

Save money, have fun: the joys of doing it yourself



Even if you didn't pick up any of the basics from your parents, it pays to give DIY a try, says **Kate Hilpern**

My father made every shelf and many of the cupboards in the house where I grew up. He tiled our bathroom, laid our carpets, put up our wallpaper and made and built our climbing frame. My father-in-law, equally expert at DIY – he re-wired his entire house. So how is it that my husband and I learned so little? How is it that, faced with our new home last year we looked at the long list of renovations required, looked at each other and agreed to call in the experts?

Until that is, we did our sums. Suddenly DIY seemed our only hope. And so, hammer in one hand, power drill in the other, we found ourselves working through some of our long list ourselves. While we learned mainly through trial and error, we found to our surprise that we actually enjoyed it. Putting up shelves, painting rooms and even doing some amateur carpentry has, dare I say it, turned out to be pretty good fun, extremely satisfying and most importantly, it's saved us a lot of money.

We are, it seems, not alone. Many people who have traditionally feared DIY like the plague are becoming increasingly confident. In the Wickes 2011 Home Improvement Report, almost half (47 per cent) of respondents said they would be doing some form of DIY in the next 12 months – ranging from painting and decorating to landscaping the garden.

Many go further still, says Ronan Todd, DIY expert at Wickes. "Laying a laminate floor sounds hard, but there's quite a trend towards people doing it themselves. Most of it is simply clipping the boards together – the only difficult bit is fitting around pipes and doorways, but provided you have the right tools, it's quite possible."

Tommy Walsh, original member of the *Ground Force* trio and adviser to TradesSupermarket.com, agrees. "Plastering is a job that nearly everyone would traditionally have got a professional in for, but after a practice session, people are surprised how quickly they get the hang of it. Fitting a heated towel rail too – you might get a plumber to run the pipes to the right place, but finish the job of yourself with a bit of measuring, drilling and tightening screws."

It's not just the recession that is forcing people into DIY, believes Todd. "It's a huge factor for some, but others are realising that by doing relatively little, you can add quite a lot of value to your home. Then there are those who are simply taking advantage of the fact that you can find the information and advice you need in so many places now – from books to television programmes to specialist magazines to how-to leaflets and cards in stores like Wickes. The internet is fabulous too for finding tips and advice and how-to videos."

Some retailers even offer courses. "Six of our stores now run around 20 classes on everything from building decking to laying a laminate floor. It only costs at tender and is like a mini-apprenticeship," says Katherine Pater-son, a director at B&Q.

Start with simpler tasks, such as constructing flat-packed furniture, fixing shelves and replacing internal door handles – and do your research to understand what exactly is involved, Pater-son advises. "Our most recent poll showed that 53 per cent of people are still quite afraid of DIY, but that's mainly down to lack of confidence, which can

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be built up quite easily," she says. Before you know it, you'll be putting up curtain poles, changing toilet seats, tiling bathrooms and wallpapering.

"Be realistic about how long a job will take you. At B&Q we show what you can achieve in half an hour, half a day, half a weekend and so on. One of the easiest mistakes is to think, 'Oh I'll decorate the lounge this weekend', only to find that it doesn't give you time to do all the preparation. You'll wind up doing a bad job and not surprisingly, will be less keen in future."

Make sure you have the right tools for the job, adds Bosch Power Tools' expert handyman Chris Tidy. "It sounds obvious, but many people don't and it can be frustrating to have to spend another hour out of your day getting a hammer or some extra screws."

One of the biggest obstacles to DIY is the potential for flat-packed damage that could end with you paying a professional vast sums to sort out a disaster you've created, says Tidy. "But start small, and it soon becomes clear what you're a natural at. People surprise themselves at how much they're drawn to wood work or decorating and how quickly they learn."

Start at the bottom rung of the DIY ladder and learn gradually
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– Marshall burned her business suit and went on courses to learn more. "I qualified as a tiler, kitchen fitter, brick-layer, plumber and plasterer and I used what I learned to encourage more women to take up DIY – to show them that if I can do it, anyone can – and to go in saving old buildings that might otherwise be sold off for car parks."

Marshall's advice? Trust your gut instinct. "If you think you can do something, you probably can and if it feels like a mountain, it probably is, at least for now. Also, don't beat yourself up if things go wrong because they will. When I started plastering, I used to use a bucket when I needed a tea cup. When I started tiling, it would take me 20 tiles before I got the right cut. But I did learn and I've just finished fitting my kitchen – a huge saving, considering what other people charge."

Former Big Brother star Craig Phillips, now a DIY guru and spokesperson for Ryobi power tools, agrees that anyone can do it themselves if they try. "In one of my recent shows, we had people coming to me on a kind of DIY bootcamp. They didn't know the difference between a hammer and a screwdriver and I must admit it was daunting even for me. But although I'm not going to pretend we turned them into tradesmen overnight, they got to a fair level and impressed themselves at what they could do in their own homes."

If you have a big or time-consuming job in mind, Phillips suggests getting some friends round. "I get a lot of women coming to me saying, 'I've bought my first house and it needs so much doing to it – where do I start?' And I always say, 'Get the girls round – teamwork makes it more fun and two or three brains works things out a lot quicker.'"

Women are increasingly the people doing DIY, even in households with men, reports Jim Chadwick, head DIY buyer at The Range, who believes they are often better suited to it because of their methodical approach. "One customer recently told me she had always wanted a shower-style bath, but her husband kept telling her the cost of a plumber and the time it would take made it impractical. She and a friend researched it and sorted it over a weekend while hubby was away. It's about taking one step at a time."

Most mistakes are the obvious ones, so they are easy enough to avoid, says Nick Bazel, operations director at www.aspect.co.uk – incorrect measuring, not disconnecting the water or power, using inappropriate tools and fixings, not laying down protective sheeting, and – scarily – not keeping the tool kit out of the reach of children.

There are two areas to avoid at all costs without training – gas and electricity. "We deal with so many instances of the public taking on dangerous DIY jobs in these areas," says a spokesperson for checktrade.com. "We were recently called to re-do a bungled DIY repair job on a gas fire, which had started leaking into the living room. The customer had tried to light it and it was pure luck the flame didn't catch. People are always putting in extra sockets and using the wrong cables with the wrong current, causing them to melt before the fuse – a massive fire risk. Another common blunder is to install light fittings without earthing them first, which causes an electric shock."

Crucially, if in any doubt, don't be afraid to seek advice from your DIY store, says Todd. "Whether it's help with buying the right screws, nuts, bolts and paint brushes or more detailed advice, stores are there to help."

'After builders let us down, I got out some library books and started tidying up the mess they'd made. If you think you can do it yourself, you probably can'

Don't be afraid to ask for expert advice, adds Todd. "People often take on a project that they're quite capable of, but either before or during the task, they come across a problem – that's the point at which to ask the experts. It may still be that you can do it yourself, but it's best to check."

Sylvia Marshall got the DIY bug so much that she ended up ditching her high-powered city career, where she'd won a businesswoman award, to set up www.coshomesonline.com, at the same time learning more hands-on skills which enabled her to do up properties and sell them on. "I couldn't do anything just five years ago," says Marshall, 52. "But then I was thrown into having to do some work on our new office, a derelict bank, after builders let us down. I got a couple of books out of the library and starting trying to tidy up the mess they'd made, and I found I quite enjoyed some of the jobs. I videoed what I did and when I put it on the internet for friends to see, I was amazed to find hundreds of people looking. They were dying to share experiences and advice and we became a community of mainly women learning DIY together."

TOP 10 PAINTING TIPS

'Start with the ceiling, then do the walls, and end with the woodwork'

Get the right paint for the job – kitchen and bathroom paints, for example, avoid moisture damage. Other speciality paints include radiator enamel and sprays.

For a quick and easy way to spruce up a room, consider a feature wall – it takes no more than three rolls of wallpaper in most homes, or you could simply paint it a brighter or darker colour.

Only tackle one room at a time.

Work out how much paint you need, using guides on websites like www.wickes.co.uk to save money. It can be worth buying in quantity, but only if you store and decant it effectively. Remember: solvent-based paints have a longer storage life than water-based ones.

Get the right brushes. As a general rule, natural bristle or natural/synthetic mix brushes are best for solvent-based paints, while synthetic bristle brushes are better for water-based products.

Lower quality brushes are always more likely to lose their bristles.

Use rollers to apply emulsion to large surface areas, but you may need more coats as the paint goes on quite thinly. Choose a short-pile roller sleeve for a smooth wall surface and a shaggy sheepskin-style sleeve for a more textured surface.

Consider paint pads – they make less spray and mess than rollers. They do, however, need reloading more often.



If you need to paint the ceiling, do it first as – let's face it – you're bound to get some on the walls. Next up, do the walls and end with the woodwork.

If you're painting a new wooden door, apply knotting solution to any knots in the wood to prevent resin seeping through the new paint.

Stop brushes and rollers drying out overnight by wrapping them in clingfilm, making them as airtight as possible.

