

Home Experts

TOP TIPS
FOR FASTER IRONING

1 Put a damper on Strike while the iron is hot, the adage goes. It's also crucial to get to work while your clothes are still damp.

2 Full metal When your ironing board is due for an update, opt for a cover with a heat-reflective metallic surface (Minky Reflector Ironing Board Cover, from £5; amazon.co.uk). This helps direct heat and steam from the iron onto the underside of the fabric, getting rid of creases more easily. You can achieve the same effect by placing a layer of tinfoil, shiny side up, under your ironing board's cover.

3 Go halves If you iron bed linen, cheat by folding duvet covers or flat sheets in half. Keep them taut to avoid wrinkles. It's easiest to fold lengthways so they fit on the board. Turn up your iron's steam function to maximum and just press half the sheet.

goodhousekeeping.co.uk/institute



READERS' CLINIC

HOW DO I STOP CATS FROM SCRATCHING THE CARPET?

Barry Wright

Helen Swann, Portsmouth Supply a doormat for scratching instead. Woven jute/coir mats are best — our cat got through one in about 12 months, but the carpets were spared! Add catnip to the mat.

Jane Foster, via email As well as offering the cat a scratching post, I have applied clear sticky-backed plastic to carpet or upholstery for a week or two, to break the habit of my cat scratching in areas.

Reader's tip To get rid of cluster flies, wait until it's really cold. Then let off smoke bombs made for flies in your loft.

Future question How do I find a real Christmas tree with the proper smell?

Send your tips, tricks and questions to homehelp@sundaytimes.co.uk. Readers' tips are given without responsibility and are not professional advice



HOME HELP

Neighbour's trees driving you up the wall, or worried about a leaky chimney? Ask our team

Q What's a modern alternative to net curtains? We are converting our loft, and the new dormer will have a Juliet balcony with glazed french doors. We'll draw curtains at night, but need window coverings in the day that let in the light yet maintain our bedroom's privacy and soften the bleak view (of garages). Any tips? **LM, London**

A There are several options that offer privacy and light. The key is to make sure any blind or window covering can be fitted without obstructing opened doors. To work out whether blinds are an option, ask your builder how much room you will have above the doors. Horizontal blinds tilted downwards will mask the view and obscure visibility from outside, but they will need to be raised when you open the doors. White or light-painted wood-slat blinds will maximise light in the room (£160-£230, excluding installation; wooden-blinds-direct.co.uk). Bespoke shutters give a high-end look and are more

stable. They can be opened entirely when the doors are open (about £500, plus installation; opensluts.co.uk). If you intend to open the doors regularly, consider integrated blinds, which are individually fitted within the double glazing and can be operated by remote control. As they are contained within the glass, they remain dust-free and the doors can be opened without having to raise the blinds. They can be ordered with the glass units and installed within them (from £845 for a pair of 75cm x 210cm french doors, behindglassblinds.co.uk). For a permanent solution, glazing could be sandblasted or acid-etched, so there is no need for blinds.

Julia Kendall, interior-design expert for the Homebuilding & Renovating Show; homebuildingshow.co.uk

Q Ever since we installed a gas fire in 2006, there has been a damp patch on the chimney breast. The patch is a distinct shape, better in winter, when the heating is on, and worse in

summer. The chimney was swept before the fire was installed, but it lacks a liner. **Sue Connolly, via email**

A Chimney leaks are often due to issues with the flashing (a stepped sheet of metal where the chimney meets the roof, making it watertight). But if that is the cause, damp tends to come down the whole hearth, not just a small area. As your damp is only a "spot" in the breast, it's likely caused by a small leak in the chimney itself. Older chimneys were often built without a lead tray in the stack. Water then penetrates this, often creating a wet patch on the breast. This can cause mould, rot or damage to wallpaper, paint and plaster. It's better in winter because the fire evaporates the water mark.

Get a professional to assess it before more damage is done. They may need to rebuild the chimney and install a lead tray, which could cost as much as £3,000. As a temporary fix, paste the chimney top with bitumen or fill in gaps on the side, topped by a few coats of

PROBLEM OF THE WEEK
MY DAUGHTER IS BUYING A HOME WITH HER BOYFRIEND — AND MY CASH. WHAT IF THEY SPLIT UP?

Q I am giving my daughter £100,000 for the deposit on her first house, which she is buying with her boyfriend for £300,000. They are planning to get married eventually. How can I protect my deposit in case they split up? **GF, via email**

A More and more buyers are receiving financial assistance from the Bank of Mum and Dad when purchasing a property. It is also increasingly common for the parents to try to ring-fence their contribution so it will be protected if their child splits from the partner with whom they are buying the home.

The parents can arrange for a legal charge (akin to a mortgage) to be registered against the property title at the Land Registry. This would detail the amount of the loan and any other agreed terms. The house could not be sold until there was an agreement in place in respect of the removal of the charge, which would inevitably involve repayment of the loaned amount. If the

buyers are purchasing with the benefit of a mortgage, however, the lender might not agree to another charge on the title.

Another option for a parent would be a "declaration of trust". This is a document that provides details of the percentage of ownership of a property or any contributions towards the purchase price, as well as subsequent repayments or reimbursements on a future sale.

If the person receiving parental assistance and his/her partner are intending to marry, a prenuptial agreement between them could also be a useful tool to identify the parties' contributions towards the purchase of the property and any reimbursement or repayments required on the break-up of the relationship and subsequent sale of the property. Bear in mind that such agreements are not legally binding, and a court may direct otherwise.

Please note that in any of these instances, the parties should take their own independent legal advice. The parents may also need to take separate advice on any possible tax issues as a consequence of any gift, contribution or loan to a child in respect of a property purchase.

Donall Murphy, partner, Russell-Cooke solicitors; russell-cooke.co.uk

water sealer. If there is a crack in the stack and no liner, this may be dangerous. Liners draw poisonous fumes such as carbon monoxide out of the top of the chimney. Without one, gases could seep into the house — a serious health risk.

Willie Moffitt, member of the Federation of Master Builders, Moffitt and Robinson Construction; moffittandrobinson.co.uk

Q My neighbours and I are not friends. A 6ft stone wall, owned by me, separates our properties. The neighbour has allowed three trees to grow 2ft from the wall. I'm sure their roots pose a threat. If the wall falls, who is responsible for its failure and repair costs? **DH, Aberdeen**

A Should roots damage the wall, you may have a claim against your neighbour for reasonable repair costs. You'd have to establish that the damage was reasonably foreseeable and that your neighbour failed to take reasonable care to prevent it.

HOW TO...
DESIGN A DRESSING ROOM

You know you want one: a room of your own, with all your clothes, shoes and scarves neatly arranged in one space, where you can put together a killer look in minutes. No more searching in crammed wardrobes or buying the same grey poloneck twice because you forgot you already had one. Here's our guide to creating a dressing room or walk-in wardrobe, leaving your bedroom serene and decluttered.

CREATE THE SPACE

If you have a box room or small bedroom next to yours, transforming it into a dressing room is relatively easy. You could knock through, if the risk of devaluing your home by having fewer bedrooms doesn't bother you, or keep it as a separate space. "We see this happening with empty-nesters, who reconfigure the house when the children leave home," says Paul Walton, design director at the luxury firm Halstock Cabinet Makers. "And when people convert

lofts into master suites, they often want a dressing room. If it's at the gable end, there will be full-height space for hanging, with drawers and shelves built into the sides to make good use of the restricted height."

If you have a big bedroom, you could siphon off a section if it won't affect the proportions of the room. "You could have a simple stud wall erected, with or without a door, to create a separate dressing room or walk-in wardrobe," says Helen Reeks, creative director at Neville Johnson, which makes fitted furniture. "The dead space on a large landing could also be expanded into, creating a dressing room."

Your dressing room should reflect the colours and style of your bedroom and bathroom, but choose a light tone to make the space feel bigger and give you a neutral background for dressing. Using the same carpet as in the adjoining bedroom will add to the sense of space, as the rooms will flow into one another.

STORAGE UNITS AND SEATING Line all the walls with storage, adding an island with more

CHRISTOPHER BROWN



storage or a seat in the centre if there's room. Fitted units will cost more than standalone ones, but bespoke designs use every inch of space and look neater. A glass-topped island is ideal for storing smaller items such as belts, cufflinks and jewellery, with drawers underneath. A cushioned bench, or an ottoman for extra storage, would give you somewhere to try on shoes. You might want to go minimal and shut everything away, but open shelving, hanging space and shoe shelves mean you can see all your possessions instantly,

which helps with putting a look together and creates a more colourful and inspiring space. If you've got a great shoe collection, why hide it? Alternatively, you could go for glass-fronted units so you can still see everything. Remember: drawers will cost more than open shelves. If it's a his-and-hers dressing room, the obvious plan is to have one side each, but Walton points out a common pitfall: "Women tend to have double the amount of shoes, so we've found the space ratio needed is sometimes 70% to 30% in favour of the woman."

But be generous with the amount of hanging space — shirts squashed in too tightly will crease."

Look for hanging rails that can be adjusted up and down, ideal for making the most of every inch. "Make sure you have enough full-length hanging space, as well as two sections stacked one above the other, which is a great space-saver," Reeks says.

DRESSING TABLES

Decide whether you'll need space for a dressing table for hair and make-up, or whether you'll keep that in the bedroom — if you choose the former, it should go wherever the (ideally natural) light is best, so you'll need to design the rest of the room around that. Standalone dressing tables can add a touch of individuality and glamour, but a built-in one will save space; avoid drawers or cupboard doors either side, otherwise it will look and feel cramped.

LIGHTING AND MIRRORS

Mirrored wardrobe doors are a good space-saver, but for style, you can't beat an oversized free-standing mirror, resting against the

wall. (This is best avoided if you have small children or pets.) Dressing rooms can be windowless and dark if they're between bedrooms and bathrooms, so if there's an opportunity to add a roof light, take it.

Lighting needs to be bright enough to see colours and creases, but you don't want changing-room stark, so it's best to go for a layered approach. If you have ceiling lights, install a dimmer switch so you can control the brightness. Wall lights are more flattering, and you can install a task lamp at the dressing table and have lights built into shelving.

HOW MUCH?

Neville Johnson's design and build service starts at £6,000 for a dressing room. Other bespoke firms include strachan.co.uk, sharps.co.uk and mwf.com.

If you have a firm idea of design, a local joiner could create units to fit your space. A budget option is Ikea's Elvarli, a three-section doorless unit with hanging space, drawers and shoe storage (£380; ikea.com).

Cherry Maslen

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