually the brother-in-law). Ask for details of the contractor’s reliability, workmanship, and problem-solving skills. But the most important question of all: Would you hire them again?

3. Blooming Sandwich

When you plant bulbs, dig a hole whose depth equals two and a half times the height of the bulb, and plant the bulb pointy-end up. Following this guideline, you can layer a pot or planter with tulips, daffodils, and crocuses whose depth equals two and a third (but skip the first one—three, but skip the first one—only one). When you plant bulbs, dig a hole three (but skip the first one—three) times the width of the bulb. Then fill the hole with soil and water for latex—and spit it dry. This keeps it usable longer before it needs cleaning during the job and makes it easier to clean at the end of the job.

4. Paintbrush Prep

Before you start painting, soak your brush in the solvent you’ll ultimately use to clean it—mineral spirits for oil paint, water for latex—and spit it dry. This keeps it usable longer before it needs cleaning during the job and makes it easier to clean at the end of the day.

5. Color Commentary

There’s no substitute for slapstick colors up on the wall before you decide what shade to repaint a room. Better yet, use a slab of foam-core art board that you can move around the space. Live with it for a couple of days and remember:

» The perfect color on a paint chip will likely be too intense on the wall. Go with a lighter hue or a grayer hue.

» If you’re in love with a strong color, try it on a single wall or as a surprise accent on the inside of a bookcase or cabinet.

» Reserve the strongest colors for transit spaces, like entries and powder rooms.

» A lot of contract makes a room feel small; to make a room feel larger, use similar tones throughout.

6. Brush in a Bag

When a painting job lasts more than a day, scrape excess paint off your brush and roller and seal them in a plastic zipper bag. So the paint doesn’t dry, press out as much air as you can. Then pop the bag in the refrigerator. It’ll keep for a week.

7. Sharp Chalk Lines

For an unbreakable chalk line, replace the cotton string with nylon fishing line. It’s not only longer lasting, but since you can pull it tighter, you can snap a cleaner line.

8. Unstick It

To ease the removal of duct tape, Liquid Nails, and dried caulk, squirt it with WD-40.

9. Clean Hands

You can’t wash dried polyurethane foam or construction adhesive off your hands. It has to wear off. So do what TOH master carpenter Norm Abram does and protect yourself by wearing disposable latex gloves, which you can buy by the box from paint stores.

10. Supple Tubing

Drip irrigation tubing is not going to lie down as neatly as the instructions suggest—unless you leave it out in the sun for a few hours to soften up before installation.

11. Stay Plugged In

Few things are more annoying than a power tool that keeps letting go of its extension cord while you drag it around. So before you connect the plugs, tie the two cords together with a simple overhand knot, as when tying your shoes.

12. Flat Batts

Trying to cut fiberglass insulation can be like trying to cut air. Mostly because that’s what’s inside those fluffy batts. To make it easier, lay a board on the cut line and kneel on it to compress the insulation, then slice with a utility knife along the edge of the board.

13. Remember the Main

The plumber knows (and now you do, too) that there is no such thing as a genuine triple-overtime-holiday-weekend plumbing emergency. Call him up and get him to walk you through shutting off the water main, then you can wait a day.

14. Break It Down

Renovating an old house is a huge task, but less daunting when you break the big job down into manageable steps you can pick off one at a time. First thing is to close out the weather and repair the leaks. Then tackle structure and systems: electrical, plumbing, and HVAC. Finish up with interior improvements, such as painting and floor refinishing.

15. Pilot Error

Striped screwhead? You should have drilled a pilot hole. Snapped screw? You should have drilled a pilot hole. Split wood? By now you know the answer—Always drill a pilot hole. Those gadgets with a quick-change drill bit and driver on either end of a hex shank take all the fuss out of it.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

The most important thing about houses also holds true for mouse traps and skylights—where you put them makes all the difference.

MOUSE PADS

Snap traps can rid your house of mice, provided you don’t underestimate the foe. Use at least six traps per room. Place them perpendicular to the baseboard and bait them with a smear of peanut butter. Lull the little devils into your snack bar of doom by not setting the traps for the first few days. Once you see where they are taking the bait, move all your traps there, rebait them, and this time, set them.

SITe UNSEEN

Not if you shop for land when the leaves are off the trees. You’ll easily see a property’s contours, and also how close the neighbors really are.

SPLOYED SKYLIGHT

People tend to plan skylights in the middle of the roof, which leaves most of the space in darkness. But that uses the walls to scatter and reflect light does a better job of brightening. Better still, create a spray-painted opening rather than the standard (and easier to frame) squared one. To spread the light even further.

FLOATING ISLAND

With kitchen islands, bigger may seem better, until you add up the miles you’ll have to walk to get around it. In many kitchens, a wheelie island that you can easily move from place to place is more convenient and versatile.

HIGH STORAGE

Library ladders aren’t just for libraries. Those sliding steps are also a great way to access storage cabinets up near the ceiling.

TOE KICK DRAWER

You can tuck a shallow drawer for seldom-used utensils into the toe kick space beneath base cabinets.

WINDOW-SHIELD SHELVING

To create a wall of storage, install built-in shelving over the top and along both sides of a window, thus creating a niche for a stor- age bench under the sill.
24 | Claw and Scratch
Use the nail claw on your pry bar to scrape the char of your BBQ grill. It’s also the best tool for cleaning clogs of ice from your snowblower’s exhaust chute, a place your hand must never enter.

25 | Water Weight
Before you caulk the bathtub to its in-service size, making sure the caulk a lot less likely to crack or pull away.

26 | Deadman Working
Hanging drywall on a ceiling is never enter.

27 | No-Bounce Floor
To stiffen a bouncy floor, you can have your contractor install wood blocking or metal bridging between all the joists at midspan, though it’s not easy to nail it in there. A more certain method is to fasten sheets of ⅛-inch plywood across the bottom of the joists. But construction adhesive on the joists, then push the plywood up against them with the deadman you learned how to make in Tip #26, and screw or nail tight.

28 | Hole Truth
When you drill a hole saw, aim for an evenly scored circle when the teeth first touch the wood, or else the hole will end up being angled.

29 | Sponge That Slab
A stinky garbage disposer probably has a build-up of grease and ground food on the underside of the rubber splash baffles that is covering the drain opening. Clean with a scrubby sponge and dish detergent. Then run a lemon through it and some of the finish work, like painting, at the tail end.

30 | Disposing of Odor
If you want the mossy look of old-world flower pots without waiting years to achieve it, store the clay containers in a cool, shady place and spritz them occasionally with a little buttermilk. They’ll start up nicely.

31 | Hanging Heavy Stuff
To keep heavy things from falling off the wall, try mounting them on a French cleat. That’s a length of ⅛-inch plywood or 1x6 cut lengthwise with the saw set at 45 degrees. Make a level line and screw one half into the wall studs with the point of the rotor facing out and up, and screw the other half onto whatever you’re hanging with the point facing out and down. Then just lift the object into place, hooking one cleat over the other.

32 | How Long?
To ensure that a nail will be embedded deeply enough, it should be two and a half times embedded deeply enough, it should be two and a half times the distance from floor to the ceiling joists, then screw and brace an 18-inch I-beam across one end of it, forming a “T.” You want the deadman to wedge and jam slightly when the drywall is in place.

33 | Spray-On Moss
If you want the mossy look of old-world flower pots without waiting years to achieve it, store the clay containers in a cool, shady place and spritz them occasionally with a little buttermilk. They’ll start up nicely.

SWEAT EQUITY
OK, we know that 100 issues of This Old House won’t make 10- and 25-thumbed you into a general contractor or master carpenter. But you can save time and big money on a major project by doing three things yourself: the demolition work at the start, daily cleanup and trash hauling; and some of the finish work, like painting, at the tail end.

RECYCLING TRIM
When you pry old trim off the wall, some of the nails will come with it. Before you can reuse the trim, you’ll have to pull the nails. Do it with end nippers from the back side, so you don’t ding up the show surface.

UP BEFORE OUT
It’s usually cheaper to raise the roof and build up rather than out, because a new story will look like as your finished countertop, wet the surface to bring out the veining patterns and color. A kitchen renovation is expensive, and doubly so if you have to blow out the walls for it. That’s why it’s smart to begin by reorganizing and re-equipping the kitchen cabinets you already have. Replace space hogging shelves with pullout drawers, swing-out corner units, and mutlitiered racks. In many cases you can reclaim so much space that you decide to forgo the addition.

BASICS BEFORE FRILLS
Remember that labor is the most expensive part of a renovation, and it takes a lot more time to rip something out and do it again than to do it right in the first place. So spend your money on the structure and systems—insulation, doors and windows, heating and cooling—rather than on granite countertops and high-style faucets. You can always upgrade to the expensive stuff later.

How to Be Cheap
It doesn’t take Carnac the Magnificent to predict that you will go over budget on your next remodeling project (the answer is:...by 20 percent). But you don’t have to be a magician to keep costs down; just try a few of these tricks.

Self-Propelled Weed Eaters
If you’re tired of weeding your enormous garden, get yourself a pair of Chinese goose. Some farmers use them to keep fields clear. Four geese can manage an acre of land, while also contributing a helpful measure of organic fertilizer.
42 | Straight Drilling

To drill a straight hole, sight down the drill to line it up with the workpiece, and start the bit slowly. Try not to bend or cock your wrist—climb on a ladder or sit on the floor so that you can keep your forearm in line with the screw—which minimizes wrist strain and gives you better control.

43 | Painter’s Edge

You always want to keep a wet edge when painting, to avoid lumpy overlap marks. That’s easy on a straightaway, but you can get yourself into a real jam when painting doors and windows. Remember this simple rule: Work from the center out to the edges, and paint the horizontal rails before the vertical stiles.

44 | Close Shave

Sometimes you have to shave just a hair off the end of a molding or piece of trim, but it’s all too easy to shave off two hairs, ending up with a piece that’s too short. Norm’s trick: With the miter saw switched off, lower the blade and slide the end of the wood up against it, then push a little more so the blade flexes just a hair. Without moving the wood, lift the blade, start the saw, and cut.

YOU’LL THANK US LATER

The only thing that separates a pro from a regular Joe is experience. Take advantage of ours, and you won’t have to learn things the hard way.

SWINGING DOOR

When installing a door, don’t forget to plane a little bevel on the latch side of the door edge, which keeps it from sticking when the wood swells in high humidity.

A LITTLE OFF THE TOP

Whatever your renovation budget, take 10 percent off the top and forget about it. Make it happen without those dollars.

That way, when there’s a problem later on, or if you just can’t live without that six-burner range, you’ll have a cushion to fall back on.

THE BUTTONED-DOWN APPROACH

Before there is a toilet, there is a 4-inch hole in the floor, and before working over it, the wise man removes his glasses and tucks them into his shirt pocket. If the unthinkable happens and those specs go sliding down into the void, you can do like Boulder, Colorado, reader Ross Flaven did and fish them out with refrigerator magnets tied to a string (if you’re lucky enough to have steel frames). Flaven’s advice: shirts with button-down pockets. Our advice: Tie ’em to your head with a sports strap so you can see what you’re doing.

SHOCKING TRUTH

A ground-fault circuit interrupter (GFCI) receptacle, now required by code in many situations, can save your butt from electrical trouble. But only if it’s working. Check by plugging in a lamp and turning it on, then push the GFCI’s “test” button. If the light stays on, the GFCI is fried—and so could you be if you don’t replace it.

MATCHING METALS

Copper gutters are beautiful, luxurious, and almost indestructible, provided you attach them with copper fasteners. Any other metal will set up a galvanic reaction, causing the nail, the copper, or both to corrode.

HOUSEHOLD INVENTORY

A CD of digital images of each room in your house, as well as individual photos of each wall, with artwork and furniture in place, can help you establish value for insurance reimbursement in case of fire, earthquake, or flood. But this only works if you remember to date the CD and store it off-site or in a safe deposit box.

SHAMELESS SHIMMING

The secret to successfully hanging exterior doors: Use plenty of shims around the frame—at the hinge points, the strike plate, and each corner. If you don’t, says Tom Silva, “the door starts out working fine, but after a few thousand slams, it sags and sticks in the jamb.”

ROUGH-IN AND READY

A trouble-free plumbing installation depends on correctly roughing it in, which is easier and more accurate if you have the actual fixture on hand. That way you might avoid such agony as befell TOH plumbing and heating expert Richard Trethewey when he and another helper humped a cast-iron tub up four flights of stairs on a hot summer day, only to discover that the drain hole was at the wrong end.

NO SURPRISES

The next time you’re shopping for power equipment, rent or borrow it for a day before buying, says TOH landscape contractor Roger Cook. That way you’ll know what you’re getting.
56 | An Extra Hand
Installing upper cabinets might seem to require a sturdy helper, but Norm Abram does it alone with no problem. First make a level line on the wall exactly where the bottom of the cabinet will be, then fasten a temporary cleat—a 1x3 or a scrap ripped off 1/2-inch plywood—onto the studs with 21⁄2-inch screws. Once the cleat is secure, rest the cabinet’s bottom back edge on it and tip the box up into place. You can easily hold it against the wall with one hand while driving screws with the other. Then remove the cleat and spackle the screwholes.

58 | Cleaning Marble
To get stains out of marble, mix flour and just enough water to make a toothpaste-like mix. Let dry, scrape off and rinse. To clean paint off marble, use regular paint solvent and scrape with a razor blade. Then sand the surface wet with 120-grit paper, either by hand or with a random orbital sander (not a belt sander), and polish wet with 220-grit and 400-grit paper.

59 | Block Sticking
To guarantee secure basins and towel bars, bathroom walls need 2x8 blocking toe-nailed between the studs. It’s difficult to install, because the exposed studs wobble with every blow of the hammer. So tighten them temporarily by nailing a 1x3 perpendicular to the studs, just above where the blocking will go.

60 | Hammer Time
A curved-claw carpenter’s hammer puts nails more easily than a straight-claw hammer. It also takes less force so you’re less likely to stick the claw into your hand on the backswing. Homeowners should steer clear of waive-face hammers, since keying in can mar many surfaces and/or thumbs.

61 | Thrift Has Limits
Known thriftiness, he doesn’t needs without having to pull it into the trash. Whenever Norm adds a piece of hardware, you’ll have to get a hardware, you’ll have to get a three buckets—two empty and one filled with clean water. Use the cardboard to see- scope of the paint and funnel it into one of the buckets (if you pour it through a filter, you can continue painting with it). Saturate what remains with clean water, then use the spoon to scrape it into the other empty bucket. Repeat until you can’t find air in it any more. Now dis- tinguish the spot to keep it wet while you go rent a carpet steamer.

63 | Tile Trouble
Tiles the floor before installing the cabinets. The job will go faster, and you won’t be hamstrung if you want to replace the vanity with a pedestal sink later on.

64 | Layered Paint
Paintstripping preparation is the key to a fine paint job, and the weak link may lurk deep beneath the layers of yesterday’s work. So trouble before you start pressing by a strip of duct tape onto the surface, then jerking it away. If paint divots come with, scrape or strip down to the loose layer.

65 | Runaway Paint
Fresh paint crawls away from sharp corners, such as you’ll find on new doors, so surround them over with a few swipes of 120-grit sandpaper first.

66 | Timeless Tile
Tiles have flaws, too. Surfaces, and bathroom floors should be set on cement backer board, not on regular drywall or particleboard subflooring, or you risk the substrate absorbing moisture and letting go of the tile.

67–73 | BOILED ESCUTCHEON
Before you can reuse period hardware, you’ll have to get a million layers of old paint off it, which you can do with the aid of that old crockpot you were about to furlough in the kitchen renovation. Cover the hard- ware with water and a couple of tablespoons of liquid laundry detergent, and let it cook, lid on, all night on medium heat. In the morning, the stewed paint will just fall off the metal.

BY THE SPOONFUL
When you have to strip paint from a fluted column or other half-round detail, a stainless steel teaspoon will fit the con- tours better than any scraper from the hardware store.

Layered Paint
When you’re stripping chalk lines for wallpaper or stenciling, fill the real with baby pow- der. It’s easier to clean off than regular colored chalk.

SPUD WRENCH
To unscrew the base of a broken light bulb, cut a raw potato in half and press the cut end onto the jagged glass. (The Univer- sity of Idaho’s Stephen Love, Ph.D., recommends an easy-to- grip Russert.) To bake the potato—or yourself—neglect to un- plug the lamp first.

PENCIL POUR
To paint will flow along it into the new container.

FRAGRANT PAINT
Hate the smell of fresh latex paint? You can cut way down on the odor by mixing a tablespoon of vanilla extract or a drop of lemon extract into every gallon.
Use stone dust instead. Then brush in some salt to stifle the growth of weeds.
77 | Best Face Forward
Lighting around a bathroom vanity should be mounted on either side of the mirror, 36 to 40 inches apart, with the center of each fixture at about eye level. That gives you even light for grooming and eliminates ghastly shadows under your chin, eyes, and cheeks.
78 | Tiny Touch-Ups
To make a touch-up invisible, keep it as small as possible. Painting contractor Jim Clark, who has worked on many TOH projects, uses a small artist’s brush or a dab from the corner of a sponge or paper towel.
79 | Door Hang-Ups
If you paint or varnish cabinet doors in place, you’ll have drips and drools. If you take them off, you’ll have to kiln one side dry completely before you can start on the other. Here’s what to do instead. Twist a pair of small screw hooks into an inconspicuous edge (the lower one for base cabinets, the top edge for uppers), paint the door’s outside face, and let it lie flat for an hour to set. Then tip it up onto the hooks, turn it around, and thread a drywall screw into an existing hardware hole. Use the screw as a handle while you paint the back side. When you’re done painting, slide the hooks onto a coat hanger and suspend the door from the shower-curtain rod to finish drying.
80 | Keeping the Peace
While planning your remodel, designate one part of the house as Switzerland, another as Germany. Switzerland has the anesthetist that doesn’t get involved, where you can retreat to survive. Germany is your hyper-organized stash of tools, materials, and hardware, so you don’t waste time looking for stuff.
81 | Splitting Spout
Stand to one side and shield the spout when first turning on a newly installed faucet. In the few seconds it takes to purge the supply of air, the spout spits water like a mad camel.
82 | Gap Goop
Electrical work in plaster walls usually leaves jagged gaps around the boxes, and filling with drywall compound is tedious, messy, and often ineffective since the mud just falls into the cavity. But a squirt of insulating foam sealant expands to fill the space. Wait until the sealant cures fully, then cut it level with a utility knife and finish with drywall tape and three coats of joint compound.
83 | Heavy Lifting
The toughest part of moving a heavy rock is lifting it. The other toughest part is moving it. But it’s all easy with the superb leverage of a regular two-wheel, pneumatic-tire hand truck, the kind deliverymen use.
84 | Rules for Swingers
Most porch swings are sedate, but when Katy and her beau crank it up on a warm summer night, they’ll need 2 feet of clearance at each end of the swing, and at least 30 inches front and back, to avoid colliding with the house; the porch railings, or their chaperones.
85 | The Right Light
Compare the brightness of bulbs (“lamps” to the trade) by lumens, not watts. A 15-watt fluorescent and a 75-watt incandescent each put out about 500 lumens. For fuel economy, compare watts; fewer is better.
86 | Digital Diary
Whenever Norm Abram has to open up a wall for a repair, he makes a sketch of the piping and wiring locations. You can go him one better: Take a digital photo, so you’ll know where everything is if you ever have to work on the wall again.

**BUYING STONE FOR WALLS**
Three running feet of 3-foot-high wall takes about a ton of stone.

**DUST DOOR**
Renovations make lots of mess, which you want to make sure your contractor traps in the work zone. He can do it by taping 6-mil plastic sheeting over every opening, using 3-inch-wide blue painter’s tape. To access other rooms, slap a peel-and-stick zipper on the center of the plastic, then cut the slit for the doorway. Or make a slit in the plastic and tape a door-wide flap over it on the exit side. Either way, be sure to close the “door” every time you go through.

**TAPE TIP**
Two different tape measures are liable to give you two different readings, because of the way those little end tabs wobble. So use the same tape throughout a project, or do like the pros do and start from the 1-inch mark on fine work. And don’t forget to subtract an inch when you saw to the measurement or go to buy another piece at the lumberyard.

**DRIVEWAY DIMENSIONS**
A driveway should be at least 10 to 12 feet wide on the straight-away and 14 feet at curves. A turnaround space (needed on long drives) should be 12 by 18 feet or larger.

**CAULK-TIP TIP**
To keep caulk fresh in its tube between uses, save the little plastic tip that you cut off to open the nozzle, turn it around, and stick its point back in the hole. That’s what they do in product-testing labs.

**PAINT DIAGNOSIS**
Moisture behind siding can push exterior paint clean off, so before repainting, read the existing surface for clues. Bulges and flakes near the soffit indicate gutter or roof leaks. Peeling paint suggests bad flashing or gaps, and air leaks in the insulation around the frame behind the trim. A paint job is expensive; fixing any underlying problems first will help it last longer.
93 | Screw Too Loose
Loose hinges likely mean stripped screw holes, which you can repair by whittling slivers of wood and gluing them into the hole. Snap the sticks level, then reattach the hardware. You don’t even have to wait for the glue to dry.

94 | Bolts Too Short
Sometimes the bolts for cabinet hardware are too short, so counterbore a flat-bottomed hole partway through the cabinet door from the inside. Use a spade bit with tape on it to gauge the depth. (If you go too far, see Tip #98.)

95 | Hole Too Big
When heavy use has enlarged hardware mounting holes so the bolt head pulls into the hole, add a washer under the bolt head.

96 | Seal in the Heat
The hatchway into your attic can act as a chimney, sucking heat out of the house. But you can fix it by making a lightweight insulated box to fit over the opening on the attic side. Use 1 1/2-inch foil-faced R1/2 foam insulation, which you can cut with a jigsaw or a sharp kitchen knife. Tack the box together with 16d nails, then duct-tape the joints inside and out. Also tape over the bottom edge, then add peel-and-stick foam weatherstripping to seal the gap at the attic floor.

98 | Bolts Too Long
Sometimes when you’re installing pulls on cabinetry, a small hardware bolt is just too long. If you just hack-saw it to length, you’ll strip the threads and it won’t screw back into the pull. So thread a nut onto the bolt before you saw. When you back the nut off, it will true up the threads and you can proceed.

99 | Taming the Fray
Frayed ends make rope useless. In the field, you can wrap a newly cut end with electrical tape. Or, to do two ends at once, wrap the uncut rope and slice right through the tape. Tape, however, is temporary and will slip off. For a permanent fix, try wrapping the ends (called whipping) with a piece of waxed string or heavy thread.

101 | Next Time Use Coasters
White rings on furniture result from water penetrating the finish and can be removed by wiping gently with a cloth that’s barely dampened with denatured alcohol. So easy—too much alcohol dulls the surface—and test in an inconspicuous spot first, because alcohol will dissolve a shellac finish.

101 | Don’t Miss a Trick
Our next 100-issue tipfest won’t come around until 2016. So in the meantime, help keep new-homeowner friends and family in the know by getting them their very own subscription to This Old House. After all, 10 years is a long time to wait.

Think you know a better way? Send us your best tips: thisoldhouse.com/shortcuts