

Home Experts

HOW TO... CLEAR A BLOCKED DRAIN

Work out the cause

Boiling water is particularly effective when removing built-up grease from a kitchen sink, but less so if the blockage is in the bathroom, where it's more likely the result of hair, skin and soap-scum deposits. To get rid of this, reach for the rubber plunger and drain auger — a flexible metal coil that can be fed through the pipes until it reaches the blockage.

Plunge it

To use a plunger properly, place it over the plughole, cover the overflow opening with a soft cloth and fill the basin with enough water to cover the plunger cup. Keeping the seal, pump vigorously up and down, then quickly release the plunger.

Hit the cleaning cupboard

GHI has also tested chemical cleaners, and found Buster's Plughole Unblockers to be the most effective.

goodhousekeeping.co.uk/institute



READERS' CLINIC

HOW DO I SOFTEN A HARD MATTRESS?

D Leigh, Surrey

Liz Dahl

Ask someone heavier than you to sleep in your bed, or on your side, for a few days. It worked for me!

Emma Brooke-Hitching

A quality "topper" (a thick layer of padding in cotton cover) worked for us. This also made the bed warmer, and the padding eases sore hips.

Astrid Hayton

Buy a memory-foam mattress topper with a removable, washable cover. The best is the 5cm-thick one from Argos.

Future questions

- How do I disguise areas of worn carpet on the corners of stair treads?
- How do I clean greasy jars — peanut butter, salad dressing — before recycling them without the oil entering my drains?

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



HOME HELP

Want to heat up your holiday home or rid your bath of orange marks? Our experts are on hand

Q We own a shoebox-size holiday flat in the Yorkshire Dales. It has storage heaters, as there is no gas. Visiting in winter is a trial: there is no heat until a day after we arrive. What are the alternatives? Must we continue to resemble walking duvets until the place warms up? *Janet and John Chamberlin, Swaledale*

A There are plenty of electric alternatives that are more convenient. Wi-fi-enabled electric radiators such as the Haverland SmartWave (from £300) give you control of your system from a tablet or smartphone. You can use it from a distance, so it's easy to heat spaces before you arrive, but your property must have internet access. If it doesn't, try the Haverland RCWave (from £199), which can be digitally programmed to a 24-hour, seven-day schedule.

Infrared panels are relatively new and popular with businesses looking for energy efficiency. They are as slim as picture frames and produce a gentle radiant

heat that won't be lost through draughts. They take up minimal space, but need more time to heat a room than other electric heaters. Herschel is an established brand; the Select range starts at £189.

Once you remove your storage heaters, contact your energy supplier so you can move from an economy tariff to standard rates.

Stephen Hankinson, managing director, Electric Radiators Direct; electricradiatorsdirect.co.uk

Q Can you recommend a product to eliminate limescale from our maroon acrylic sunken tub? *Sandie Deitsch, Surrey*

There are lots of orange marks on our acrylic bath. How do I remove the stains? *Sally Pinfold, via email*

A It sounds as if the build-up of limescale on Sally's bath has attracted dirt and soap scum, hence the orange marks. Any water that doesn't quite clear after bath use can cause this, too.

The best product for this, and for Sandie's maroon tub, is Kilrock, available as a gel paste with a brush, a liquid or a spray (£4.50 for 400ml; diy.com). Apply and leave for 30 minutes, then rinse with cold water. This should make the bath white (or maroon) again.

Wayne Perrey and Steph Bron, founders of the DIY Doers Club; thediadoers.com

Q How can I discourage a fox from sleeping on top of my Audi convertible? I live in Bloomsbury and park in an open garage space under my block. The fox climbs over my bonnet, windscreen, roof and boot. The dirty paw prints are left for all to see! The roof seems to be a resting place. *Peter Silver, London*

A Footprints on car roofs and bonnets are often left by roving young males in February and March — mating season — when their screaming yelps (answered by females) rend the night air. As a boy, I thought they were witches,

PROBLEM OF THE WEEK

CAN I BUY MY HOME'S FREEHOLD IF I DON'T OWN THE LOFT?

Q I own a terraced house with a 995-year lease and pay annual ground rent of £350, which doubles every 20 years. The lease excludes the loft area and roof.

I wish to buy the freehold. My solicitor served a section 5 notice under the Leasehold Reform Act 1967, but the freeholder ignored it, so the solicitor has applied to a first-tier tribunal for an order to set a price for the freehold and for it to be transferred to me. Do I have the right to buy the freehold? And, as the freeholder did not respond, should he share legal costs? *IT, Hertfordshire*

A Broadly speaking, a tenant of a house under a long lease (more than 21 years) who has owned the lease for at least two years can enfranchise the freehold under section 1 (1) of the Leasehold Reform Act 1967 ("the act"). When the claim notice is served, a contract comes into being, compelling the landlord to transfer the freehold to you if you are entitled to enfranchise it. But the tenancy must be of the whole house. Yours does

not include the roof or loft, so, on the face of it, you aren't entitled to enfranchise. This may be why the landlord has ignored your application. Excluding the roof is a known method of avoiding the act.

The landlord has not served a notice in reply to your application, so he is not prevented from denying your right. The first-tier tribunal can only fix the price and terms of any transfer; it cannot rule on whether you are entitled to enfranchise. The county court has that jurisdiction.

The first-tier tribunal will issue directions; the landlord will likely respond that the tribunal has no jurisdiction in your case. The tribunal application will then likely be stayed pending an application to the county court for a ruling on your entitlement.

As for costs, a landlord who does not serve a notice in reply is usually ordered to pay any costs unnecessarily incurred as a result of that failure. This would be dealt with in the county court.

If you are keen to avoid the escalating rent, and enfranchisement is not an option, consider applying for a lease extension under the Leasehold Reform Housing and Urban Development Act 1993. This could get you 90 additional years at a peppercorn rent.

Alan Edwards, partner, Russell-Cooke, incorporating Alan Edwards & Co; russell-cooke.co.uk

so ungodly was the din. They're often too excited to notice where they're going. Exhausted by their nocturnal gallivanting, they rest in warm, dry spots, often with a vantage point (a shed roof, a garden trampoline).

Even outside the mating season, foxes nap on roofs, and this one has a soft spot for your soft top. Pepper or citronella dusts and sprays might deter it: if you don't want this on your car, sprinkle on the tarmac. Bird spikes might work, too. A tarpaulin will protect the car from scratches and may make the roof less comfortable. If you're away, place wooden battens on the roof, under the tarp, to make a dip you can fill with water. No fox likes sleeping in a puddle.

Richard Jones is the author of House Guests, House Pests (Bloomsbury £9.99); bugmanjones.com

Q I have planning consent for a new house, but it is subject to a community infrastructure levy of £50,000. Do I need to pay? *S Allen, via email*

A If the new home is your main residence, you can apply for an exemption from the levy, but you must submit a claim, and a form whereby you assume liability to pay any levy if you break the rules, to your local authority. Confirmation of your exemption must be granted before you start and you must send the council a notice with your start date.

Once your home has been completed in accordance with building regulations, you have six months to confirm to the council that it is self-built. If you don't do all of the above, you must pay the levy when you sell or let your property, or if it ceases to be your main residence within three years of completion.

Claire Fallows, head of planning, Charles Russell Speechlys; charlesrussellspeechlys.com

DO YOU NEED HELP FROM ONE OF OUR EXPERTS?

Email your questions to homehelp@sunday-times.co.uk. Advice is given without responsibility