

December 9, 2006

DID IT MYSELF

Old-Year's Resolutions

How to tackle a big home-improvement challenge: wrapping up the tedious details from months of projects; getting psyched to spackle

By GWENDOLYN BOUNDS December 9, 2006; Page P5

Christmas is two weeks away, and my tree is trimmed -- but the newly renovated guest bathroom still isn't. Nor are the metal covers back on its heating vents: I removed them months ago to lay a new wood floor, and now they don't quite fit. The upstairs bedroom closet desperately needs a second coat of paint (the first one went up in January). And all of the living room's electrical outlets have been upgraded -- except for two cracked yellow ones.

The new year may be the time to chart out big projects, but if you're like me, the time that really requires resolution is now, the waning weeks of the year when unfinished jobs are staring you in the face. Part of the problem is procrastination: Once the interesting work is done, spackling that last crack or buying the right screw to make the vanity shelf fit is pure drudgery. With pros, you put these outstanding job items on a "punch list" of work that needs completing for payment. But nobody's paying you, so the little to-do's accumulate, hitting critical mass just as friends and family descend for the holidays.

WALL STREET JOURNAL VIDEO



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WSJ's Wendy Bounds discusses some easy-to-use tools the home-improvement industry is touting this holiday season.

Whether it's not having the right tools, not having time, or just knowing "you hate to do it, that's why these minor honey-do items don't get done," says Bob Vila, host of the "Bob Vila" home-improvement TV series. The most common punch-list item he sees: hanging bathroom fixtures, such

as towel bars. "My own son was on his way to prep school before he learned that toilet paper wasn't supposed to sit on the floor."

Our punch lists are getting longer as the \$200 billion-plus home-improvement industry pushes us to try ever more complicated projects. Just last month, the HGTV cable-TV network launched "Don't Sweat It," billed as a way to help DIYers "tick off their 'Honey, could you do...' lists -- instead of their spouses." Mr. Vila recently launched a Web forum where homeowners can get help finishing tasks. He's also trying to cash in on the trend with a new tool line.

As for myself, I've made a DIY New Year's Resolution: Punch out the punch list by Jan. 31. Until then, no new projects. For inspiration, I checked out new tool recommendations from retailers and blog favorites; a few gift-worthy finds are featured here. I also canvassed readers about their procrastination habits. It was heartening to hear that Jonathan Dintzis is still living with a half-painted bathroom in Bogota, Colombia, because he needs to remove shelving to finish. And that like me, Gary Weiler of Virginia Beach, Va., still hasn't fixed a gate in his backyard after weather expanded the wood so much the door latch and fence post latch holder don't meet.

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Writes Mr. Weiler: "When we sit down to eat, the gate hits the fence post loudly throughout the meal if it is a windy day. At that point, my wife, Pam, looks at me with that 'You are totally useless around the house' expression."

The darkest confession came from David Hirsch of Pawtucket, R.I. "Probably the most ridiculous item on my list is 'Review the punch list to edit and prioritize,'" he confides.

That got me moving. The best strategy, I decided, was to do a survey, notebook in hand. So several weeks ago, I walked through the house, the garage and the yard, listing outstanding jobs and making note of tools and hardware needed to complete each one. That included the biggies (install molding around the bathroom ceiling), the easy (replace that missing light bulb under the staircase) and the ridiculous (pull up those rotting tomato plants). My final punch list was 43 items long.

A single trip to my local home-improvement store set me back \$262.50 for everything from a hatchet to beat out an ugly, rotting stump to a mini-hacksaw to trim the unsightly bolts holding down my new toilet. I also stocked up on a winter's supply of batteries and light bulbs.

On a recent Sunday morning, I dug in, starting with those toilet bolts. As I lay on the floor, head wedged between the sink and the commode's sweaty base, I felt a twinge of envy at the sane people still snuggled in bed. Then I put on a wool hat and gloves, grabbed a cup of hot coffee and headed for the chilly garage. I filed a jumbled mess of wrenches, screwdrivers and fittings into piles and then into drawers, and exhausted and cold, called it a day.

On following weekends, I pulled up the tomato plants (though only after my dog had eaten the rotten fruit), swapped out dead light bulbs and removed old gas from the lawn mower and the weed trimmer. There's still a lot left, but I've made a dent.

Some of you bolstered my spirits by suggesting delay is a natural part of the home-improvement process. When the hot-water dispenser died after 15 years at Henry J. Murphy's house, the Cranbury, N.J., reader purchased a \$6.95 tea kettle to use while deciding how and when to replace the dispenser. "I figure at least six months' time will be required to fully implement the decision," he says.

Adds Frank Dougherty of Penngrove, Calif.: "Probably the thing that was on my punch list longest was painting a window that was replaced along with the stucco that had to be repaired when the window was replaced. It took two years to get around to that." The reason: "There were more interesting projects to do."

* * *



1. Black & Decker Alligator Lopper

\$99 at homedepot.com³

CLAIM: Easy-to-use electric pruner for branches up to 4 inches in diameter.

OUR TAKE: Part chain saw, part manual lopper, this tool offers a quick way to trim thick branches or small logs -- and with covered jaws, it's safer. We nipped deadwood around our property and found it well-balanced and not scary at all. But at

6½ pounds, the Alligator Lopper is almost as heavy as some small gasoline-powered chain saws.

2. Life + Gear 6-in-1 Personal Safety Device

\$34.95 at lifegearcompany.com⁴

CLAIM: Hand-cranked device with functionality of FM radio, cellphone charger, LED flashlight, signal flasher, siren and compass.

OUR TAKE: Emergency tools that don't need batteries or electricity are gaining appeal among noncampers. We're adding the PSD to our stash of flashlights. For something fancier, consider Life + Gear's LifeLight (\$49.95); it can play iPods or other MP3 devices, albeit at weak volume levels.



3. ImmiX 10x or 20x multitool

\$74.95 at www.loggerheadtools.com⁵

CLAIM: Ergonomic, pistol grip multitool with as many as 34 tools.

OUR TAKE: Last year we discovered the LoggerHead Bionic Wrench. This year's new entrant combines the unique wrench, which covers 14 metric and standard sizes. Twenty screwdriver heads are tucked in the handle of the 20x. The 10x includes two retractable knife blades, though we prefer a standard utility knife.

4. Craftsman 7-Piece Locking Flex Ratcheting Wrench Set

\$99.99 at sears.com⁶

CLAIM: 180-degree rotation of wrench heads wards off slippage.

OUR TAKE: Increased power, especially for those without Popeye physique.

Wrench flexes and locks into multiple positions for better leverage; plus its 5-degree turning arc helps maneuver in tight areas.



5. Black & Decker Simple Start Vehicle Battery Booster

\$49.99 at homedepot.com⁷

CLAIM: No jumper cables required.

OUR TAKE: We let our car's battery die and then popped the cable of this precharged booster into our vehicle's cigarette lighter. After 10 minutes of charging the battery, the car started right up.

6. Bob Vila's Quick Change Utility Knife

\$16.90 at HSN.com⁸

CLAIM: Part of the TV host's new tool line this year. Knife boasts an easy-to-change blade feature and ergonomic grip.

OUR TAKE: Blade-swapping is fast and safe; just eject old blade with push of button and new one automatically reloads from internal storage chamber. Grip is gentle on smaller female hands, and price includes 55 blades. One quibble: Cover of knife's blade storage isn't permanently attached, making it easier to lose.



7. DAP Patch Stick

\$3.19 at Lowes.com⁹

CLAIM: Quick-drying nail-hole and crack filler.

OUR TAKE: It rubs on like laundry spot remover and even comes with built-in plastic spackle knife to wipe off excess. Hardens in minutes.

8. 686 Original Snow Toolbelt

\$33.99 at daddiesboardshop.com¹⁰

CLAIM: Waterproof leather belt has detachable buckle with Phillips head and flathead screwdriver prongs, three wrench sizes and bottle opener.

OUR TAKE: We were skeptical this literal "tool belt" would be both functional and fashionable, but the small/medium actually fit our female guinea pig in low-rise jeans. You won't fix an engine with this, but we managed to reinstall a loose license plate. (A user on kk.org/cooltools¹¹ says the belt can get through airport security.)



9. X-Treme Tape

\$7.04 at Amazon.com¹²

CLAIM: No-adhesive protective repair tape good from -60F to +500F

OUR TAKE: Though we'll never give up on silver duct tape, we liked the lack of "stickiness" of this self-bonding, silicone-based brand by Vypar Products. We tested the heat claim by wrapping our fire poker and sticking it in a roaring blaze; it took 20

seconds to ignite.

10. WD-40 No Mess Pen

\$4.09 at Amazon.com¹³

CLAIM: Precise application of old standby.

OUR TAKE: This pen works like a marker. It's as good as the original and a lot less messy. We lubed our bicycle chain, unstuck a zipper and cleaned rust off garden clippers left in the rain.



11. Craftsman Digital LaserTrac Level

\$39.99 for 10-inch and \$49.99 for 24-inch at sears.com¹⁴

CLAIM: Makes precise leveling easier with digital display of tool angle; projects laser dot to 100 feet.

OUR TAKE: For those frustrated with dodgy air bubble on regular models, this affordable digital readout may be welcome. It beeps helpfully when level. Still, it's a lot of level for the average DIYer.

12. OXO Good Grips 4-in-1 Screwdriver

\$4.98 at lowes.com¹⁵

CLAIM: Eases mending of electronics, eyeglasses, jewelry and toys.

OUR TAKE: Magnetic bits make adjusting small screws less of an eye-straining headache. A solid stocking stuffer if those new Gucci glasses and the Playstation need a tweak Christmas morning.

13. Black & Decker Auto Wrench

\$29.98 at Lowe's

CLAIM: Automatically adjusts to any size nut or bolt with push of a button on handle.

OUR TAKE: It's gimmicky and needs batteries (they're included) -- but like B&D's Auto Tape Measurer, this tool's got a novelty "wow" factor that makes it gift-worthy. Plus, our female tester appreciated not having to rub her bare thumb on the rough manual adjustment wheel.

14. Ryobi One+ 18 V Radio

\$24.97 at Home Depot

CLAIM: Inexpensive digital tuning radio with MP3 player input that operates on interchangeable 18 V Ryobi battery pack.

OUR TAKE: While radio reception wasn't the greatest, we have to give the One + props for sound. When we plugged in our iPod, the Dixie Chicks sounded loud and clear even over clanking tools. Would be better if it worked with other makers' batteries.

15. Hawkmate

\$10.95 at hawkmate.com¹⁶

CLAIM: Storage system for spackling/putty knives.

OUR TAKE: Anyone who's ever slogged through joint compound or plaster, switching knives as you go, will appreciate this tool's design. The Hawkmate attaches underneath existing hawk that holds the plaster and provides a platform to stash knives while working. Accidentally turn the Hawkmate at 90 degree angle, and knives stay put ... though your plaster might not.

16. Bamboo Mud Magnet paw cleaner

\$9.99 at select retailers listed at www.bamboopet.com¹⁷

CLAIM: Oversized microfiber glove cleans dog's muddy paws better than cotton towels, absorbing six times its weight in dirt and water.

OUR TAKE: When we weed, our dog helps. The fingers on these gloves culled mud off our pooch's paws more easily than a towel, and withstood several muddy marsh jaunts before needing to hit the laundry. But it's only a glove, so if your dog is bigger than a cat and likes to roll, forget about it.

17. Black & Decker Handisaw

\$39.97 at lowes.com¹⁸

CLAIM: Mini reciprocating saw for a light wood and metal cutting

OUR TAKE: For little tasks, trimming drywall, plastic PVC pipe or even Christmas tree limbs, this is a good saw to keep around the house -- and a lot less scary to use than others. Lightweight, it earned kudos from tool bloggers for sturdiness and quick-change blade feature.

18. Duct Tape Passport Holder

\$9.99 at thinkgeek.com¹⁹

CLAIM: Super sturdy cover made from DIY staple

OUR TAKE: While you could make this holder at home, it probably wouldn't look as sleek as Ducti's, which comes with a Lifetime Trade-In Policy. Only drawback was size: We wanted 3.75" x 5.5" dimensions slightly bigger to hold more paperwork, such as airline tickets.

19. Shur-Line Teflon-coated paint pan

\$11.10 for pan and paint rollers at amazon.com²⁰

CLAIM: Tray cleans more quickly with no need for liners

OUR TAKE: The tray was a favorite find for 2006. Just let the paint dry on pan, and it peels off (with a little scraping) to toss in the trash.

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