

better than lugging around a half-dozen wrenches. So put a little thought into what kind of repair work you do most and what kind of multiuse tools can help you shrink the size and weight of the tool kit you take along. Then you get to do one of my favorite things: go browsing in hardware stores and home improvements stores for the ingenious multiuse tools that will make your cheat-at-home-repair life even easier.

Portability. If you had a workbench in your basement with all your tools at hand and that was the only place where you ever did repair work, then portability of your tools would not be an issue at all. But life doesn't work like that. Your attic, shed, roof, siding, and clothes washer will all cry out for attention occasionally, which means that you need to be able to move just the right tools to a location far from your tool storage area—with a minimum of hassle. This is where clever use of tool-carrying devices comes in.

Sara Fisher, a professional organizer in Atlanta, recommends buying a small, lightweight toolbox and stocking it with the tools you use most often around the house. You'll be able to grab it from your tool storage area whenever you need it without hunting around for your screwdrivers, hammer, and pliers. Oreland, Pennsylvania, resident Scott Vincent has multiple toolboxes, and they're stocked according to purpose; for instance, drilling equipment goes in one box, and tools for working on home siding go in another. Raymond VinZant, Roto Rooter's Ask-the-Plumber expert, likes to keep a small bucket supplied with the four or five tools he most often needs for plumbing jobs around the house. And yet another alternative: Post a small-but-rugged-handled tool bag in your tool storage area, but leave it empty. Each time you need to fix something, toss in only the items you need, and return those tools to their proper places when you're done.

Resist the temptation to cram all your tools into one box—you'll never feel like lugging *that* around. Also, don't attempt to store all your hardware—nails, screws, bolts, and picture hangers—in your toolbox. A small selection would be helpful, but the entire supply is needless weight.

SLEIGHT OF HAND

A Bag in Every Toolbox

Scott Vincent keeps multiple toolboxes handy, their contents depending on the repair jobs he has to do most frequently around the house. But every one of his toolboxes has an item in common: a clear plastic bag full of miscellaneous, commonly used hardware (a variety of screws, nails, picture hangers, and such). This way, no matter what kind of job he's doing, he can save himself an annoying trip back to his workbench if he needs a common hardware item.

Availability. Being able to get to your tools readily when you need them is crucial to successful cheating-at-home-repair. The easier your tools are to find, and the closer they are at hand, the more likely it is that you'll snap them up and make simple repairs the moment you're aware of the need. So if you don't already have a single location where you cluster all your tools, choose a

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Mantesh

Getting the Right Tools in the Right Place

JUST OWNING TOOLS IS NOT ENOUGH. IF YOU WANT TO BE READY FOR THE MOST COMMON HOME REPAIRS, IF YOU WANT TO SAVE YOURSELF ENORMOUS AMOUNTS OF TIME, ENERGY, AND AGGRAVATION, THEN YOU NEED TO ADOPT SOME SIMPLE PRINCIPLES ABOUT YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH TOOLS. WHICH ONES YOU BRING INTO YOUR LIFE, FOR INSTANCE, WHERE YOU PUT THEM IN THE HOME, AND HOW YOU ORGANIZE THEM. NONE OF THIS IS DIFFICULT—IN FACT, *NOT* TAKING THESE MEASURES IS THE DIFFICULT WAY TO GO. WE’LL ALSO TAKE A LOOK AT SOME SNEAKY WAYS TO USE YOUR TOOLS, PLUS ANOTHER SURPRISE OR TWO.

Power Up Your Tools with Wise Selection and Storage

A lot of the advice in *How to Cheat at Home Repair* involves the very moment when you put a tool to use. However, there are many factors in the background that influence how efficient, powerful, useful, and hassle-free that tool is. Here are some simple strategies for selecting and storing tools that will have an enormous impact on your cheat-at-home-repair efforts.

Versatility. When you were a kid, a kind uncle might have given you a screwdriver set with one small plastic handle and several different kinds of driver tips that snapped into it. If that was your introduction to multiuse tools, then you might have soured on them when the plastic cracked and the cheap tips shredded after only a few uses. Well, multiuse tools aren’t kid stuff any more. The cleverest home-repair people I know rave about them because they’re so convenient. Basically, it’s the Swiss Army knife concept on a slightly larger scale. Rather than having to carry several tools around to make a repair, you have several high-quality tools combined into one compact object. Multiuse tools can make good economic sense too, because their cost is often less than the combined cost of the individual tools they represent. They also add less weight to your toolbox.

Now, not all multiuse tools are alike, of course. Buying one depends on what kind of work you typically do. Some are geared more for electrical work, carpentry, or even recreational pursuits, such as camping and fishing. A good one for around-the-house use might include multiple screwdrivers, knife blades, a saw blade or two, an awl, and pliers with a wire-cutting edge. Some versatile tools focus on a single function, but adjust to all the sizes and varieties of that function. For instance, Chuck McLaughlin, a plumber in Glenside, Pennsylvania, loves his Lenox multitip screwdriver that offers Phillips, flat, square, and nut drivers. Similarly, an adjustable socket wrench has an opening that will expand and shrink to fit any size nut—much

better than lugging around a half-dozen wrenches. So put a little thought into what kind of repair work you do most and what kind of multiuse tools can help you shrink the size and weight of the tool kit you take along. Then you get to do one of my favorite things: go browsing in hardware stores and home improvements stores for the ingenious multiuse tools that will make your cheat-at-home-repair life even easier.

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spot now. Garages are often ideal, as are basements. In a pinch, a walk-in pantry, laundry room, or mudroom might suffice, too.

Make sure that your Tool Central has some wall space open. To make your tools super-available, you need to be able to display the tools that don't reside permanently in toolboxes. The classic ways of doing this are by installing either pegboard or shelving. Pegboard comes with an enormous range of movable hooks that can accommodate tools of any size and shape. For storing tools on shelves, Fisher prefers the "ventilated" wire style of shelf. You can add hard plastic, easy-to-clean shelf liners to wire shelving to prevent teeny objects from falling through and getting lost. An alternative (or in addition to wall storage): Fisher also loves storing tools in a cabinet with multiple shallow drawers that have dividers in them (Elfa is one brand).

Durability. We all keep an eye out for bargains. But the most experienced repair people I know are unanimous about this: The tools that work better and are more durable cost more money than the tools that don't perform as well and fall apart quickly. Now, if you only intend to use a particular tool once or twice for a rare job and its longevity doesn't matter to you, then a cheaper tool may suffice. Otherwise, invest in quality. A screwdriver that will last you twenty years is a sounder investment than twenty screwdrivers—each of which falls apart after a year.

Understand that many tool manufacturers offer their products to different kinds of consumers. They may create a line of less expensive tools to appeal to everyday homeowners, and they may create a separate line of the same tools to appeal to fix-it professionals. There's a reason that the pros will only buy the latter. You often will get hints of this phenomenon from tool packaging in the stores—look for such terms as *professional grade*.

[Are You Properly Equipped to Start Cheating?](#)

If you've been running your own household for more than a few years, chances are you've been accumulating tools in self-defense—just to keep your house or apartment from collapsing in on you. And it's also likely that you have many or all of the following basic tools already. But just to be sure, let's run down a list of the must-haves for any household toolbox. These tools are versatile, easy to use, and relatively inexpensive. If you're missing any of these, put them on your shopping list the next time you visit a hardware store or home improvement center.

Screwdriver. You'll need various sizes and with various tips—flat, Phillips, and square tips, plus hex nut drivers.

Crescent wrench. For grasping various sizes of nuts and bolts, crescent wrenches have a jaw that can widen or narrow by turning a screw on the side of the wrench's head.

Channel-lock pliers. These pliers have an adjustable jaw size and are used for a wide variety of grasping purposes.

Pipe wrench. This is an adjustable wrench with a toothy jaw meant for grabbing the rounded part of a pipe or some other fitting (not nuts). Unless you expect to do a lot of heavy-duty plumbing, one of the smaller sizes—say, ten inches (25.5cm) or so—will do nicely.

Hammer. At the very least have one classic, sixteen-ounce hammer with a two-pronged claw on the head for pulling nails out of wood. Look for a forged steel head. The handle might be steel as well, or it might be wood or fiberglass.

Utility knife. Also called a box cutter, this gizmo features a sharp, retractable blade that protrudes from one end of the handle. Yes, it will cut open cardboard boxes, but it's also handy for slicing other tough materials, such as carpet. The blades are replaceable and often stored inside the handle.

Chisel. A chisel has a sharp, flat end that's used for sculpting gaps or recesses into wood.

Power drill. While they come in larger sizes, the classic $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch (1-cm) electric drill (that's a measurement of the maximum drill bit size) is probably all you need for general-purpose home repair. Whether to go with the corded variety or cordless is a matter of personal preference—and whether you intend to do a lot of drilling away from a convenient electrical outlet. Buy drill bits in a variety of sizes, plus a few screwdriver bits for times when you want to drive multiple screws quickly.

Hand saw. At a minimum you will want a crosscut saw, the conventional carpentry tool for cutting across the grain of wood. However, you will find two other saws very handy as well: a hacksaw for cutting metal and a pruning saw for cutting tree branches and other yard work.

Staple gun. A spring-powered device that allows you to squeeze the handle and drive hefty staples into wood and other firm-but-penetrable surfaces.

Caulking gun. A lot of the materials you use for filling holes, sealing around the bathtub, and filling cracks in the driveway come in standardized tubes with a nozzle on one end. A caulking gun has an open cylinder that you set such tubes into, and then you snip the end of the nozzle to make an opening. When you squeeze the handle of the caulking gun, a rod presses into the back of the tube and forces the patching material out the nozzle.

Tape measure. A long, thin metal tape with inches and/or centimeters marked on it that coils up, spring-loaded, inside a small metal or plastic casing. For home use, get one that's at least twelve feet (4m). It's a must-have for any kind of carpentry, of course, but also take it with you any time you're buying bulky items that will have to fit into your home—furniture, shelving, or appliances, for instance.

Eight Sneaky, Highly Versatile Repair Tools

Enough about conventional tools. Full-fledged cheaters-at-home-repair love to use common household objects to solve everyday problems, too. Here are some of my favorites, chosen for their versatility, durability, and reasonable cost. In fact, I suggest that you collect each of these eight items into several kits (stuff them into a mini-toolbox, a zip-closing bag, or some other small container). Store these kits in multiple locations—your main tool storage area, in the shed, in the garage, in your car trunk, and perhaps even in the kitchen. You will find yourself inventing zillions of ingenious uses for these tools as you run into daily hassles and dilemmas.

1. Spray lubricant. Spray it anywhere you need two parts to slide against each other more easily. Will prevent metal corrosion, too, and is a great solvent in many cleaning situations. Available in a wide variety of retail stores. WD-40 is one common brand.

2. Compressed air. A second entry from the aerosol-can department. Use this “instant

wind” for dusting delicate or intricate items, cleaning electronics and other equipment that’s sensitive to cleaning chemicals and moisture, and blowing dust out of spots you can’t reach in any other way. Hold the can straight up so the propellant sprays out. Buy cans of compressed air at office-supply stores, computer and electronics stores, and camera stores.

SLEIGHT OF HAND

A Ready Lubricant, Right Before Your Eyes

You probably don’t carry an oilcan around with you day in and day out. So do you know what to do when you need just a little light lubricant—say, to loosen up a pair of balky scissors? The solution is as plain as the nose on your face. That’s right: Rub your finger against the side of your nose—it’s a ready source of lubricant!

If your tummy is turning flip-flops just now, let me point out that the cleverest cheaters-at-home-repair consider all the tools at their disposal when they confront a problem. You can’t afford to ignore the potential of nose oil any more than you can afford to throw your favorite screwdriver into the trash. Legend has it that old-time clockmakers used nose oil to lubricate fine lock mechanisms. If clockmaking isn’t your career path, then you will want to know about these other uses for the world’s handiest lubricant. (By the way, the best place to harvest nose oil is at either side of your nostrils, in the crease where your nose meets the rest of your face.)

- ◇ Use nose oil to remove the foamy head from a glass of soft drink or beer. Yes, rub your finger against the side of your nose, dip it into the foam, and swirl. You see, the oil disturbs the water in the bubbles and causes the bubbles to rupture. *Highly recommended: Only try this on your own drink.*
 - ◇ Rub nose oil into a scratch on your sunglasses to make it less visible. After you rub it in, wipe off the excess around the scratch so you don’t have a big smudge.
 - ◇ Use nose oil to rub away the sticky residue left by a label on glass or plastic.
 - ◇ Use nose oil as lip balm. Probably the kind of application you would want to employ discreetly.
 - ◇ Use nose oil to add a quick gloss to your fingernails.
 - ◇ If you haven’t yet converted to digital photography, use a touch of nose oil to mask scratches in a negative when you’re printing photographs in the darkroom.
- Use nose oil to make hazy glass transparent. For instance, if your low-voltage

- ◇ kitchen counter lights have hazy bulbs and you want to see if their filaments are burned out, rub on a little nose oil and you'll be able to see right through the glass.
- ◇ Rub nose oil onto the bowl of your tobacco pipe to keep it shiny.
- ◇ Use nose oil to lubricate your fingertips while playing a stringed instrument, such as a guitar or a banjo.

Note: A grateful salute—right off the side of my nose—goes out to Mark Bruley, a vice president at ECRI Institute in Plymouth Meeting, Pennsylvania, and also an accomplished nose oil scholar.

3. Fishing line and needle. Buy a spool of four-or five-pound test (1.8–2.5kg) monofilament fishing line. Fishing line is handy for scores of impromptu repair jobs, including stitching up ripped jackets, pants, backpacks, and upholstery. Also use it to hang things or make an impromptu clothesline. Because it's clear, any stitching you do will be inconspicuous. To go with your fishing line, select a needle that's hefty enough to penetrate sturdy materials and has an eye that will accommodate the thickness of your fishing line. Store the needle in its original packaging to keep it from getting lost and to protect your fingers from pokes.

4. Bailing wire. This thin, strong galvanized wire is great for hanging pictures, outdoor decorations, and more. Wrap it around objects that need to be bound together, twist the ends together, and snip off the excess with wire cutters or pliers.

5. Zip ties. These are sturdy nylon straps with a slotted opening on one end and a ridged band that slides through the slot and locks. They're commonly used for forcing some order in spots where you have multiple wires or cables. They're also very handy for an impromptu fix when you need to bind two or more objects together. Secure a weak plant stalk to a garden stake, hold several washers together "key ring" style, or bind two objects together when their bolt comes loose and is lost. You can buy zip ties at home improvement stores in a variety of lengths. Cluster the unused ones in a zip-closing bag.

6. Bungee cords. These are strong-but-elastic cords with hooks on each end. They come in a wide range of lengths and colors and are available in hardware stores and home improvement centers. Use them anywhere you need to temporarily hold one thing to another—say, binding a bed roll to a backpack, holding your car's trunk lid down when it won't close over an oversized object, or securing your garbage can lid to prevent the wind—or varmints—from removing it. There's an annoying thing about bungee cords: When you store several of them together, those little hooks love to reach out and grab one another and any object they happen to be near. The solution to this: Store unused bungee cords in a large zip-closing bag, which will curb their grabby tendency.

7. Duct tape. Strong, waterproof, and more versatile than a Swiss Army knife. The Scouts I know include in their backpacks a small pencil wrapped in several feet (1m or so) of duct tape. That makes it lighter and more compact than an entire roll—and you have something

to write with as well!

8. A bag of plastic supermarket bags. Squash together three plastic supermarket bags, stuff them into the bottom of a fourth bag, roll the entire thing into a tight wad, wrap a rubber band around it, and drop it into your toolkit. The ultimate way to recycle supermarket bags is to get a second use out of them. Naturally, they'll be handy when you need to carry several things at once. But they're also great for keeping your hands out of grimy or disgusting messes. Slide one over you hand while you're changing the lawnmower's oil, for instance, or while you're picking up that dead mouse that your cat left on the sidewalk. Throw out the bag, of course, when it gets messy, and replenish your stock when it runs low.

Sneaky Tool-Specific Tips

Here's a collection of clever ways to save time and effort while you're using specific tools:

For one-handed screw driving, tear off some tape. It's very easy to drop a screw when you're trying to drive it, especially if you don't have your second hand free to hold the screw, or if you have to reach for the spot where the screw needs to go in. Here's "Handyman Scott" Kropnick's tricky solution: Tape the screw to the tip of the screwdriver. Here's how you do it: Tear off about two inches (5cm) of tape (electrician's tape or masking tape work well) and poke the tip of your screwdriver through the center of the tape so that the tip emerges on the sticky side. Then set the slot of your screw against the tip of the driver, and fold the tape up so it grasps the head of the screw. Now you can drive the screw one-handed without fear of dropping it.

Reduce the damage—and effort—of pulling nails. Many people do too much damage—and work way too hard—when they're pulling nails out of wood with a claw hammer. The novice's approach goes like this: You slide the head of a nail between the two prongs of the hammer's claw, then you push the handle of the hammer down so the leverage pulls the nail out of the wood. If the nail gives you any resistance at all, the head of the hammer leaves a mark—and sometimes a sizable dent—on the wood. Instead, here's Kropnick's take-it-easy approach: Before you push the hammer's handle down, slide a thin piece of wood under the hammer's head to protect the wood below. Then, instead of pushing straight down, loosen the nail by pushing side to side, and lower the handle gradually. "This is especially good for bigger nails," Kropnick says.

Keep a "notepad" on your measuring tape. When you're taking measurements for a job around the house, you probably know better than to try to keep the figures in your head. When you go to buy materials at the home store, the length of the shelves you need will have vanished from your mind quicker than last night's dream. The obvious solution is to write all measurements down immediately. But that requires carrying yet another object around with you—a notepad. To simplify matters, and to make sure you're never without a scratch pad, do this: Buy a roll of 2-inch-wide (5-cm-wide) masking tape. Tear off five 2-inch (5cm) lengths of this tape and affix these squares, one on top of another, to the case of your tape measure (the outer side, not over the belt clip). Now when you take measurements, you will have a "notepad" right there in your hand. Jot the figures on the top piece of masking tape. Peel it off and stick it to your materials list when you go shopping. Replenish the tape squares as needed.

Seal your plumbing connections. You may not consider yourself a master plumber, but now and then you might make a plumbing connection that you want to be leak-free—say, when you install a new showerhead. So you will want to know about a material that plumbers use anytime they're connecting one pipe to another: joint sealer. This stuff comes in two forms. Teflon tape is a material you wrap around the threads of a pipe. "Pipe dope" is a liquid that you brush onto the threads. These products, available at home improvement stores and hardware stores, prevent leaks by sealing any voids left in the joint, says Chuck McLaughlin, a plumber in Glenside, Pennsylvania.

Put a rust-buster in your toolbox. Collect those little packets of silica gel that come with so many consumer products (sneakers, electronics, medicines, and camera accessories, for instance). The packets are designed to absorb moisture, so they make an excellent rust preventer to toss into your toolbox. When you get a new one, toss out an old one, since they become saturated after a while and will no longer draw the damaging humidity out of your toolbox's interior. If you would rather buy your silica gel, ask for it at a hardware store, a home improvement store, a camera store, or a craft store.

On ladders, let your power tool dangle. Working with power tools on a ladder has its ups and downs. Specifically: You go up the ladder with your power drill to drive some screws. When you need to set the drill down for a moment, you have to go down to the ground again to set it in a safe place. Up and down, up and down. Well, save yourself the steps with this simple trick, says Scott Vincent. When you're at the top of the ladder, tie the cord of the drill around a side support of the ladder, leaving yourself enough slack that you can reach the spots where you need to work. When you're not using the drill, just let it hang along the side of the ladder. It will be right at your fingertips the next time you need it.

Label broad categories on your tool display. Wherever you display your tools on pegboard or shelving, using labels will help ensure that your tools always find their way back to the proper place. Now, quit rolling your eyes—I'm not suggesting that you create a label to go with every screwdriver and pair of pliers. Depending on what kind of work you do around the house, you probably will get away with three to five labels, because we're going to use broad categories for our labels rather than narrow ones—CARPENTRY, PLUMBING, and ELECTRICAL, for instance. When you have your tools clustered and labeled this way in your storage area, anyone in your household who borrows a tool is much more likely to return it to the proper place. Which means that you're much more likely to be able to find it the next time you need it.

"I'm label crazy—I love labels," says Sara Fisher. "Help the homeless items in your home. I have a home, and you have a home—we know where we go. So we've gotta be sure our tools know where they go."

EMERGENCY! 

Spills: A Sticky Solution

A container slipped through your fingers, and now your floor is covered with hundreds of

minuscule objects. Whatever they are—pins, brads, beads, nails—you're envisioning an hour of meticulous work to gather them all up again. But the situation is not really that bad. All you need to do is wrap your hand in tape with the sticky side out—cellophane tape or masking tape will do nicely. Then pat your hand against the errant objects and brush them off into their original box. You'll be done in just minutes.

If the spilled objects are metal, there's another easy alternative: Just drag a magnet over the floor and pick the objects up a score at a time.

A slick way to make screw driving easy. When you have to drive a lot of screws into wood, the friction from the screwdriver can leave your hand raw or even blistered. Making screws easier to drive is simple. Keep an old candle in your toolbox just for this purpose. When you have to drive a screw, rub the candle against its threads first, lubricating the metal. This makes the screw much easier to turn and saves the hands a lot of pain. If you don't have a candle handy, soap will work well, too (but with greater potential to get messy). Or spritz the pilot hole for your screw with spray lubricant.

YOU'VE LEARNED ALL about the home repair cheatin' frame of mind, about selecting and storing your tools, and now you're rarin' to go. Let's move on to some simple and downright sneaky fixes you can make in and around the house.

Furniture: Top-Shelf Shortcuts and Fixes

AS MUCH AS WE MIGHT LOVE OUR FURNITURE, BY ITS VERY NATURE IT INVITES ABUSE. IT'S POSITIONED OUT IN THE OPEN AND GETS SAT ON, BOUNCED ON, SPILLED ON, CLAWED ON, AND BUMPED AROUND BY PASSERSBY. EXPOSURE TO CHEMICALS—AND EVEN SUCH SEEMINGLY BENIGN FACTORS AS LIGHT AND THE SURROUNDING AIR—HEAP STILL MORE DAMAGE ON OUR DEAR FURNITURE. AND ALL THE WHILE HOMEOWNERS GO CRAZY AS THEY WATCH THE BEAUTY, VALUE, AND FUNCTION OF THEIR FURNISHINGS SWIRL DOWN THE DRAIN.

Well, sit back, put your feet up (not on the coffee table, please), and let's review some repair and maintenance shortcuts that will restore your sanity in no time.

Wood Furniture: When Life Goes against the Grain

A lot of our most beautiful and expensive furniture is made of wood. We think of it as hefty and solid, but wood furniture is actually rather sensitive stuff. So as a first step in getting long life out of our furniture, we're going to do something touchy-feely: Sit down on or beside every chair, table, dresser, shelf, and cabinet in the house and feel what they're feeling. Yup, look carefully all around you and think about the close environment of each piece: Is it in direct sunlight? Is it close to a heating or air-conditioning vent? If either is the case, move that piece into a safer spot immediately. The ultraviolet rays in sunlight cause "tremendous fading" in your furniture's finish, says furniture restorer Steve Nearman of The Master's Touch in Fredericksburg, Virginia. Streams of cold and hot air change the humidity around your furniture, too, and that's bad for it. Sure, there are some practical concerns involved, and you'll just have to be inventive. For instance, if your dining-room table and chairs are exposed to bright sunlight, you can't very well move them to another room. However, you may be able to keep the shades drawn in the room during the day. Also, try this trick: Simply turn the table and rotate the chairs every few weeks, so at least the colors will change evenly.

Refinish? Scratch that idea. The best fix for deep gouges and scratches in wood furniture is simple and fun: Pull out a ninety-six-count box of crayons and start coloring, recommends Tim Puro, owner of Monroe Furniture Restoration in Bloomington, Indiana. Professional repairers use special wax fillers to do these fixes, but a big box of crayons from the kids' aisle of a discount store will work just fine. Such collections contain many of the same colors as the pros use, he says. Select the color that most closely matches the wood, and hold the crayon so your finger is near the tip and the crayon is nearly horizontal with the wood. Rub the colored stick back and forth across the crevice in the wood, so the edges scrape wax off the crayon. Keep going until you

have *over*filled the gouge, Puro emphasizes.

Now take a credit card from your wallet (or take one of those fake credit cards that the companies send you in the mail every day) and scrape it over the top of the repaired spot to remove any wax bulging out of the gouge. This will leave you with a perfectly smooth, color-matched spot where the defect was just moments before.

If using crayons makes you feel a little childish, a device called a stain pen will disguise the shallower scratches in your wood furniture. Pick one up in a matching color at your hardware store or home improvement store, and use that to darken the scratch.

Stash some “gold” in the pantry. Here’s the other way to insure your furniture and other woodwork against scratches and gouges: Put a can of scratch remover on your shopping list the next time you visit a home improvement store, and tuck it away in an accessible cabinet, says “Handyman Scott” Kropnick. (His favorite brand is Scott’s Liquid Gold.) Scratch remover is a polish you apply to nicked wood with a soft rag. The polish adds a slightly darker tone to the wood, filling in the bright mark of a scratch with disguising color.

Rub away water rings. Ouch! An oafish guest set down an iced tea glass on your tabletop, and it left a water ring. Or perhaps you did it. All that matters is knowing how to get that blemish out. For starters, look at the color. If it’s white, it’s fixable. The moisture has penetrated the finish and forced apart its molecules, creating little bubbles of moisture or air, says Richard Bullock, owner of Bullock’s Furniture Restoration in Odenton, Maryland. If the ring is dark, the water penetrated the wood and you either have a lengthy project on your hands or your favorite furniture repair professional does.

All you need to do is warm the white ring to melt those bubbles out of the finish. Squirt on a dab of nongel toothpaste, and aggressively buff it onto the ring with a rag. The toothpaste isn’t magic—it’s just transferring the heat from the rag to the tabletop, Bullock says. When the white in the wood is gone, you’re finished.

If you don’t have toothpaste, or don’t enjoy buffing, you can use a hair dryer to heat the ring. Be careful with this approach, however—hair dryers can easily get hot enough to damage the finish. Spread your fingers and hold your hand so the dryer blows between your thumb and forefinger onto the blemish. If the air gets too hot for your hand, then you know it’s too hot for the furniture as well, Bullock says.

Or coast right past those water rings. We love our party guests dearly, of course, but the problem is that those who have drinks in their hands, by definition, have been drinking. And often they don’t bother searching for coasters when they want to set down those drinks. A guest who doesn’t find one quickly is likely to put his glass right on your tabletop, where it could leave an unsightly ring. The solution, says furniture restorer Tim Puro, is to liberally distribute coasters around your home before guests arrive, and point them out as you’re serving drinks. That’s much easier than restoring your furniture’s finish the next day.

Get steamed up over furniture dings. Oops—you dropped a casserole dish on the kitchen table. Oops—your child slammed a toy dump truck onto the coffee table in a moment of overexuberance. Now that perfectly smooth surface is marred by a dent. If the dent didn’t break the surface of the wood, all you have to do is steam it out, says Craig Veters of the Chair Dr. in Evansville, Indiana.

If you have a steamer—the kind you see advertised on television for steaming clothes or