

Home Experts

TOP TIPS
THREE CLEVER USES
FOR TINFOIL

Clean the barbecue

Once the grill has cooled down, scrunch some foil into a ball to make a scouring pad. Rub it across the burnt grill to remove charred food residue, then wash the grill in warm, soapy water.

Polish silverware

For an eco-friendly cleaner for sterling silver cutlery, line a saucepan or heat-proof glass bowl with foil (shiny side up). Fill with boiling water and add baking soda (2tbsp in a litre of water). Drop in the silver and leave for a few minutes. It will bubble and fizz. When you remove the silver, it will be hot, so take care. Rinse under a tap, dry and buff with a soft cloth. Repeat if the silver is heavily tarnished.

Iron clothes faster

Place foil underneath the cover of your ironing board, shiny side up. Foil reflects heat, so it will speed up crease removal.

goodhousekeeping.co.uk/institute



READERS' CLINIC

HOW DO I CLEAN THE INSIDE OF GLASS SALT AND PEPPER MILLS?

EM Martin, Staffordshire

G Lewis, via email

Easy-peasy. Lakeland sells a pot of tiny ball bearings (magic copper balls, £6, lakeland.co.uk). Mixed with water and shaken, they clean the inside of most things, including vases and decanters. Failing that, rough sand, similarly used, might do the trick.

Patricia Goodyear, via email

Keep them full, so you won't notice.

Furniture questions:

● I live in a first-floor Victorian terraced flat. How do I neutralise the smell of a neighbour's spicy cooking (from downstairs) and pungent meats (from next door)?

● I have lots of left-handed rubber gloves, as the right ones wear out first. How do I prevent this?

Send your trips, tricks and questions to: homehelp@sunday-times.co.uk



ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL DORNER

PROBLEM OF THE WEEK
I BOUGHT A HOUSE INFESTED WITH RATS

Q I recently moved into a property that I bought six months ago. The house is an end-of-terrace dating from 1900. Since I moved in, it has become apparent that I have a rat infestation: they are entering my property in huge numbers, often at night. In two weeks, I've put down 6kg of poison.

A I have learnt from this my neighbours that one of the issues the vendor was long aware of. The previous owner had paid jointly to repair walls three years ago in the hope of solving the problem. I was told the seller had reported it to and sought help from the local authority and water board "year after year".

I am worried the rats are related to drains/sewage. It may be costly to resolve. The seller did not declare any of this to me, in person or in the legal paperwork. Do I have any recourse? LB, via email

A In a property sale, there is no duty on the seller to disclose problems, hence the expression "caveat emptor", or "buyer beware". That said, in conveyancing, it is standard practice for the seller to answer questions on a "property information" form. If the information given in that form, or elsewhere, is inaccurate, then you may

have a legal claim against the seller.

The form doesn't cover rats specifically; you'll need to argue that answers to other questions are relevant. You may argue that there have been "complaints" (eg to the council) or "notices" from the council about the rats. You might make a freedom of information request to obtain evidence; ask the neighbours for any paperwork they have. If you can show that (a) there were complaints or notices about the rats, (b) the seller knew about them, but gave you inaccurate information, and (c) that you relied on that information in buying the property and suffered a loss, you may have a claim.

That might entitle you to a court order requiring the seller to buy the property back. Act quickly – you can lose the right to make a claim if you have made changes to the property. If you are not able to make the seller buy it back, you might have a claim for damages; perhaps the cost of correcting the problem or the difference between what you paid for the property and what you should have paid. You would require valuation evidence from an expert valuer in that case. You should take specific legal advice.

Ed Cracknell, senior associate, Russell-Cooke Solicitors; russell-cooke.co.uk



HOME HELP

Plagued by rats, rabbits or issues with past subsidence? Our experts are on hand

Q My house had minor subsidence the year before I bought it. The previous owners repaired it, and it has been fine since. Yet a decade later, I am still paying excessive home insurance for a past problem. Is there a way to certify that it's now sound and pay a lower premium, or is it forever tainted? Celine Le Guyader, via email

A Underpinning, which improves the foundations of a home, is mostly done to reinstate structural stability, perhaps affected by subsidence. Sometimes it is carried out to add support to a home when it is altered or extended.

Underpinned houses can sometimes be difficult to secure a mortgage on or insure. It is important to know why it was needed. It's unlikely that underpinning for alteration works would affect insurance premiums, but repairs for subsidence might do so.

Part of the problem is that underpinning is hidden in the ground and cannot be

inspected. If the work was done in the past, the exact location and reason may have been lost. As a surveyor, I cannot stress enough: always keep documents relating to work and pass them to future owners. A "certificate of structural adequacy" may have been issued: this will give the reason for the work and the details. This is helpful, but it isn't a guarantee.

A house underpinned to repair subsidence is usually less likely to suffer problems in future, but underwriters take history into account when assessing premiums. As there can be uncertainty, many insurers place additional terms on properties that have been underpinned and reflect this in their premium and excess.

There is no formal way to certify that a house with past subsidence is now stable, but some underwriters consider reports from a chartered surveyor or structural engineer. Specialist insurance brokers may be of help, too.

Steven Vay, practice principal, Collier Stevens Chartered Surveyors; collier-stevens.co.uk

Q We live on half an acre in a rural area. This year we have a problem with rabbits eating certain flowering plants and some bushes. The planted areas are too large to enclose in wire netting. How can we deter the rabbits? Are there any plants they don't like to eat? R Ashworth, via email

A One of the most useful innovations for deterring rabbits is a foliar spray made by a company called Grazers. Relatively new to gardeners, though long used by farmers, it contains a special formulation of the plant nutrient calcium that rabbits find unpalatable.

Unlike a poison, it won't harm the environment or the rabbits. But it works in a similar way to oversalting a bag of chips: they're edible, but no longer good to eat. Spray at the start of the growing season and every six weeks while new leaves are forming, from spring to autumn.

For rabbit-resistant plants, choose flowers that spread and naturalise, such as foxgloves, primroses, aquilegia and

ajuga; blooms with hairy or scented leaves, including salvia, catmint and achillea; or fleshy foliage, as found on sedums and agapanthus. For a longer list, visit rhs.org.uk.

Toby Buckland is a garden writer and the host of tobygardenfest.co.uk in Somerset, September 16 and 17

Q When we bought our house, a carpenter fitted a row of MFI flatpack wardrobes. The plastic veneer on the doors is now peeling, and there is glue underneath it. We are selling up, but do not want the upheaval of replacing the wardrobes. How can we remove the veneer, and what paint can we use for the surface underneath? Rineke Robbins, via email

A Fusion Mineral Paint is what you need for this job: when you apply it after the same firm's Ultra Grip primer, you can paint it onto any surface. The coverage is excellent, it is environmentally sensitive, there's a great colour choice and it's good value.

Upcyclers are going mad for the stuff. To see the colour range and find a stockist, go to fusionmineralpaint.com.

Don't try to remove the plastic veneer. This could be a time-consuming, horrible job. Use a good PVA/wood glue to stick down any peeling parts, then prime and paint them.

The Fusion paint forms a durable surface that will last for years. For best results, lightly sand the outer layer, apply the Ultra Grip, wait 12 hours, then paint it.

There are other paints that can cover this type of surface. Zinsser makes an All Coat Multi-Surface Primer and Finish, but the colour range is much smaller and I have only seen solvent-based options.

This is a simple weekend job that will add years of life to those MFI doors.

Wayne Perrey and Steph Bron, founders of theidiydoers.com

DO YOU NEED HELP FROM ONE OF OUR EXPERTS? Email your questions to homehelp@sunday-times.co.uk. Advice is given without responsibility