HOLIDAY HINTS

THE FAMILY Handyman®

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Tips for Lights, Trees, and Decorating

Lazy Susan tree stand for wood floors

Winding the lights around our Christmas tree was always a pain. Then we found a great way to rotate the tree in its stand—without scratching up our hardwood floor. We put a bath rug underneath the tree stand, fabric side down, rubber side up. Now we can easily turn the tree to string our lights and place our ornaments just where we want them. It makes "undecorating" the tree a breeze too. We fold the rug under the tree skirt to keep it hidden.

Easy bolt tightening

Tightening tree-stand nuts by hand is tiring and takes forever. Try this, our favorite Christmas tree hint from our archives: Cut off the little L's at the end of the tree stand bolts with a hacksaw. Chuck the ends of the bolts into a variable-speed drill and tighten them into the trunk. Your tree will be secure, and you can get out from underneath the tree and get decorating.

Tip-proof, drip-proof lazy Susan for carpet

We've tried different tree stands over the years, but we've still had trees fall over—because they either were top heavy with ornaments or got tipped over by the cat. I came up with this easy solution: I cut a 2-ft.-diameter circle out of plywood, screwed my tree stand to it and then stapled plastic sheeting to the plywood. The wooden base gives our tree solid footing and even the cat can't topple it (not that she doesn't keep trying). The plastic helps us slide the tree around on the carpet for easy decorating and protects the carpet from any watering spills.

Hose reel for holiday lights

They call me “Mr. Christmas” because I love decorating my house with tons of lights inside and out. My wife calls this my holiday obsession. I prefer to think of it as my holiday passion. To keep all the lights from getting tangled and make it easy to string them around my yard, I rolled about 30 strings of lights onto a portable hose reel that has wheels and a handle. Now I can pull the lights around my yard and roll off as many as I need without any help from elves (or my wife), and everybody’s happy. Ho ho ho.

Tree in a tube—to go, please

We like the convenience of our artificial tree but dislike storing it because it takes up so darn much space. I came up with this idea. I use two 8-in.-diameter concrete form tubes, wrap each layer of the tree in twine and store half the tree layers in one tube and half in the other. I mark the layer numbers on each tube and stow the tubes in my garage rafters. A perfect solution!

Labeled tree layers

Artificial Christmas trees are assembled in color-coded layers. After a few years, the colors rub off (or you lose the instructions), and putting the tree together gets confusing. Try this simple trick. When you disassemble the tree at the end of the season, do it one level at a time. Once all the branches from one level are off, duct-tape them together and number each layer with a marker. Next year, the tree will go together in a snap!

Holiday light hangers

Instead of poking nails into aluminum soffits and fascia when you’re hanging holiday lights, clip the wires to the bottom lip of the fascia with clothespins.

Toilet paper holder for tape

An old toilet paper holder makes a handy tape dispenser for the shop. You can use a surface-mounted holder or impress the neighbors with a recessed version.

Buy a tree bag when you get your tree

Slip a tree disposal bag over the base of the tree before putting it in the stand. (Tear a slit for the trunk so the tree can get water!) The bag hides under the tree skirt until you're ready to haul the tree out the door—without leaving a trail of needles through the house. Just remove the ornaments from the tree, pull the bag up like a pair of pants, and you're on your way.

Tighten the tree stand with a drill

Tightening tree stand nuts by hand is tiring and takes forever. Here's an alternative: Cut off the little Ls at the end of the tree stand bolts with a hacksaw. Chuck the ends of the bolts into a variable-speed drill to tighten them into the trunk. You'll be out from under that prickly tree in no time.

P.S. It's a fact of Christmas: The tree stand gets overfilled and water stains the carpet or the hardwood floor. To prevent this, place a plastic water heater tank catch basin ($5 at home centers) between the stand and the floor.

Lighting tips

Test your lights before you go to the effort of stringing them on the tree. When the season is over, coil them into a 5-gal. pail to keep them tangle free for next year.

Don’t cut off the netting—yet

When you bring your tree home, carry it into the house and set it up in the stand before removing the netting. It’ll slip right through doors, hallways and stairwells without making a mess. You’ll find it easier to get at the tree stand screws and easier to tell if the tree is straight.

Knee-saving watering

To make tree watering easier, hang a funnel from a tree branch with a loop of clothes hanger. Then slip a plastic tube over the end of the funnel and run the tube along the trunk and into the water reservoir. To prevent overfilling, have one of the kids watch the water level or put a finger in the reservoir and tell you when it’s full.

Christmas tree basics

• Check the height of the tree before you bring it into the house to make sure it'll fit under the ceiling. Then if you have to shorten the trunk, the sawdust will stay outside.

• Cut an inch or so off the bottom of the trunk. The fresh wood can absorb more water, so the tree will stay fresher longer.

• Check the trunk diameter by test-fitting the stand. If the tree's too big, you'll need to either get a bigger stand—or start whittling.

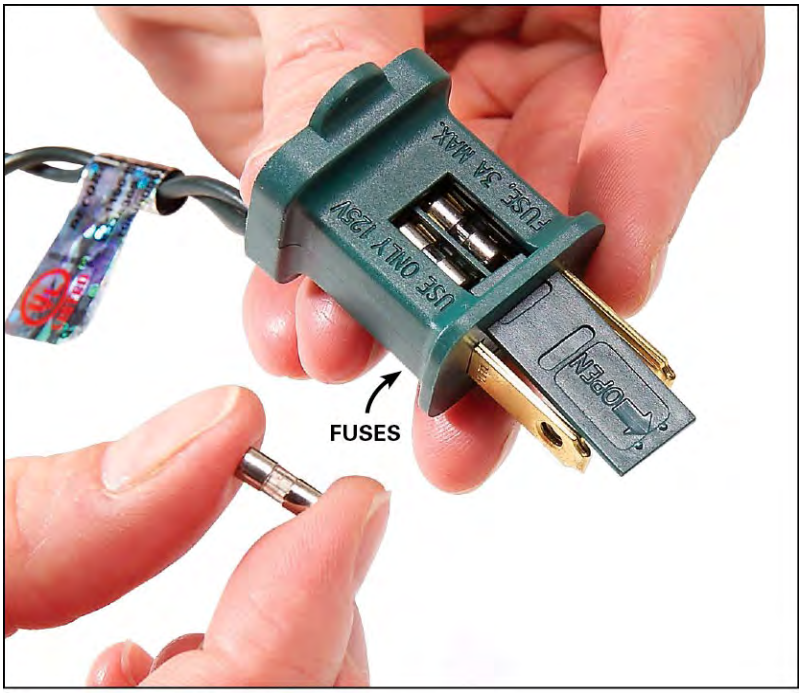
• Use a lopper to trim any bottom branches that don't clear the sides of the stand.

Burned-out holiday lights

Q I'm putting up my outdoor Christmas lights that I used last year. Half of the lights won't work. I know it's cheaper to just replace them, but I hate to throw them away. Yet I also hate to pull out every bulb to find the bad one. Any solutions?

Mike Koning, via e-mail

A Judging by our mail, it seems that most of us have experienced the frustration of uncooperative holiday lights. There's a simple way to solve the problem. First, slide back the plastic covering on the plug to check the fuse (Photo 1). Some strings have more than one fuse, in which case they'll be next to each other. Replace any blown fuses. New ones are available where holiday lights are sold and at some electronics stores.



1 Check the fuse

Second, test the bulbs with an inexpensive tester (less than $10), available where holiday lights are sold and online. Usually, changing a problem bulb (or tightening it) will fix the entire strand. The tester will indicate which bulbs are bad and need to be replaced. (For the tester to work, the lights must be plugged into the electrical outlet correctly—the narrow "hot" blade into the narrow slot and the wide neutral blade into the wide slot.)

Some testers work by having you slide each bulb through a hole (Photo 2). With other testers, you simply touch each bulb (Photo 3). You can test an entire strand in a few minutes. Sometimes you have two or more defective bulbs, so only identifying one bad bulb may not fix the problem.

2 Check the bulbs: Tester 1

Keep in mind that inexpensive strings of lights aren't durable. At the end of the holiday season, take down the lights with care. Don't pull too hard on the wires. A loose bulb, broken socket or frayed wire is sometimes all it takes for the strand to malfunction.

3 Check the bulbs: Tester 2

After taking down the lights, plug them in before storing them, to make sure they still

work. Then carefully wrap the lights in their original or similar containers, making sure the bulbs don't bang together. Proper storage is key to their continued success. Wadding them up in a coil and stuffing them into a box will almost guarantee they won't work next year.

Also be aware that most holiday light bulbs have short life expectancies, about 1,000 to 1,500 hours. This means the lights are designed to last one to three seasons, depending on your usage. Newer style LED (light-emitting diode) lights are the exception. They can last 10 times longer than traditional lights.

Spool center

I used to keep all my tape, twine and ribbon spools in a drawer. Not only did it look messy, but it wasted a lot of space and made it hard to find things. Last winter I came up with this great organizing idea. I screwed a paper towel holder to the window trim in my craft room and stuck rolls of the things I use most often on the holder.

Now I know right where everything is, and I can pull off the amount I need without the spool jumping out of my hand and rolling across the floor.

No-spill Christmas tree

A plastic snow saucer, the kind with the flat area in the center ($6 at discount stores), is great for keeping overflowing Christmas tree water from staining your floor. Place a carpet remnant under the saucer to prevent scratches on wood flooring.

Fast $40 table

Aunt Edna just called to tell you she's coming for the holidays (and bringing some nice people she met hanging around the bus station). Trouble is, you don't have enough table space. Don't worry; just run to the home center and get a 10-ft. length of 3-in. PVC pipe, four 3-in. toilet flanges and a hollow-core door. Hollow-core "slabs" are 80 in. long and available from 28 to 36 in. wide ($15 to $25). Cut the PVC to make legs and assemble the table as shown.

It's not a masterpiece, but under a tablecloth it looks fine. Plus it's lightweight and easy to disassemble and store until next year. Just remember that hollow-core doors aren't very strong; don't sit or stand on the table.

Fireplace jump-start

If your fireplace won’t draw smoke up the chimney when you first start a fire, try opening a window near the fireplace. That allows air to flow into the room and up the chimney. If that doesn’t work, preheat the chimney before you start a fire: Blast hot air up into the chimney using a hair dryer or, better yet, a heat gun.

Last-minute gifts

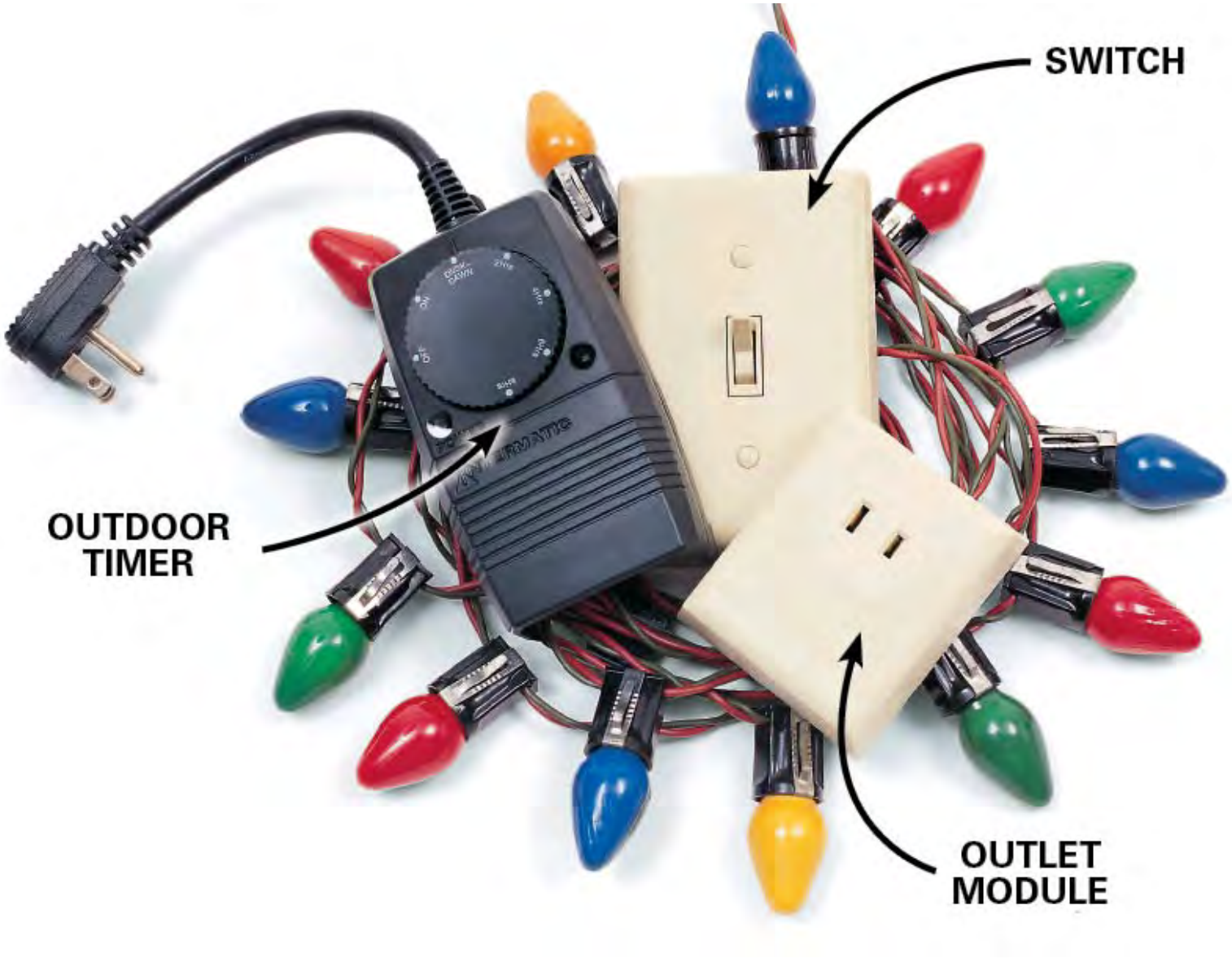
If you're buying for a homeowner, you can't go wrong with these inexpensive, easy-to-find tools:

• Beloved by contractors, the "4-in-1" screwdriver is one tool everyone should own. It has tips to fit large and small Phillips and slotted screws. About $5.

• Spring clamps are meant for woodworking, but anyone who has fewer than three hands will find them useful. And you can never have too many. About $2 to $6, depending on size.

• Super-bright halogen work lights are great for auto repair, painting, remodeling and a dozen other tasks. Available in several sizes and styles, most models cost $10 to $25.

Gadgets for lights



After dinner you crawl behind the Christmas tree to plug in the lights. Then you go out into the cold to plug in the outdoor lights. At bedtime you unplug them both. For about $30 you can put an end to this holiday hassle. Outdoor timers cost about $10. Remote switches, which are for indoor use only, have a module that plugs into an outlet and a switch that can be mounted on a wall or kept in a drawer. They cost about $20. Both are available at home centers and discount stores.

Cat-proof Christmas tree

Two or three lengths of fishing line can keep climbing cats or rambunctious kids from tipping your tree. Just tie one end of each line to the top of the tree and the other to something sturdy: a screw driven into an inconspicuous spot on the wall, moldings above windows or doors, or even a curtain rod.

Carbon monoxide season

You've got a house full of guests, so the oven and stove are working overtime, the water heater is struggling to keep up with demand, the fireplace is burning and the furnace is fighting the cold. It's the perfect setting for carbon monoxide buildup. So if you don't already have a UL-listed carbon monoxide detector, put it at the top of your shopping list. Detectors cost about $20 at home centers and discount stores.

Christmas tree safety

To help prevent Christmas tree fires, choose a recently cut, healthy tree. A fresh tree holds moisture better. Grab a tree branch and run your hand over it—no more than a few needles should fall off. As soon as you get the tree home, cut 1/2 in. off the trunk and place the tree in a bucket of water until you're ready to bring it into the house. When you set the tree up to decorate it, make sure it's stable in the stand and won't tip over, and water it frequently. A 6-ft. tree needs about 1 gallon of water every other day.

When decorating, use lights rated for indoor use that don't create heat (such as LED lights). And don't overload your electrical outlet. If you want to power dozens of strands of lights and other electric decorations, plug them into different circuits around the house. If you continually blow a circuit, it's probably overloaded.

Here are some other tips:

- Don't use electric lights on a metal tree.
- Unplug tree lights before leaving the house or going to bed.
- Keep the tree at least 3 ft. from candles and fireplaces.

A new Christmas Tree Safety System ($30) by LifeKeeper is designed to detect low water in the tree stand and send a warning if a fire starts (see photo). Place the system's low-water detector in the tree stand. It'll send an audio alert and trigger flashing lights on the attached heat sensor angel if the water level gets too low.

The ornamental angel, attached to the tree, signals a remote alarm if it senses heat, warning you that a fire could start or has started. The alarm plugs into the wall. To buy the system, visit christmastreesafetysystem.com.

Zip-tie your decorations

Zip ties are a simple way to string holiday lights on banisters and fences without marring the railing with nail marks. A pack of 20 zip ties costs $1.60 at home centers. You'll find them in the electrical supplies aisle. After the holidays, snip the ties off with scissors.

Holiday lights made easy

Add an outdoor outlet in five simple steps

Most homes have only two exterior outlets—one in the front and one in the back. That may be OK most of the year, but it's a real hassle when you're hanging holiday lights. It can be dangerous, too: Overloading cords or outlets poses a fire hazard, while crisscrossing your driveway and sidewalk with cords creates tripping hazards.

In just a few hours, you can solve these problems forever by adding an outlet or two. In this story, we'll show you how to do just that. We've made adding an outlet as easy as possible—simply connect new wire to an existing interior outlet and install your new outlet on the opposite side of the wall. This eliminates the arduous task of fishing wires through finished rooms. To bypass the hassles of cutting a boxed-size hole in the exterior wall, mount the new outlet right to the siding.

Even if you've never worked with electricity before, you can do this. Our Web site covers all of the basic skills you need to complete this project safely (visit familyhandyman.com).

Everything you need is available at home centers for less than $60. Call your local inspections department to apply for a permit before you start.

Choose and mark the outlet location

To keep this project simple, place the new outlet in the same stud cavity as an existing indoor outlet. Start by choosing the interior outlet you want to use. Building codes prohibit tapping into circuits in the kitchen, bathroom, laundry room or into those dedicated to a large appliance, like a refrigerator. You can use living room, bedroom and basement circuits, but don't tap into a circuit that's already overloaded and trips the circuit breaker. To place the outlet somewhere other than opposite the interior outlet, see "Running Cable from Other Power Sources".

Turn off the circuit breaker controlling the outlet. Use a noncontact voltage tester ($15) to be sure the power is off.

WARNING Turn off the power at the main panel, remove the cover plate and outlet, and use a noncontact voltage tester to ensure the power is off.

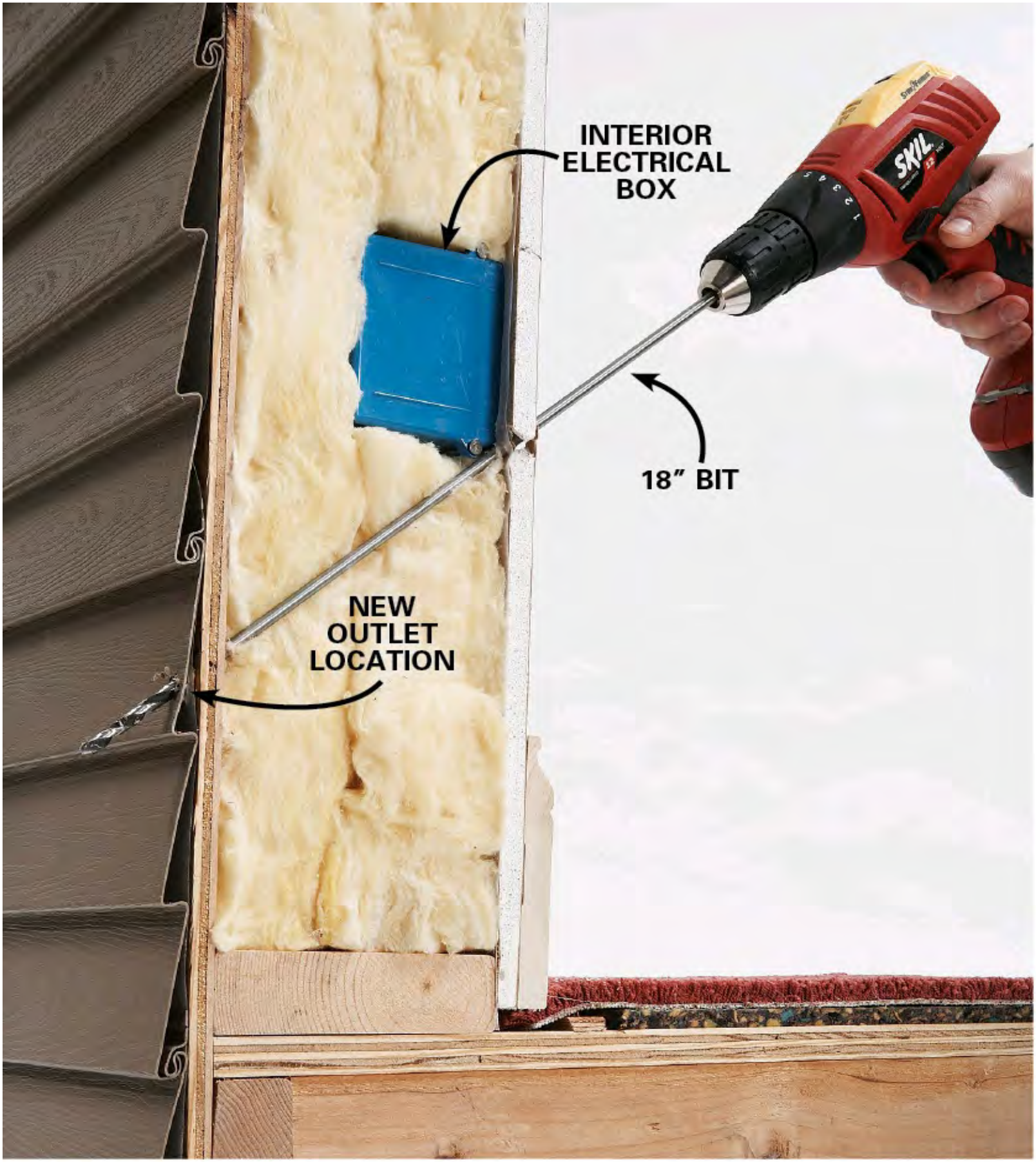
Then unscrew and pull the receptacle out of the electrical box. Hold the voltage tester over the terminals to double-check that the power is off. Next, unscrew the wires from the outlet.

Make sure the junction box is large enough to hold an added set of wires. (An overstuffed box is a fire hazard.) If the box is plastic, shine a flashlight inside and look for a volume listing, such as 21 cu. in. (cubic inches). If your box is metal, we recommend that you replace it (see "Replace an Electrical Box,"). Most metal boxes are too small to hold additional wires.

CAUTION

If you have aluminum wiring, call in a licensed electrician who is certified to work with it. This wiring is dull gray, not the dull orange that is characteristic of copper wire.

Use a stud sensor to determine which side of the electrical box the stud is on. Place a 1/4- x 18-in.-long drill bit ($11) along the outside of the electrical box on the side away from the stud. Squeeze the bit between the box and the drywall. But don't worry if you make a small hole in the drywall. You can hide it later with the outlet cover plate. Drill through the wall and through the siding to mark the location for the new outlet (**Photo 1**).



1 Drill a 1/4-in. hole alongside an existing electrical box to mark the location of the new outlet. Go outside and drill a 3/4-in. hole in the siding over or near the smaller hole.

We tilted the drill bit downward to lower the outlet location (if it's near the ground you can hide it behind shrubs), but you can place it anywhere on the wall.

Find the marker hole outside and place the exterior junction box over it on the siding. If that's not where you want it located, move it straight up or down (staying in the same stud cavity) and mark the position of the box hole on the siding. Then drill a 1-in. hole over the smaller hole or the mark on the siding to make room for the cable.

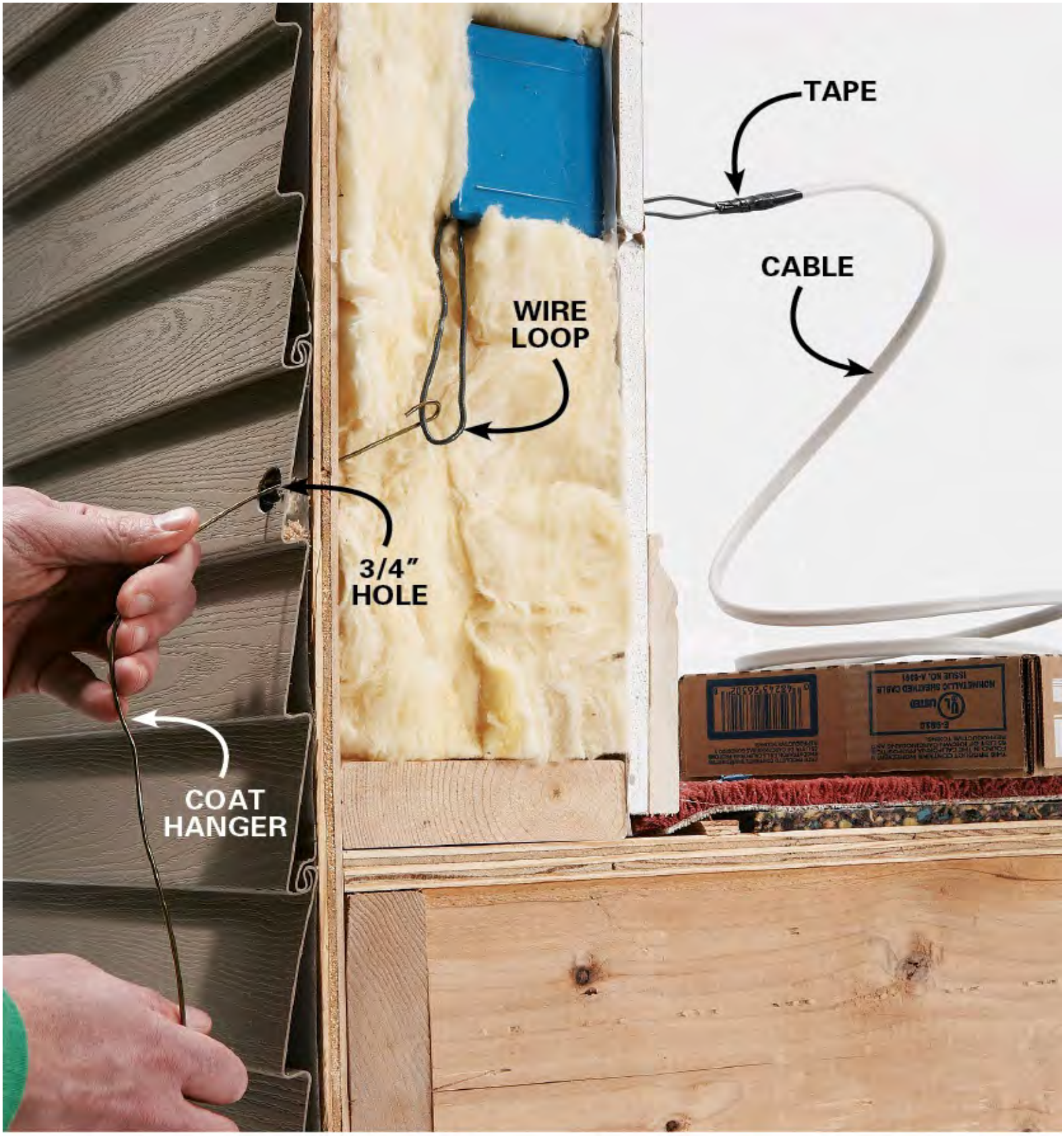
If drilling through stucco, you'll probably wreck the bit, but you'll get through the siding. For brick, use a masonry drill bit with a hammer drill. Then drill a series of small-diameter holes around the marker hole and knock out the center with a hammer and chisel.

Run cable between the outlets

The new wire must be the same gauge (thickness) as the wire already in the box, which is most likely 14 gauge but could be 12. To check, use the labeled notches on wire-stripper pliers.

Run cable from the interior box to the hole in the exterior. Start by removing a knockout in the box by hitting it with a screwdriver. Then strip about 2 ft. of sheathing off the end of the cable and cut off two of the three wires. Tape the end of the remaining wire to the end of the sheathing, forming a loop. Feed the loop through the knockout into the wall cavity.

Bend the end of a wire coat hanger to form a hook. Insert it through the hole in the exterior, grab the wire loop in the wall and pull it back through the hole (**Photo 2**).



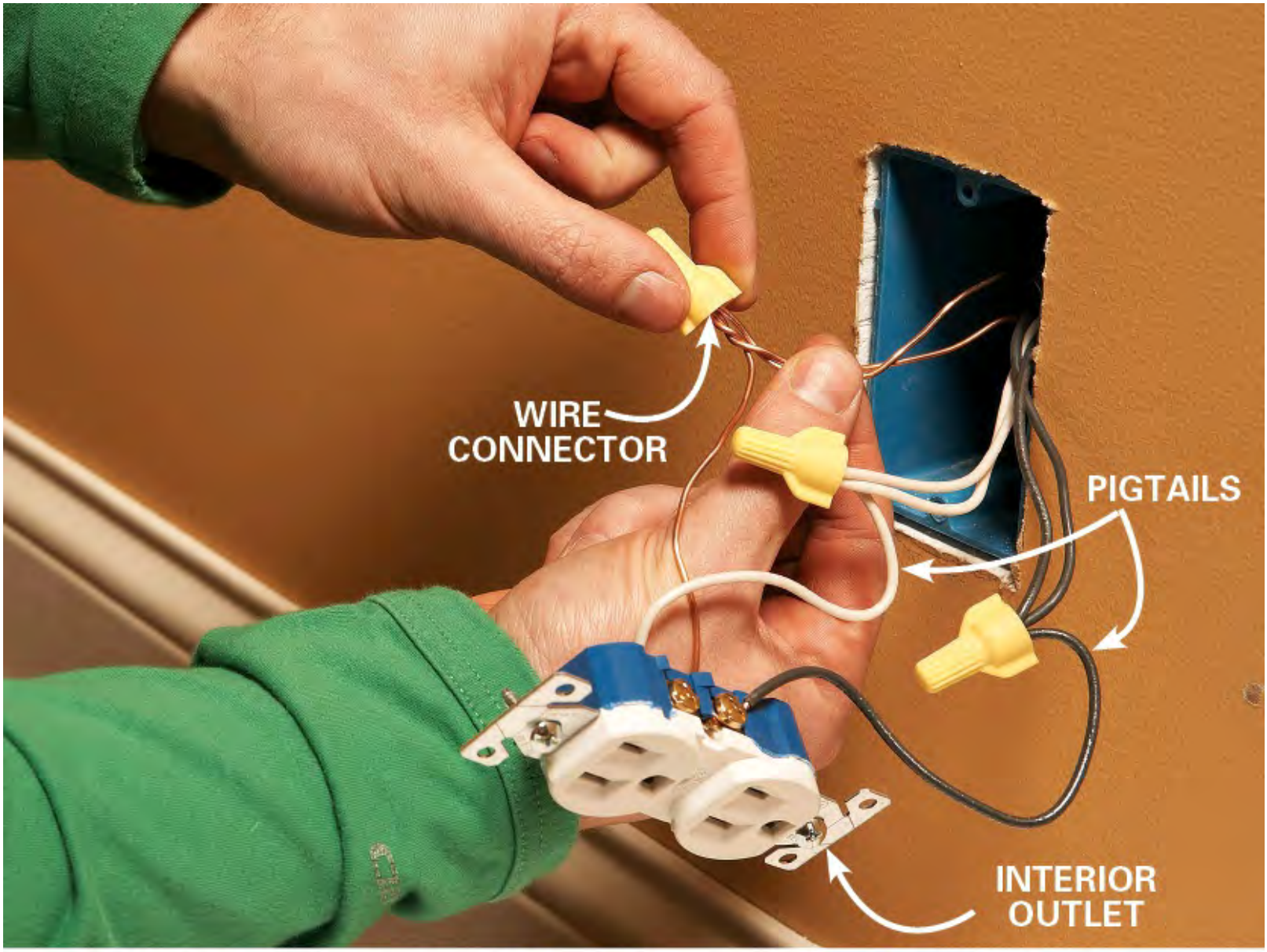
2 Cut off 2 ft. of sheathing and two wires from the cable. Tape the remaining wire to the sheathing, then feed the loop through a knockout in the interior box. Fish for the cable from the exterior hole using a hook made from wire. Pull the cable through the hole.

Pull through at least 12 in. of cable to give yourself plenty to work with.

Wire the interior outlet

At the interior box, cut the cable so there's 12 in. sticking out, then remove the sheathing to expose the wires. Cut 6-in. pieces of wires from the coil and strip 3/4 in. of insulation off the ends. Screw these short pieces to the outlet: The bare copper goes to the ground screw (green), the white to either of the silver terminals, and the black to either of the brass screws on the other side. Hook the wires clockwise over the screws so they stay in place as you tighten the screws.

To wire the interior outlet, connect all of the hot wires (black and any other color except green or white), all the neutral wires (white), and all of the ground wires (green or bare copper as shown in **Photo 3**).



3 Strip 12 in. of sheathing from the cable in the interior box. Strip 3/4 in. of insulation off the ends of the wires. Fasten the pigtail wires to the outlet, then join the wires with wire connectors.

Gently fold the wires into the box, then reattach the outlet and cover plate. If you damaged the wall around the box, use an oversize cover plate to hide the problem.

Mount and wire the new outlet

We used a $20 TayMac weatherproof receptacle kit (see Buyer's Guide) for our exterior outlet. It came with a standard three-prong outlet, but since outside outlets must be GFCI protected, we replaced the kit outlet with a GFCI outlet.

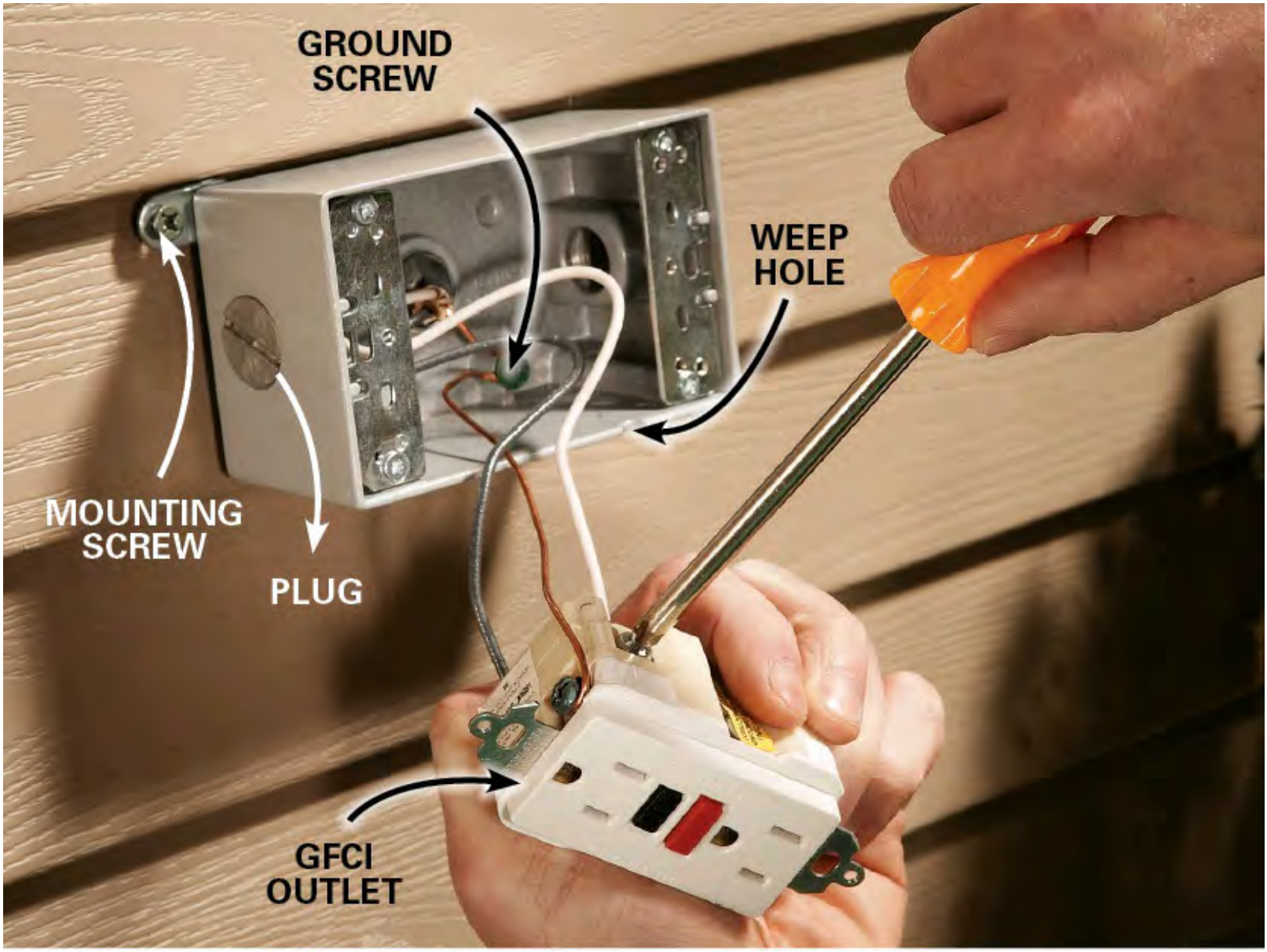
Attach the two mounting lugs to the back of the metal electrical box, putting them in opposite corners. Fasten a clamp to the hole in the back of the box, then feed the cable through the clamp. Apply a heavy bead of silicone caulk around the clamp and place the

box on the wall, inserting the clamp into the hole in the siding. The caulk makes the hole watertight. We placed our box horizontally on the lap siding so it could lie flat.

If you have lap siding (wood, hardboard, fiber cement) or plywood sheathing, mount the junction box to the house, using exterior-grade fasteners. Simply drive galvanized deck screws through the mounting lugs. For brick or stucco siding, mount the box with masonry anchors. For vinyl siding over composition board, use hollow wall anchors.

Fasten plugs into the openings on both ends of the box. Use a file to scrape a small notch or "weep hole" in the bottom edge of the box. This allows any water that gets into the box to drain.

Next, strip insulation off the wire ends. Attach the ground wire to the green screw in the box and to the green screw on the GFCI outlet. Make sure to identify the line, hot and white terminals (they'll be labeled "line," "hot" and "white." Attach the black wire to the brass screw or adjacent push-in hole (labeled "line")and the white wire to the silver screw or push-in (**Photo 4**).



4 Attach a clamp to the box, feed the cable through it into the box, then caulk around the clamp. Mount the exterior outlet box to the house. Wire the outlet and set it in the box.

Clip the ears off the outlet, fold the wires into the box and set the outlet in place.

You'll need to remove the middle of the plastic base so it'll fit over the GFCI outlet (don't worry, it's designed to come out by twisting it with pliers). Set the base on the box, over the outlet. Make sure the hinges are at the top so the plastic cover will close over the outlet. Fasten the base to the box with the screws that came with the kit.

Attach the cover to the base (**Photo 5**).

5 Screw the base to the box. Attach the plastic cover to the base, sliding it over the hinges until it snaps.

Push the hinge receptacles sideways over the hinges until they snap in place. Remove the cord knockouts in the base where the electrical cords will run. Turn the power on and plug in your miles of holiday lights!

Buyer's Guide

Arlington Industries makes wide range of outlet boxes

TayMac makes outlets, outside electrical boxes, box covers and outlet kits (we used a TayMac kit). (800) 526-5416. taymac.com

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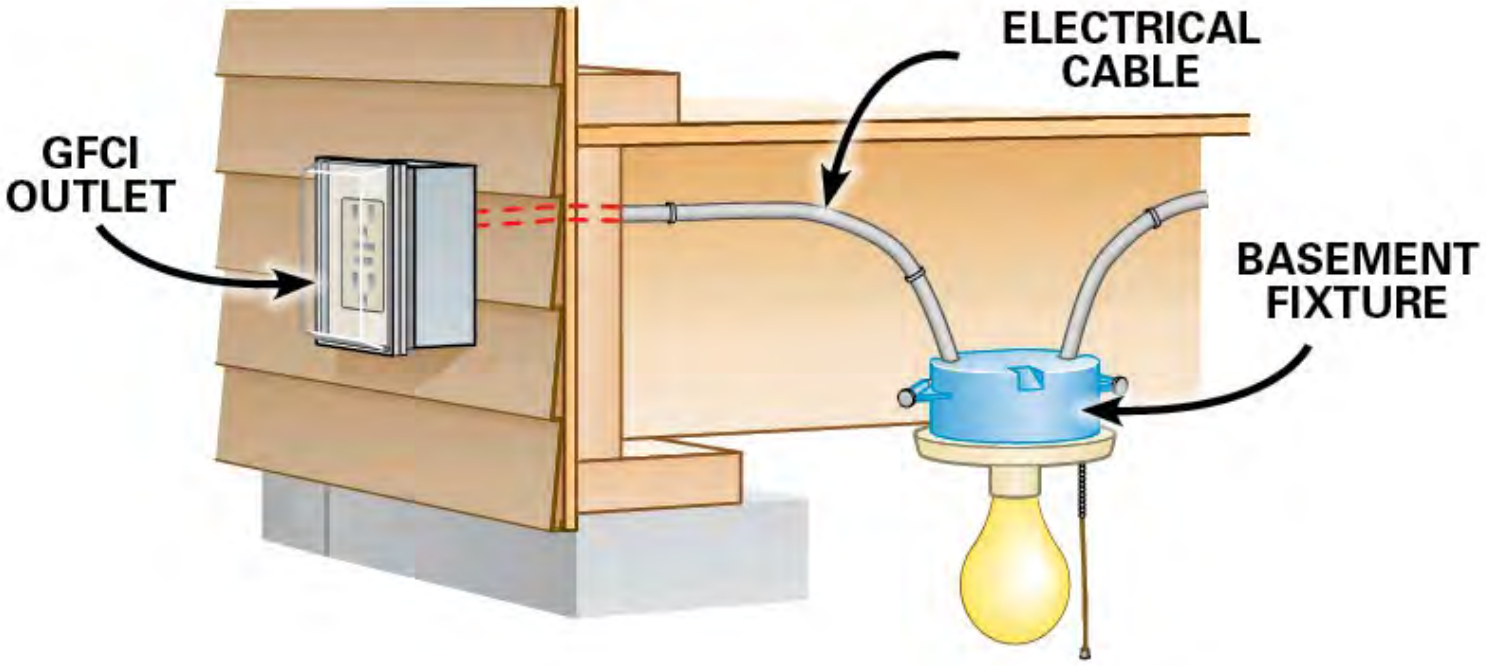
Running cable from other power sources

If you don't want your exterior outlet location limited to where you have

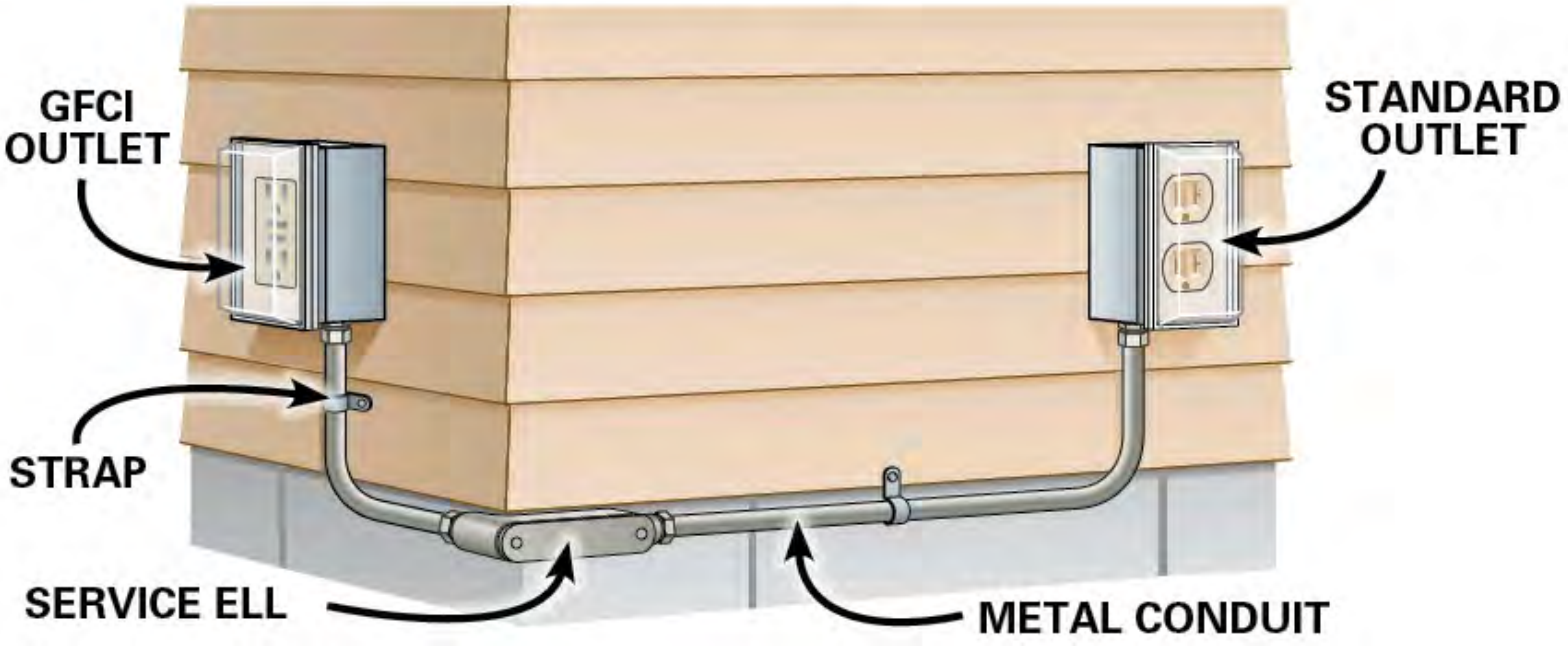
interior outlets, you'll have to tap into another electrical circuit. If you have an unfinished basement, you can tap into a junction box in the basement and run the cable out through the rim joist. This is even easier than tapping into a main floor outlet. Plus, it allows you to put your new outlet anywhere, not just opposite an interior outlet. Simply drill a hole through the rim joist and siding, then run a cable from a basement light fixture to the outlet location (Figure A).

Figure A Run a cable from the basement



A second option is to run wires inside 1/2-in. metal conduit from an existing exterior outlet to the new location (Figure B).

Figure B Run wires inside conduit

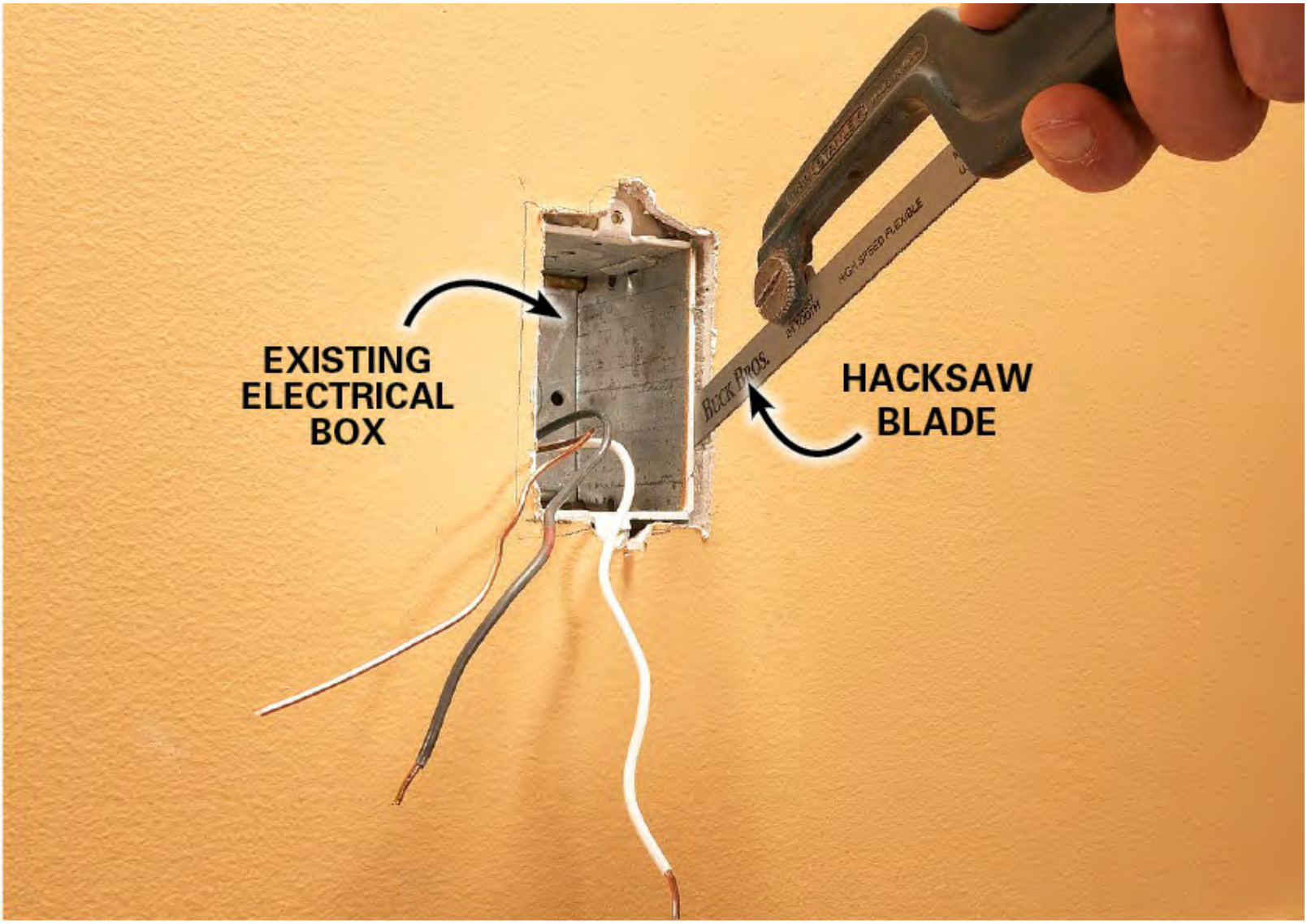


The conduit can wrap around corners with a service ell, but don't run it in front of doors. Plant flowers or shrubs in front to cover it.

Replace an electrical box

If your existing electrical box isn't large enough to hold more wires, you'll have to replace it. Remove the old box before cutting a large opening for the new one. This allows you to see if anything is behind the wall before you make the cut.

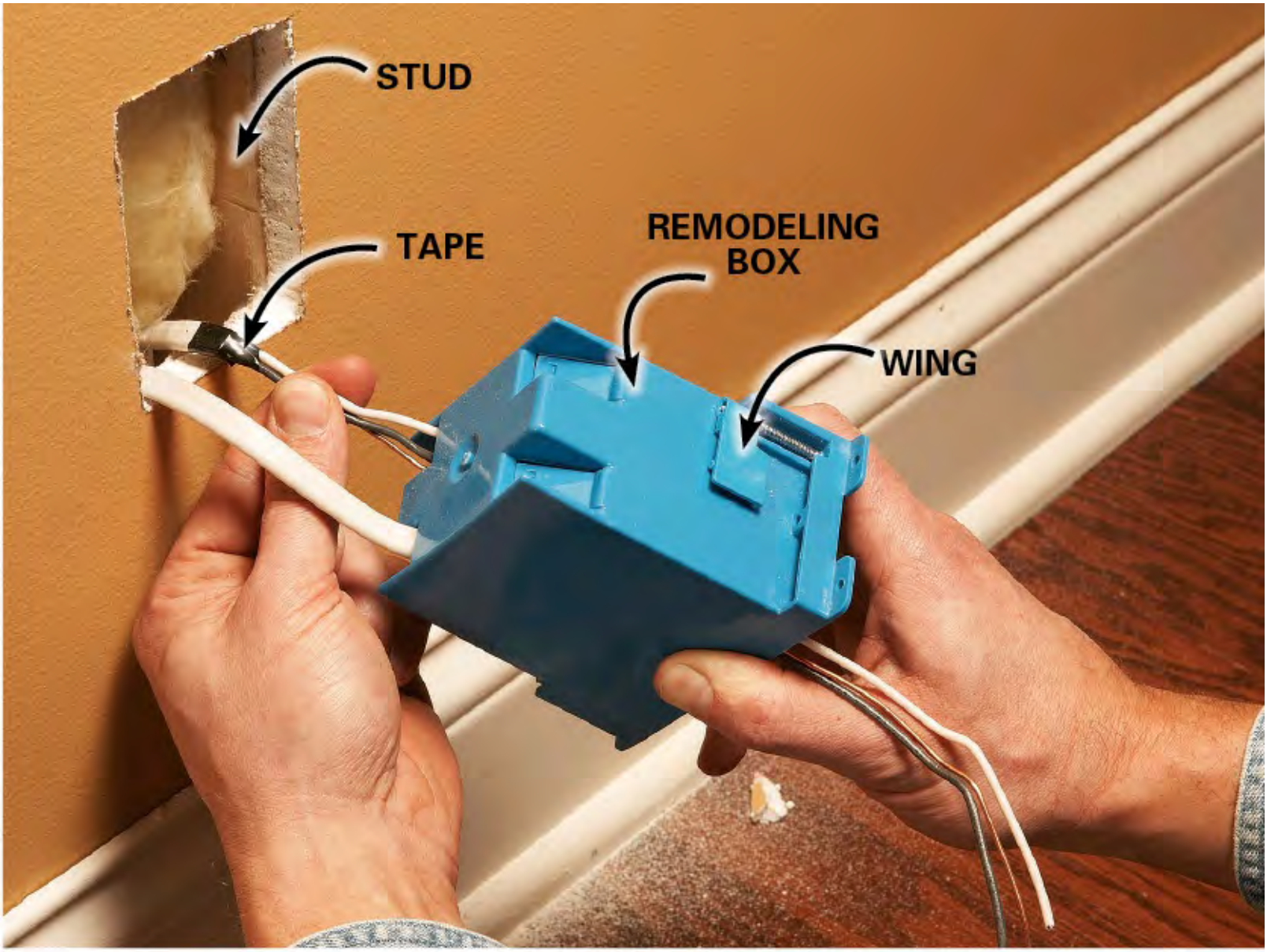
To swap out boxes, cut the nails that hold the box in place (Photo 1).



1 Cut the nails that fasten the box to the stud with a hacksaw blade. Pull out the box and loosen the clamps that hold the wire.

Then remove the box. Replace it with a plastic "remodeling" box ($2 at home centers). These boxes have wings that flip up and attach to the back side of the drywall or plaster. Hold the box over the wall opening and trace around it. Then enlarge the opening with a drywall saw. Don't overcut; you want a snug fit.

Feed the new cable from the outlet being added into the box before installing it (Photo 2).



2 Enlarge the wall opening for a remodeling box. Feed in the new and old cables, then mount the box. Caulk any gaps between the box and the wall.

Wrap the cable with electrical tape where the sheathing meets the exposed wires so the sheathing will slide into the box easier.

Control lights with a timer

You don't want to have to step outside every night, especially in the middle of a winter deep freeze, to plug in or unplug your outlets. That's where timers come into play. Walk down a home center's electrical aisle and you'll see plenty of them. Be sure to buy one that's rated for outdoor use.

The most common timers plug into the outlet, then cords plug into the timer. Most don't need to be mounted. They just hang from the outlet. The least

expensive models ($10) have a dial setting to run the lights for a specific period of time, such as two hours, six hours, or dusk to dawn (see Photo 1).

1. TIMER WITH DIAL

Slightly more expensive models ($20) have digital controls for programming (Photo 2).

2. TIMER WITH DIGITAL CONTROLS

If you don't want to fuss with setting the timer, buy a remote outdoor switch ($20; not shown). You can turn the lights off and on from inside the house, just like you open and close your garage door with a remote control from your vehicle. Look for one at home centers or search online for "remote outdoor switch."

If you need additional outlets in the yard, install an outlet strip rated for exterior use (Photo 3).

3. OUTLET STRIP

They plug into your outlet, stake into the ground and offer multiple outlets. Look for them at home centers, starting at $12. You can only install one strip per outlet.

Tips for Last Minute Home Spruce-Ups

Scuff mark eraser

Clean off shoe scuff marks from vinyl flooring with a clean, dry tennis ball. A light rub and heel marks are “erased.”

Corkscrew in a pinch

It’s difficult to remember everything for that important date. You’ve picked up your suit at the cleaners; coordinated the tablecloth, napkins and candle; and chilled the champagne, only to discover you’ve forgotten the corkscrew. But your date is resourceful and has her toolbox handy.

She drives a coarse-threaded deck screw into the cork, grabs the screwhead with a pliers, carefully pulls out the cork and rescues the evening.

Microwave cleaner

It’s easy to clean baked-on food and spills from your microwave! Partially fill a measuring or coffee cup with water and add a slice of lemon. Boil the water for a minute, and then leave the door closed and let the steam loosen the mess. After 10 minutes, open the door and wipe away the grime.

Vacuum extension tube

Don’t throw away the cardboard tube from wrapping paper! Tape the tube to the end of a vacuum cleaner wand to reach cobwebs in ceiling corners or dust freeloading on fans. Reach all the way under beds and furniture, or flatten the roll to vacuum narrow crevices. Make it a permanent dusting wand by wrapping it with duct tape, and it’ll stand up to years of use.

Fluff up furniture dents in your carpet

5-minute fix

To remove furniture footprints from carpet, dampen the carpet with a white rag (colored fabric can leave dye in the carpet). Then heat the area with a hair dryer as you rake the carpet yarn gently in all directions with a spoon. In most cases, the crater will completely disappear in five minutes or less. If not, let the carpet dry completely and repeat the process.

A neater way to use bleach on grout

In a damp area like a shower, there's no permanent cure for mildew growing on grout. But bleach, along with light scrubbing, is a good way to clean it off and kill it off—at least temporarily. The trouble with applying bleach to a large area is that nasty fumes fill the air. Plus you risk damage to other nearby surfaces (bleach can harm many metals and plastics with prolonged contact). A bleach pen, on the other hand, lets you apply bleach only where you need it. And since the bleach is in a gel form, it grips vertical surfaces—that gives it time to penetrate and kill mildew in the grout's pores. You'll find bleach pens ($4) alongside fabric detergents at discount and grocery stores. If you have colored grout, test for discoloration on a small spot.

Take out the ring without refinishing

Spilled water or a wet glass can leave a white stain on wood furniture. Often, complete stripping and refinishing are the only solution. But there are two solvents that can sometimes remove water marks in a few minutes without harming the finish. Both solvents give off nasty fumes, so work outside in a well-ventilated area. If you think the piece might be especially old or valuable, consult an antiques dealer before trying these remedies.

First, rub the stain with a soft rag dipped in mineral spirits. If the original finish has a coating of wax over it, there's a good chance that only the wax has turned white. Mineral spirits removes wax without harming the underlying finish. Have patience; the mineral spirits may take a few minutes to soften the wax. If the stain disappears but leaves the rubbed area looking dull, clean the entire surface with mineral spirits and apply a new coat of furniture wax.

If mineral spirits doesn't work, gently wipe the stain using a soft rag lightly dampened with denatured alcohol. Alcohol can damage some finishes, so test it on an inconspicuous spot first. Stop every minute or so to examine the finish to make sure you're not damaging it. Again, have patience. Sometimes alcohol can draw out moisture that's trapped in the finish, but it works slowly. If you don't see any results after five minutes, refinishing is the only way to remove the mark.

Shop vacuum air mattress pump

We get lots of guests around the holidays, and blowing up our inflatable air mattresses for guest beds was a hassle until I discovered this trick—use your shop vacuum! It's simple to turn your machine into a temporary compressor. Just hook up the hose to the vacuum's exhaust port and hold the other end to the mattress's release valve. When you're ready to deflate the mattress, connect to the suction port. Now it only takes a minute or two to fill and deflate our mattresses.

Get tough on plastic laminate stains

Stubborn stains on countertops can be frustrating, but they don't have to be permanent. Standard household spray cleaners will remove most of them. Check the label and make sure any product you use is recommended for laminate countertops. The secret to success with these products is patience; let the cleaner work for five minutes or so before you wipe off the countertop. A plastic brush is helpful on stubborn spots. If a standard cleaner won't do the job, read on for more options.

Soak stains with baking soda

Paste made from baking soda and a little water often removes stains left by fruit juices and other liquids (Photo 1).

1 **Mix baking soda with just enough water to form a thick paste. Apply the paste to the stain and lay a wet paper towel over the paste to keep it moist.**

Baking soda is slightly abrasive and can leave fine scratches, so don't scrub. Just let the paste work for one to two hours and then wipe it off gently.

DON'T let any type of cleaner or solvent pool over seams in the laminate or along the edges. It can seep under the laminate, weaken the adhesive and damage the particleboard substrate.

Spray paint revives old upholstery

For less than $20, you can make an old chair look like new. Special spray paint formulated for fabric can hide stains, update the color of old solid-color upholstery and even obscure minor wear. It's available for about $6 a can at most auto parts stores and some home centers and hardware stores. Most stores carry only two or three colors. To find more colors, do an online search for "fabric spray paint."

Fabric spray paint has one drawback: It can make fabric feel rough. This usually isn't a big problem with smooth fabrics, but fabric with a "nap," such as velour, may feel like sandpaper after painting. Test the back of a chair or the underside of a seat cushion before you paint the entire piece.

Preventing house fires this holiday season

A quarter of all home fires occur in December and January. In addition to being the heart of the heating season, those two months feature holidays with traditions that can set the stage for a catastrophic home fire. It's the time of year when fireplaces roar, homes glow with candles, electrical decorations overload extension cords, and party guests get carried away with drinking and careless smoking.

The good news is, it's fast, cheap and easy to greatly reduce the chances of a home fire. Follow these tips and your house should still be there for Valentine's Day!

Attend your stove while cooking.

Cooking fires are the second-largest cause of residential fires. (Heating hazards are No. 1.) Stay with your cooking and remain alert, especially when cooking with grease or oil. If the grease ignites, slide a large lid (keep one handy) over the pan, then turn off the burner. Leave the pan on the stove until it's cool to the touch. Clean hoods, fan motors and vent filters regularly.

Playing with fire is the leading cause of fire deaths for children under 5.

Buy freshly cut Christmas trees and keep them watered.

Buy only freshly cut trees. They're more resistant to ignition than dry ones. A tree is fresh if the needles don't fall off when you drag your hand over it and if the branches are flexible. Cut a few inches off the bottom of the trunk before setting it up, and water your tree daily.

The tree should be placed well away from the fireplace, portable heating sources, candles and ashtrays. Unplug the tree lights before leaving the house or going to bed.

According to statistics, this year fire will claim the lives of 30 of our readers and 500 of their homes.

Clean, test and replace your smoke and carbon monoxide alarms.

A smoke alarm works only when its internal electronics are clear of dust and the batteries are good. Vacuum out the interior of detectors once a year, test detectors every month using the test buttons and install new batteries every six months. Even electronics wear out eventually. Replace all detectors every 10 years.

Install carbon monoxide alarms on every level away from heating sources.

The United States has one of the highest fire death rates in the industrialized world.

Clean and maintain chimneys and fireplaces.

If the last pro that's seen the inside of your flue is Santa Claus, spend $100 for a licensed sweep to come out to inspect and clean your chimney.

Prevent creosote buildup by burning seasoned, dry wood. Burning hot fires reduces creosote buildup and keeps your chimney cleaner and safer.

CAUTION: Fireplace ashes can smolder for up to two weeks after a fire. Empty ashes into a covered steel container and store it outside the house away from combustibles for a couple of weeks. Then dump it into the trash can.

Sixty percent of house-fire fatalities occur in homes with missing or disabled smoke alarms, or smoke alarms with dead batteries.

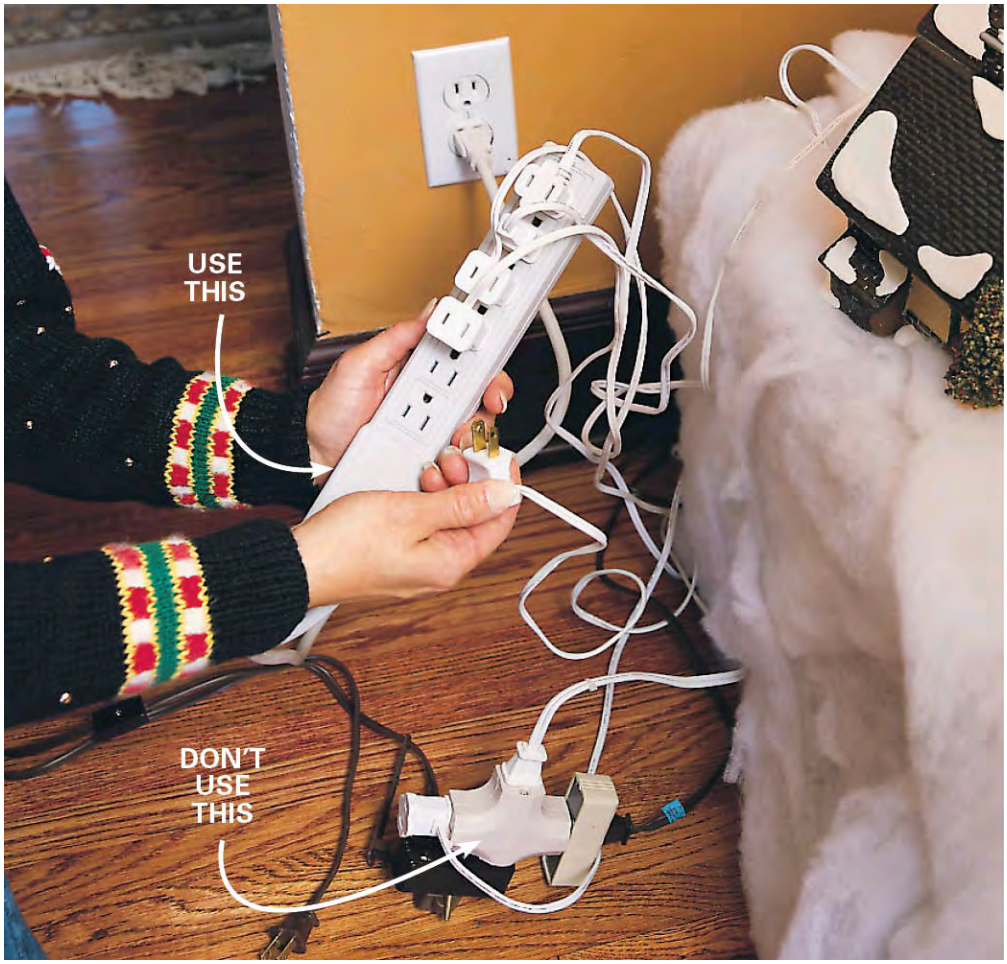
Display candles in tip-resistant containers away from combustibles.

Use heavy, tip-resistant glass or metal containers for candles or place a large platter under them to catch wax drippings and contain burned-down wicks.

A burning candle might look festive surrounded by pine cones and ribbon, but you're asking for trouble. Keep all flammables well away from candles.

Give carbon monoxide detectors, smoke alarms and fire extinguishers as gifts.

Use UL-listed multi-strips, not jury-rigged electrical octopuses.



Lights and other electrical decorations can easily overload light-duty extension cords, so be sure to use cords big enough to handle the load—not light-duty lamp cords.

Outside lights need to be:

- UL-rated for outdoor use
- Plugged into outdoor-rated extension cords
- Serviced by GFCI outlets only
- Attached with UL-listed clips or staples.

New York City (pop. 7.3 million) has more fire calls than all of Japan (pop. 100 million).

Hang fire extinguishers away from fire sources.

Locate fire extinguishers in rooms that present fire hazards, such as kitchens and garages. Keep the extinguishers away from possible fire sources and near exits. That way you'll be fighting the fire with an escape at your back in case the fire gets out of control. Use fire extinguishers only after you've evacuated the house and called the fire department.

Sixty percent of house-fire fatalities occur in homes with missing or disabled smoke alarms, or smoke alarms with dead batteries.

Collect and dispose of cigarettes in a covered coffee can.

When it comes to home fires, alcohol and cigarettes are a deadly combination. If you're hosting a holiday party where there will be smoking and drinking, you'll need to be especially vigilant. The big killers are live cigarettes that are dropped and forgotten between furniture cushions, where they smolder for hours before igniting the furniture—when everyone's asleep. Provide large ashtrays for smokers and insist that the ashtrays stay on the table, not on the arm of the sofa.

For More Information

For an easy, informative, sobering, two-hour read, go to the library and check out a copy of "Dr. Frank Field's Get Out Alive" by Dr. Frank Field and John Morse (Random House, 1992).

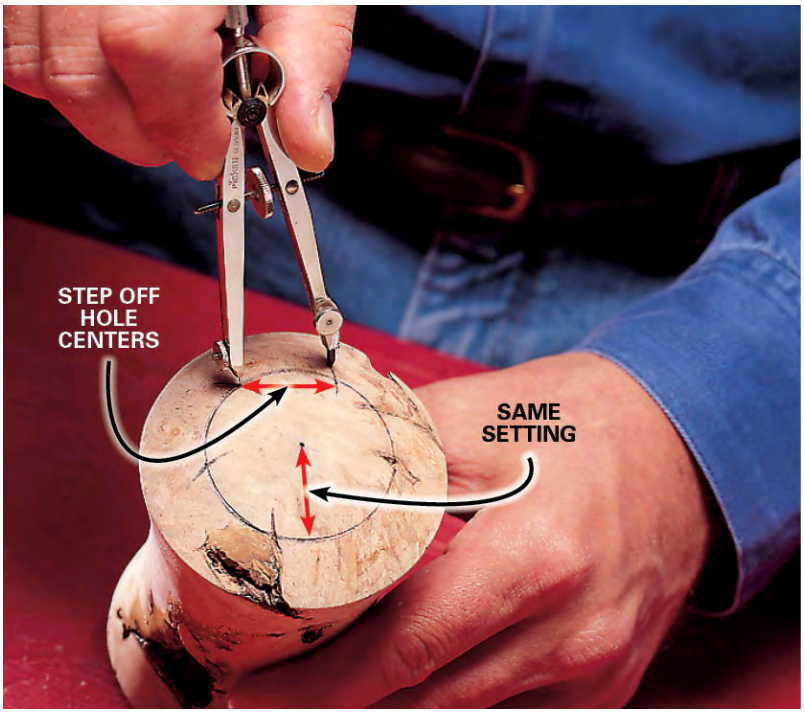
You can also check out the National Fire Protection Association's Web site at www.nfpa.org. It also has a children's Web site (www.sparky.org), which features a fire engine that kids can drive.

Quick and Easy Gift Projects

Here’s a smorgasbord of useful and interesting projects that’ll give you some instant gratification. We wracked our brains to come up with a variety of projects that take about an hour each to build, not counting glue drying time and finishing. Check ’em out, then dig through your woodpile for suitable scraps, and start crankin’!

Turned Pen Holder

Make one of these and get ready to fill gift orders! On a lathe, turn a 3-in. square x 6-in. long hardwood blank into a cylinder that's 4-1/2 in. long with a narrowed waist, curved top and flat bottom. Sand smooth. With a compass, draw a circle on the top and mark six hole locations on the circle.



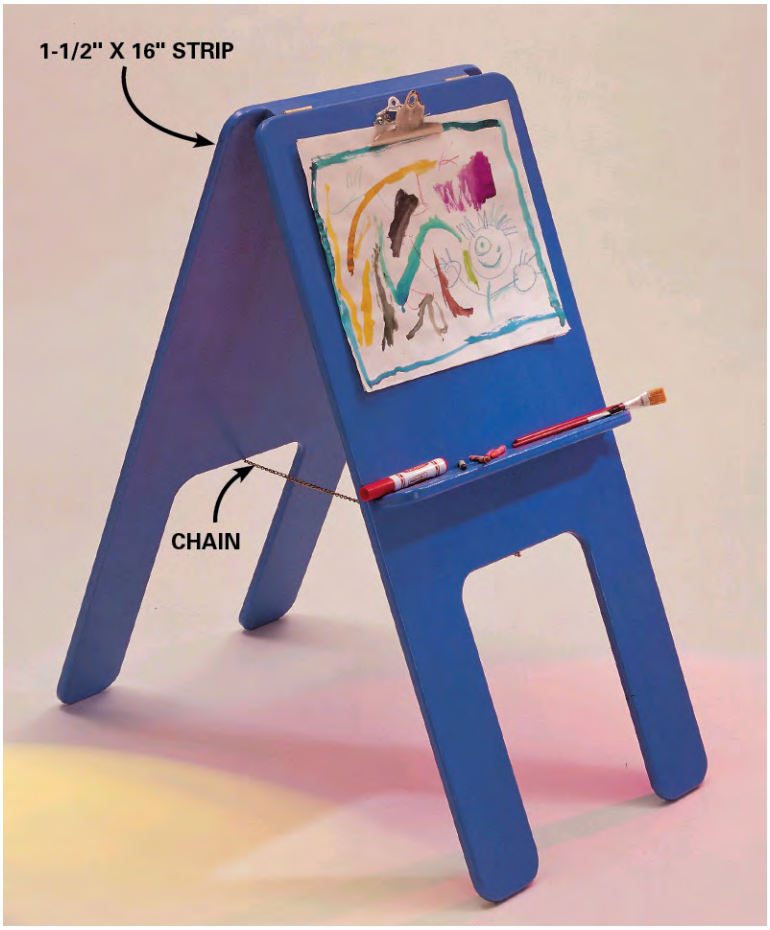
Why six? When you leave the compass at the same radius and "step" it around the circle, it marks off six equally spaced points. After marking, use a 3/8-in. brad point bit to drill the six holes at 10 degrees and 2-in. deep.

If your drill press has no angle adjustment, glue three door shims together and clamp them to the table to make a 10-degree angled ramp. Finish the pen holder with Danish oil, and load with pens.

Sliding Bookend

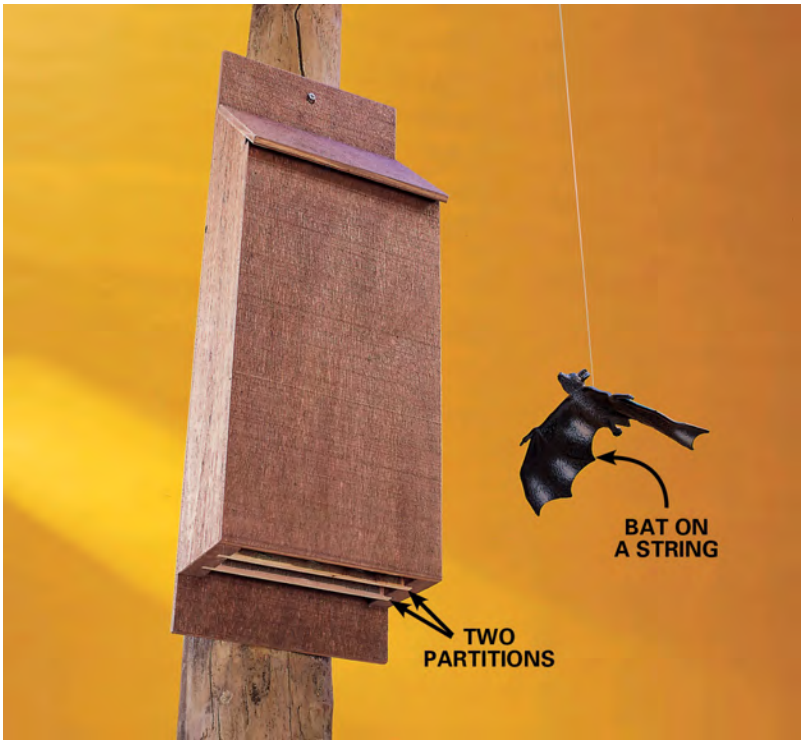
To corral shelf-dwelling books or CDs that like to wander, cut 3/4-in. thick hardwood pieces into 6-in. x 6-in. squares. Use a band saw or saber saw to cut a slot along one edge (with the grain) that's a smidgen wider than the shelf thickness. Stop the notch 3/4-in. from the other edge. Finish the bookend and slide it on the shelf.

Easy Easel

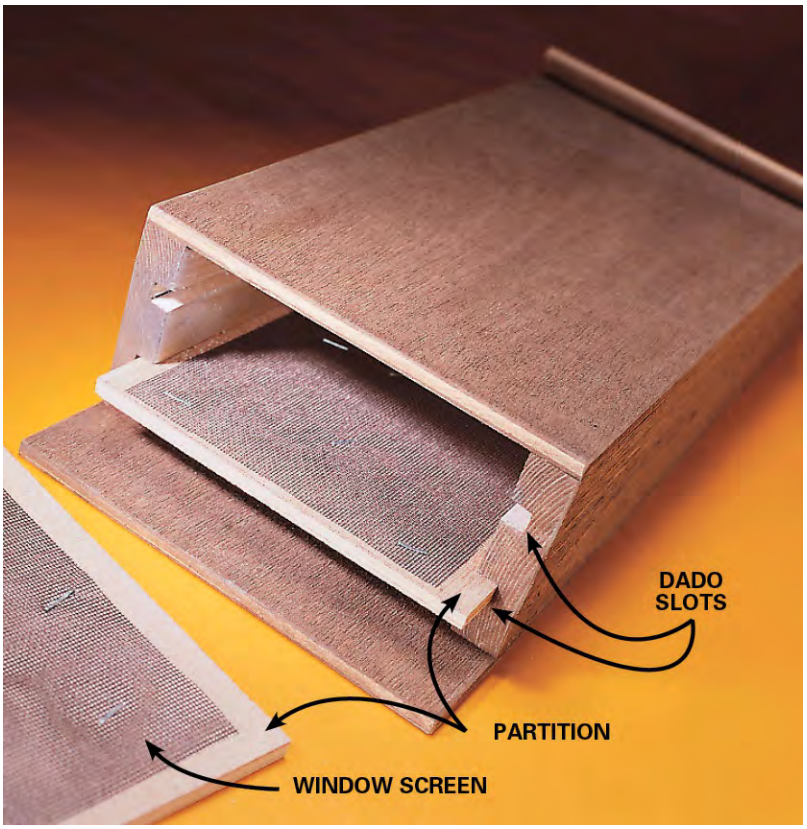


Build this sturdy easel for your young Picasso! Cut a 4-ft. x 4-ft. piece of 3/4-in. thick birch plywood into two 21-in. wide x 46-in. long pieces. Cut out the legs (5-in. wide x 17-1/4 in. long) using a saber saw. Cut a 1-1/2 in. radius on each corner. Glue a 16-in. long x 1-1/2 in. wide plywood piece to the top edge of one easel half. (This keeps fingers from being pinched when folding the assembled easel.) Connect the easel halves at the top with 2-in. wide butt hinges. Screw a 2-3/4 in. wide x 20-in. long board on edge, 2-ft. down from the top, on one side to support paint pots and brushes. Screw a 22-in. long chain midway along the bottom edges to stabilize the easel. Paint the easel a bright color, and commission your portrait.

Bat House



Give Dracula a home! Make this bat house and the neighborhood bats will help control the insect population. Cut the pieces to the dimensions given below. Next, cut 3/8-in. wide x 1/4-in. deep dadoes 3/8-in. from the inside edges of the sides to hold the two partitions. Staple fiberglass window screen on the front and back sides of both partitions, slide them in the dadoes and nail through the sides. Assemble the bat house with galvanized nails and caulk the seams around the top.



Bats like it warm, so finish your bat house with a dark exterior stain to absorb sunlight. Hang it at least 12-in. high on a tree, the side of a building, or a pole where the sun will reach it but predators won't.

Cutting List

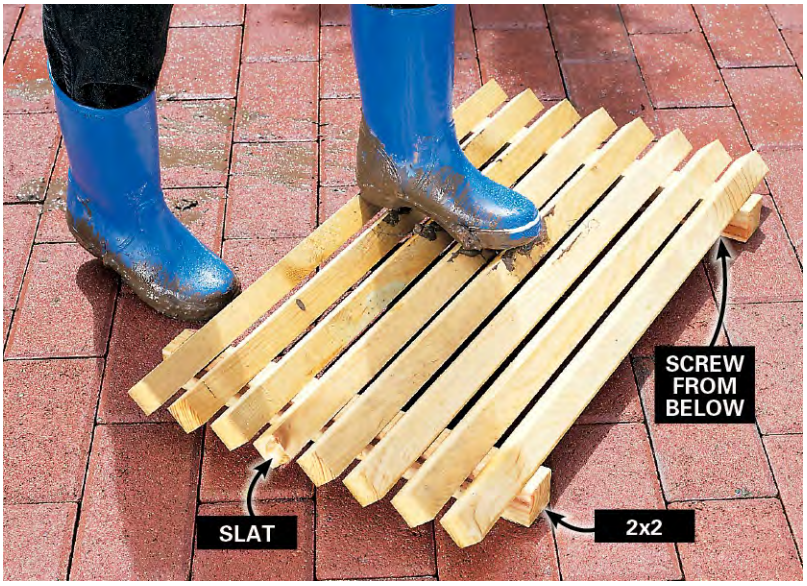
3/8-in. Thick Rough Cedar Plywood

Back: 24-in. x 8-in.; **Front:** 24-in. x 16-in; Top: 6-1/2 in. x 8-in.; **2 partitions:** 17-in. x 7-in. and 18-3/4 in. x 7-in.

1-in. Thick Cedar

2 sides: 20-in. x 16-in. x 4-in.

Swedish Boot Scraper

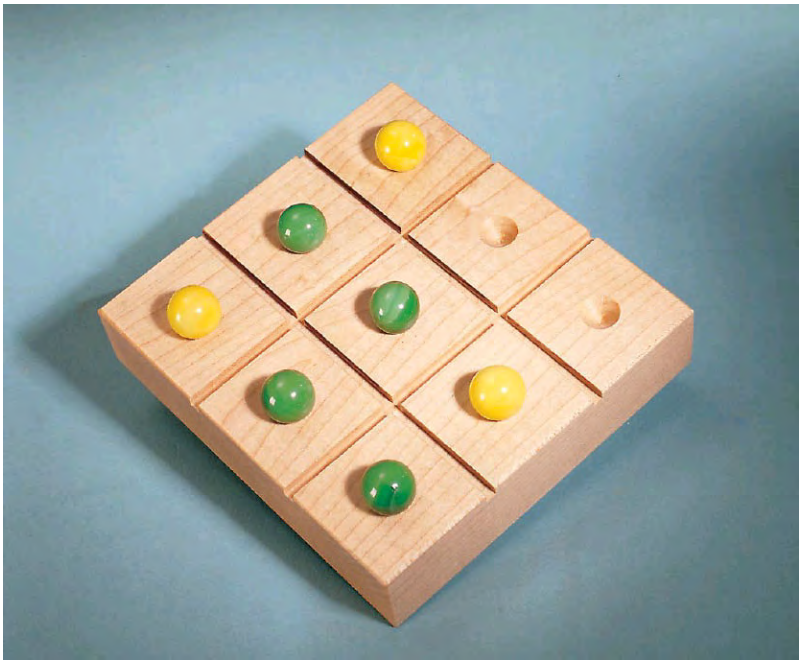


Here's a traditional Swedish farm accessory for gunk-laden soles. The dimensions are not critical, but be sure the edges of the slats are fairly sharp—they're what make the boot scraper work. Cut slats to length, then cut triangular openings on the side of a pair of 2x2s. A radial arm saw works well for this, but a table saw or band saw will also make the cut. Trim the 2x2s to length, predrill, and use galvanized screws to attach the slats from underneath.

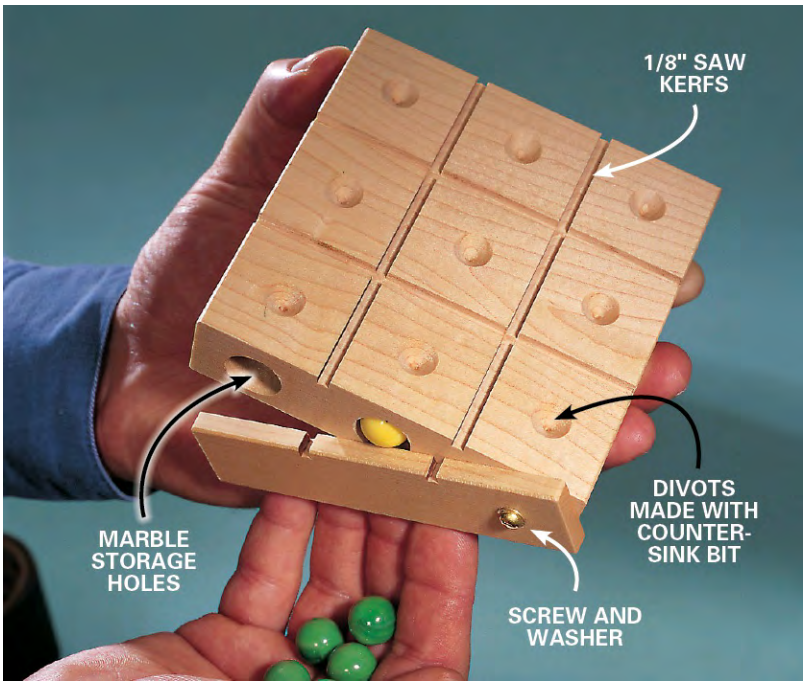
Stud Stuffer

Transform a bare wall space into an attractive storage shelf. Ours fits anywhere between studs (behind a door for example) spaced 16-in. on center. Build the box as tall as you want. (It could be a broom closet!) Use 14-1/4 in. wide, 1x4 boards screwed together at each corner with 1-5/8 in. drywall screws. Frame the box with trim that matches other trim in the room. Nail and glue on a 1/4-in. thick plywood back. Cut out the hole in your wall. Screw or nail the box to the studs through the sides of the box. We finished ours off with a 1x4 shelf.

Tic-Tac-Toe

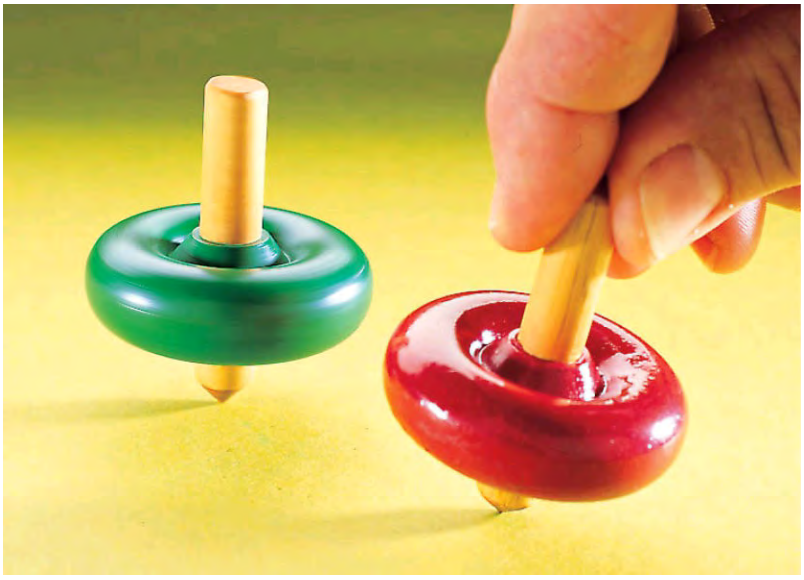


Make a fun game for the kids. Start with a 12-in. long x 4-3/8 in. wide x 1-in. thick board. On a table saw, cut 1/8-in. wide x 1/8-in. deep saw kerfs on one end of the board to make the tic-tac-toe pattern. (The board has to be extra long so the cuts can be done safely.) Hold the board on edge in a drill press and drill marble storage holes 3-in. deep with a 3/4-in. dia. drill bit. Cut off the 4-3/8 in. square playing board. Countersink marble divots in the center of each square, and, to cover the storage holes, screw on a 1/8-in. thick door with a No. 6 x 1-in. brass round-head screw and washer.



(Advanced woodworkers can lay out their cuts so the door also has kerfs, as we show in the photo, but a plain door is much easier!)

Quick Finger Tops



You can churn out this eye-catching little toy in a minute or two. It's a finger top, the kind you start with a snap of the fingers. Just two parts—a commercially made wheel for wooden toys (1-1/4 in. to 1-3/4 in. dia.) and a piece of dowel (1/4-in. dia.)—are all you need. Chuck the dowel in your drill and "turn" a rounded point on it with a file. Clamp your drill in a vise if you need to.

Securely glue on the wheel with yellow carpenter's glue, give the top a finish and it's ready to spin. Buy the wheels from mail order suppliers like bearwood.com 800-565-5066. As with all small toys, keep these tops out of the reach of the under-three crowd.

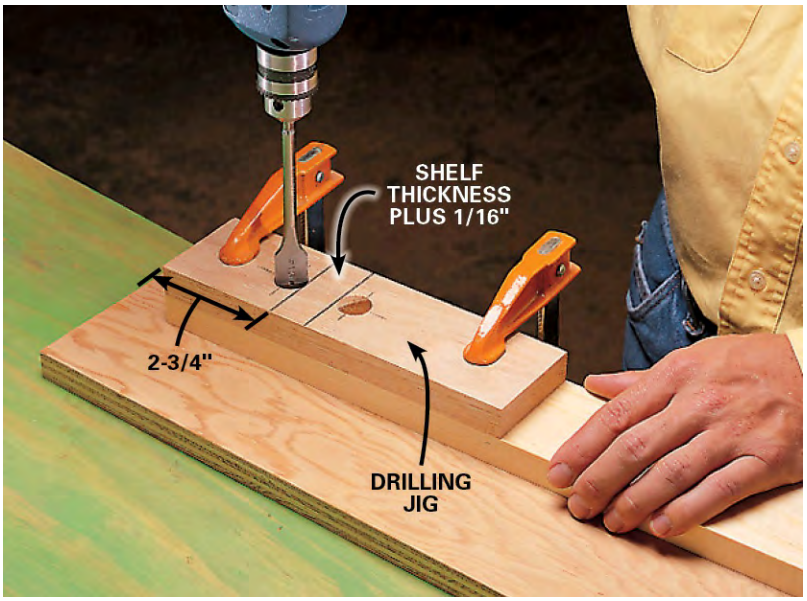
Bookshelf

Here's a cool knock-down shelf for a dorm room or den. You just slide the shelves between the dowels, and they pinch the shelves to stiffen the bookshelf. It works great if you're careful about two things:

• Make the space between the dowel holes exactly 1/16-in. wider than the thickness of the shelf board.

• Be sure the shelf thickness is the same from end to end and side to side.

After test-fitting a dowel in a trial hole (you want a tight fit), drill holes in a jig board so the space between the holes is your shelf thickness plus 1/16-in. Clamp the jig board on the ends of the legs and drill the holes.



Cut the dowels 1-3/4 in. longer than the shelf width, then dry assemble (no glue). Mark

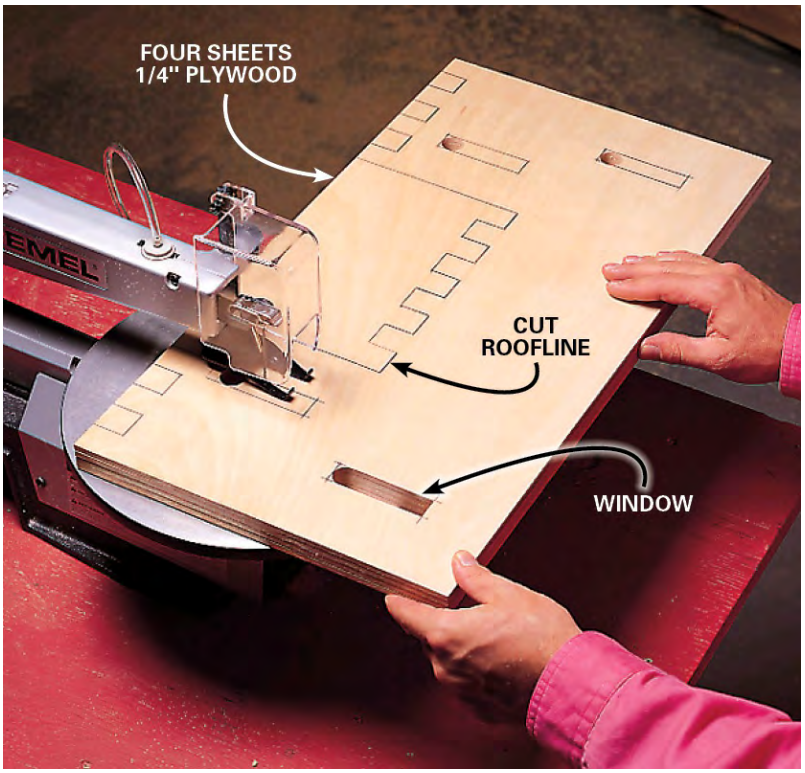
the angled ends of the legs parallel to the shelves and cut off the tips to make the legs sit flat. Disassemble and glue the dowels in the leg holes. When the glue dries, slide the shelves in and load them up.

Cutting List

Perfectly flat 1x12 lumber or plywood
2 shelves: 11-1/4 in. wide x 3-ft. long
4 risers: 2-1/4 in. wide x 24-in. long
8 dowels: 3/4-in. dia. x 13-in. long

Knock-Down Castle

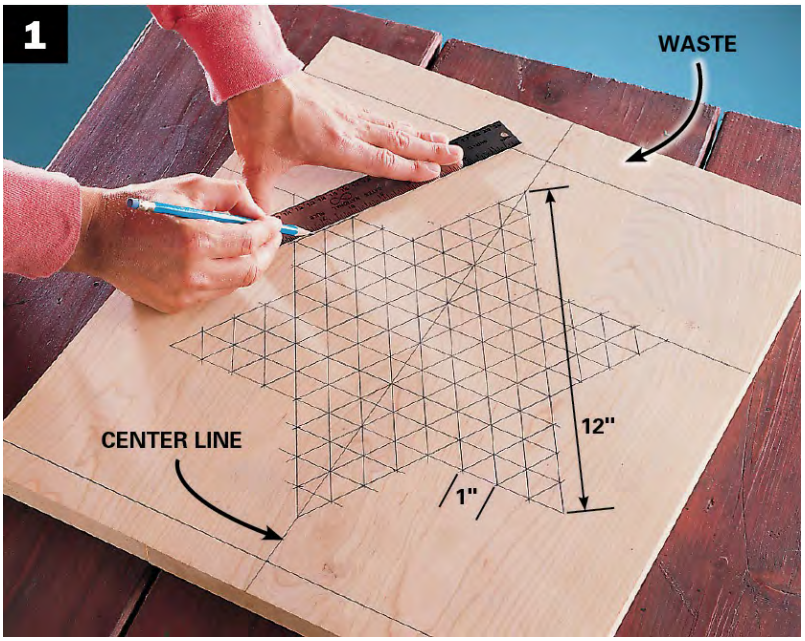
Need a quick yet noble structure for your young knight's and lady's play area? Saw a 4-ft. x 4-ft. sheet of 1/4-in. thick plywood into four 11-3/4 in. wide x 23-in. long pieces. Lay out one castle wall. Mark the towers (7-in. wide x 6-in. high), the battlement notches (1-in. x 1-in.) and the windows (3/4-in. wide x 3-in. long). Stack the four pieces, with the wall pattern traced on top, in a four-ply sandwich held together with dabs of hot-melt glue. Use a scroll, saber or band saw to cut the tower and battlement patterns on the roof. Drill 3/4-in. entry holes for your saw and cut out the windows.



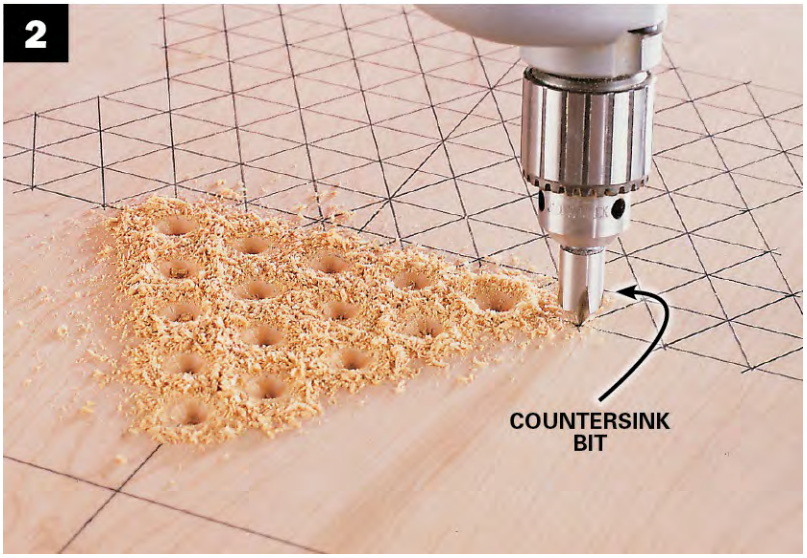
Separate the four-ply stack into two pairs, and cut the knock-down slots (1/4-in. wide x 5-7/8 in. long) from the roof edge in one pair and from the ground edge in the other pair. Separate the four walls and cut an arched door (5-in. wide x 5-in. high) in one wall. For the stone wall finish, paint the four pieces with gray spray enamel. Let dry, then mix black latex paint 1:2 with water. Cut a 1-in. x 3/4-in. piece of sponge and dab on the diluted paint in horizontal rows. (Practice this finish on scrap wood first!) Assemble when dry, and prepare for battle.

Chinese Checkers

Don’t go to the toy store for one of these—make it in an hour. First, glue boards together to make a 17-in. x 21-in. panel. (Eventually, it gets cut to 17-in. square, but the extra length makes it easier to center the game design.) With a pencil, lay out two intersecting equal-sided triangles (Photo 1) with 12-in. sides.



Mark off 1-in. spaces along each side of the triangles and draw parallel lines inside the triangles to mark centers for the marble holes. Cut the panel into a 17-in. square, then bevel the top edges with a router or table saw. Drill the marble holes with a 1/2-in. dia. countersink bit (Photo 2) in a drill or drill press.



Sand, finish with Danish oil and add your marbles.

Shop Stool/Stepladder

Here's a double-duty project you'll wonder how you lived without. It's a solid, comfortable stool, and when you flip over the hinged seat board, it becomes a stepladder.

Assemble the two sides first. Drill pilot holes, countersink and attach the leg braces to the legs with 1-1/4 in. drywall screws and glue. Screw the top leg brace flush with the top of the legs, and the lower braces 8-in. and 16-3/4 in. up from the lower ends of the legs. Attach the step boards and the back brace with 2-in. drywall screws and glue. Round over the top outside edges of the seat boards with a 1/4-in. round-over bit. Connect the seat boards with two 2-in. wide butt hinges, and screw the rear seat board to the top leg brace with 2-in. drywall screws and glue.

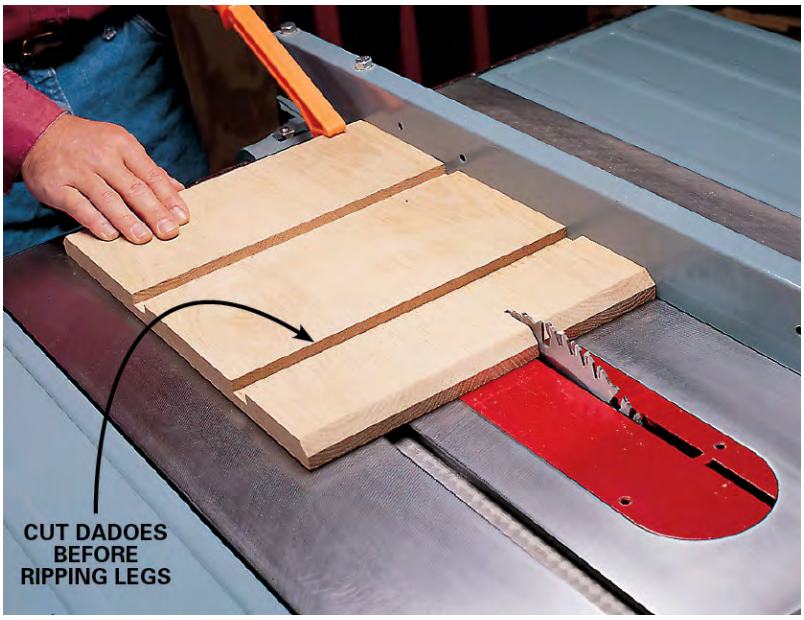
Cutting List

1x4 Pine: 4 legs, 25-in. long; 6 leg braces, 14-in. long; 2 steps and back brace, 16-in. long 1x8 Pine: 2 seat boards, 18-in.

long x 7-1/4 in. wide

Petite Shelves

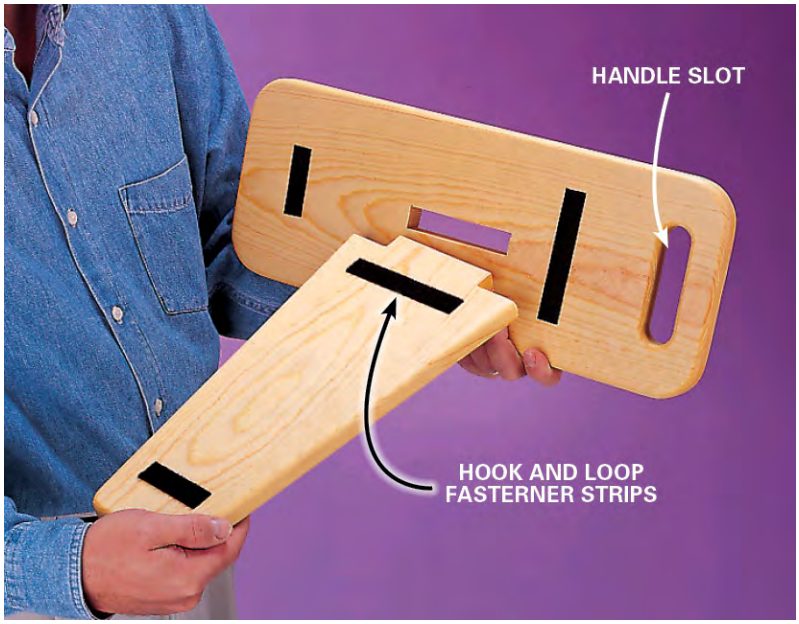
Turn a single 3-ft. long, 1x12 hardwood board into some small shelves to organize a desk top or counter. Cut off a 15-in. long board for the shelves, rip it in the middle to make two shelves, and cut 45-degree bevels on the two long front edges with a router or table saw.



Bevel the ends of the other board, cut dadoes crosswise (cut a dado on scrap and test fit the shelves first!) and rip it into four narrower boards, two at 1-3/8 in. wide and two at 4-in. Finish, then assemble with brass screws and finish washers.

Parade Stool

Here's a great knock-down seat for any outdoor activity. A 3-ft. length of 1x8 pine is all the wood you need. Cut a 15-in. length for the center leg, and taper it with a saw so the bottom is 5-in. wide. Cut a 19-in. length for the seat, drill and saw a 4-in. long x 1-in. wide handle slot. Round all the edges with a 1/4-in. round-over bit in a router.



Drill and saw a 4-in. long x 3/4-in. wide mortise in the seat's center. Cut the notched ends of the leg to make the tenon. Finish, and put on self-adhesive hook and loop fastener strips to hold the pieces together.

Holiday Storage Tips

Garage ceiling track storage

If you store stuff in big plastic storage bins and you need a place to put them, how about the garage ceiling? Screw 2x2s to the ceiling framing with 3-1/2-in. screws spaced every 2 ft. Use the bins as a guide for spacing the 2x2s. The lips on the bins should just brush against the 2x2s when you're sliding the bins into place.

Then center and screw 1x4s to the 2x2s with 2-in. screws. The garage ceiling is a perfect place to store light and medium-weight seasonal items like holiday decorations and camping gear.

Accessory clip-up

Create the perfect hangers for soft items like hats and gloves using a length of metal or plastic chain and binder clips. Squeeze the metal handles to free them from the clips, slip them through the chain links, then reattach the clips. You'll have a neat hangout for all your winter gear.

Protect table leaves

When you’re storing table leaves, protect the edges with pipe insulation (about $4 per four-pack of 3-ft. foam). It will keep your dinner table picture perfect and free of scuffs.

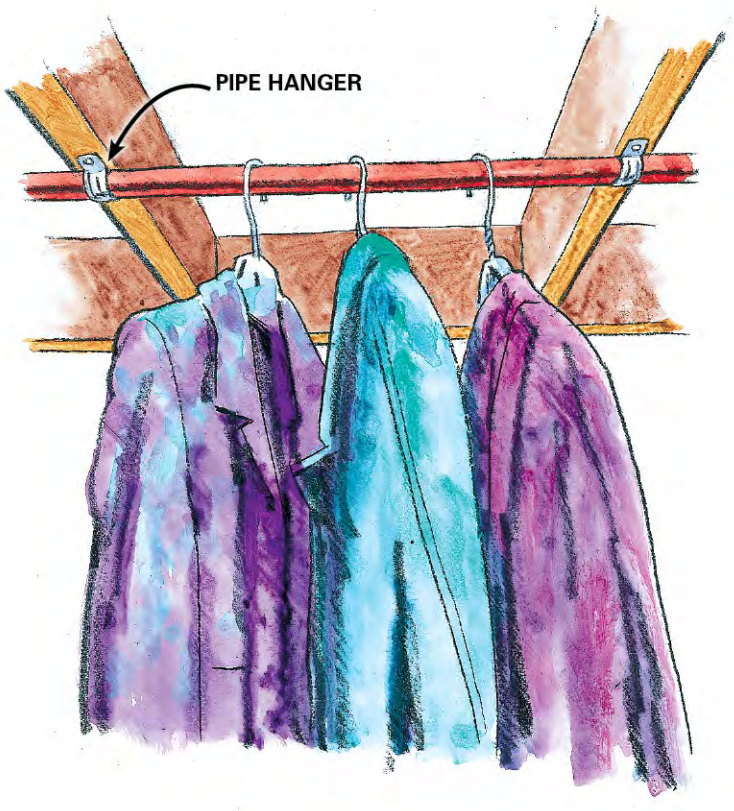
Under-bed drawers

Drawers from old dressers can be given new life as under-bed storage bins. Fasten small casters to the bottoms and slide the drawers under the bed to store seasonal clothes, extra blankets and more.

Wire shelving “corral”

For years we stored our gift wrap propped against the wall in the hall closet. Of course, some of the rolls would fall over and get lost behind other things or end up wrinkled or torn. Last summer I added wire shelves to the closet and had some shelving left over. Using the plastic shelf clips, I screwed a small section to the closet wall and made a wrapping paper “corral.”

Basement laundry rod



For more clothes-hanging space in your basement laundry area, make this rod from 3/4-in. copper or steel pipe and pipe hangers.

Turn a shelf into a clothes hanger rack

Sometimes you just need another place to hang clothes, like on the shelf over your washer and dryer. Turn the edge of that shelf into a hanger rack by predrilling some 3/4-in. plastic pipe and screwing it to the top of the shelf along the edge.

Suspended shelving

Make good use of the space above your garage doors

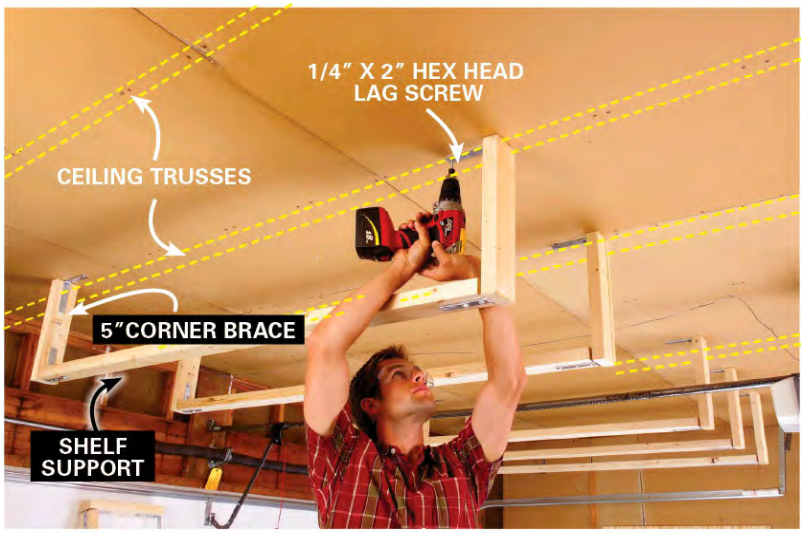
Tuck medium and lightweight stuff onto shelves suspended from the ceiling. The shelves are designed to fit into that unused space above the garage doors (you need 16 in. of clearance to fit a shelf and standard 12-1/2 in. high plastic bins).

However, you can adjust the shelf height and put them anywhere. The only limitation is weight. This 4 x 6-ft. shelf is designed to hold about 160 lbs., a load that typical ceiling framing can safely support.

1 Measure from the ceiling to the top of the raised garage door. Subtract 1 in. to determine the height of the side 2x4s.

It's best to save the shelf for "deep storage," using labeled bins with lids, because you'll need a stepladder to reach stuff.

First, find which way the joists run, then plan to hang one shelf support from three adjacent joists (Photo 2).



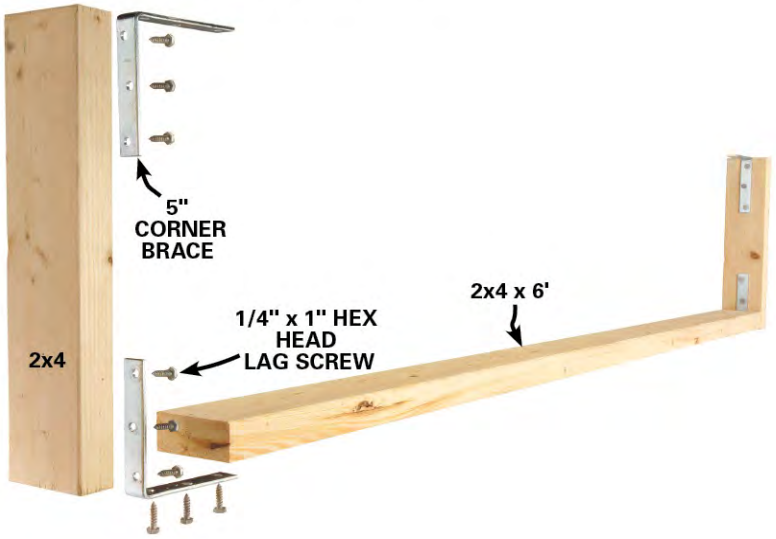
2 Build three identical shelf supports, align the side supports, and predrill and lag-screw each into the center of the ceiling trusses/joists.

The joists shown here are 24 in. apart; if yours are spaced at 16 in., skip one

intermediate joist. These shelves were built to hold plastic bins, but if you put loose stuff up there, add 1x4 sides to keep things from falling off.

Assemble the 2x4s as shown (Figure A), using 5-in. corner braces (1-in. x 5-in. Stanley corner brace, 800-622-4343, stanleyhardware.com) and 1/4-in. x 1-in. hex head lag screws (drill pilot holes first).

Figure A Shelf support detail



Now attach the corner braces on both ends of a shelf support to the center of a joist/truss by drilling pilot holes and using 1/4-in. x 2-in. hex head lag screws (Photo 2). The only challenge is finding the center of joists through a drywall ceiling (if your ceiling is finished) to attach the shelf supports. Tap a small nail through the drywall until you locate both edges of the joist. Measure to find the center of the adjacent joists, and measure to keep the three supports in alignment with one another. Finish the shelf unit by attaching a 3/8-in. x 4-ft. x 6-ft. plywood floor (Photo 3).

3 **Cut 3/8-in. plywood for the shelf base and attach it to the 2x4 shelf supports with 1-in. wood screws.**

Don’t overload bins with heavy stuff. Limit the total weight to about 160 lbs.

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