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Cleaning the basement or garage can make a big green difference

By Tom Watson
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Few household chores provide the visceral satisfaction of cleaning and organizing the basement or garage.

What a relief to finally say goodbye to those chairs that never really worked out, the tire chains from two cars ago, and those cans of paint from a previous owner's 1970s psychedelic remodeling job. While you're at it, why not make your garage or basement cleanup even more rewarding and turn it into a green makeover?

Give it up

Start by simply gathering together all the stuff in the basement and garage you want to give away or sell. Unless you have items worth more than \$100 apiece, it may not be worth the time and trouble to sell them.

Once you have a pile, use newspaper or online classified ads and exchanges to find a home for your items,



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Resources

King County "What Do I Do With ... ?": www.metrokc.gov/dnrp/swd/wdidw

Household hazardous waste: www.govlink.org/hazwaste/house/disposal

Mrs. Clean Northwest: www.mrscleannw.com/tips

Basement moisture problems: www.extension.umn.edu/distribution/housingandclothing/DK7051.html

Second Use Building Materials: www.seconduse.com

MetroPaint: www.oregonmetro.gov/index.cfm/go/by.web/id=521

offer them to family and friends, or donate them to a charity. To find charities that will accept them, consult the "Miscellaneous Household Items" section on King County's "What Do I Do With...?" Web site.

Don't donate items that need repairing, as most charities lack the resources to deal with those. But offer them to people who might fix them, or you can consider creative reuse options. For example, turn the long handles from broken tools into garden stakes, and bring an old inner tube back to life as weatherstripping for a basement door.

Pick your poison

When you have so many pesticides, paints, polishes and powders that you lose track of them, it's time to take a stand. First, organize your chemicals by type, such as lawn and garden, auto, cleaning and paint. Then pull out the ones you will never use.

For standard household chemicals such as cleaners, ask your neighbors if they want them. When they use them for their proper purpose, it can avoid the purchase of a new product. Take the rest to a household-hazardous-waste disposal center. Never dump them down the drain or put them in the garbage.

If you have leftover latex paint, however, you can dry that out and put it in the garbage, since solidified latex paint is not a problem there. King County's Local Hazardous Waste Management Program collection facilities no longer accept latex paint.

Corralling the clutter

Setting up an efficient organization system is one of the greenest things you can do in the garage or basement, since it reduces waste. When you just store stuff helter-skelter, it tends to get damaged, or you forget what you own and buy new products you don't need.

But you don't have to spend hundreds of dollars on fancy storage systems, despite what some organizational experts say. If you purge unneeded items and commit to buying less stuff in the future, much of your existing shelving may work just fine.

If you do need to buy new storage racks, choose wire shelving, since it easily lets you see what's on all the shelves and doesn't collect dust. Group your items intuitively, by use and season.

Seattle basement problem

Another likely cause of waste in your basement is simply the fact that it's in Western Washington. Few basements here stay completely dry, and many of us have had to throw away things from our basements because they got damp, musty or totally soaked. These strategies can help avoid that in the future:

- Address the basic problem. Fix the gutters, slope the grade of soil away from the house, or install a new drainage system to keep your basement dry. Make sure the clothes dryer is vented outdoors.
- Keep everything at least 4 inches off the floor. Even if water doesn't seep in from outside, a washing machine hose or sump pump line could burst.
- Choose alternatives to cardboard boxes for basement storage. Moisture — not to mention bugs, rats and mice — easily gets into cardboard boxes. The experts at Mrs. Clean Northwest, a Lynnwood-based housecleaning company, recommend using only airtight, waterproof containers.

Paint it green

Finish off your garage or basement green-up with a fresh coat of paint. If you find enough leftover latex paint, mix several cans of similar colors and use that.

Or try MetroPaint, the low-cost, 100 percent recycled latex paint now sold in gallons at Second Use Building Materials in South Seattle. Metro, a regional government agency in Portland, makes this product from paint collected at household-hazardous-waste centers. Guaranteed for five years, it comes in various colors with evocative names, just like regular paint. How about Crater Lake for the basement and Espresso for the garage?

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