

# DIY FYI

To do it yourself, or not to do it yourself. It's the question that precedes every home remodeling project. We talked to a DIY guru and local contractors to help you decide which projects you may be able to tackle, and the ones best left to the pros.

by **Tori Woods**

**H**ome remodeling can be immensely rewarding. What homeowner doesn't want to increase the value and enjoyment of her home? And in recent years, more homeowners have been encouraged to try it themselves, prodded by a slew of television shows extolling how much a homeowner can do for a little money and a little skill. But it's the "little skill" portion of that equation that can get you in trouble, leading to unexpected, unwelcome expenditures and loads of stress. Depending on your patience level and experience, some jobs you really can do yourself, and some are best left to the professionals — the trick is knowing the difference. Tim Baker, an independent contractor for The Home Depot, who runs clinics and workshops at the chain's Pearl Road location in Strongsville, gives us the lowdown on 10 popular home remodeling projects. We then asked an assortment of local contractors to weigh in on when it's time to call in the big guns.

## 1. Removing wallpaper and repainting a room

**What's involved:** Stripping wallpaper should be fairly easy. It involves a process of scoring the paper and using a liquid or steamer to loosen the adhesive so you can scrape it off. After that, it's a matter of priming and painting.

**DIY skill level:** Medium

**Tip from the DIY pro:** Work slowly and steadily.

**Hidden dangers:** If the wallpaper was applied without proper preparation, chunks of drywall can come off too.

**When to hire a contractor:** If wallpaper is laid on top of plaster it is very difficult to remove yourself.



**Advantages of hiring a contractor:** "Your free time is valuable now," says Mike Roesch from Blonders Paint & Wallpaper in North Olmsted. "If you can afford to hire someone to do it, that would be the way. It gives you more time to enjoy things you like to do."

## 2. Replacing kitchen counters

**What's involved:** Tearing out old counters and installing new ones. The difficulty depends on the size and configuration of your counters, as well as your skill and confidence with a saw.

**DIY skill level:** Medium

**Tip from the DIY pro:** When cutting a hole for your sink, make sure you have the pattern for the actual sink you're using, don't guess. Ask the store where you bought the counters to cut it for you.

**Hidden dangers:** Make sure you use the right screw when you attach the counter — just one accidental too-long screw and your nice, flawless surface is shot.

**When to hire a contractor:** If you want to use many high-end materials, such as stone, you'll need a contractor. Same thing if you have U-shaped counters, curved angles or multiple 45-degree angles.

**Advantages of hiring a contractor:** Pointing out that DIYers might not

have the equipment to best remove the old countertops, as well as the technical knowledge to troubleshoot problems, Roger Jackson of Cleveland Tile & Cabinet thinks it best to have a contractor be responsible for both the product and labor. "It's advantageous to have one company for all the work and all the materials. If you have a problem, there's no finger-pointing," he says.

## 3. Replacing kitchen cabinetry

**What's involved:** After measuring and measuring and re-measuring, pick the cabinets you want and determine the sizes you need. Find the studs in the wall and mount the cabinets.

**DIY skill level:** Medium to hard

**Tip from the DIY pro:** Measure out and draw the actual dimensions of the cabinets on your wall. This will ensure that everything fits and is where you want it.

**Hidden dangers:** Even walls built by the best carpenters may eventually develop "bellies" — areas where the wall is no longer straight. Since cabinetry is so visible and right at eye level, it's especially important to make sure its all straight and even, which requires extra attention and work.

**When to hire a contractor:** If the plans are very complicated with tons of cup-



boards of different sizes and different angles or if a more customized kitchen design is desired.

**Advantages of hiring a contractor:** "It's important to have a qualified person install cabinetry, regardless of the price of cabinet, if it's stock-built or custom," says Bob Somrak of Somrak Kitchens in Westlake and Bedford Heights. "We have been asked to look at jobs where a friend has installed cabinets and the doors were out of plumb, the drawers didn't close perfectly or were askew. Cabinets were

pulling from the wall and the countertop was not lined up. ... Installation is extremely important."

#### 4. Installing a closet organization system

**What's involved:** You can take a hohum closet and turn it into a dream space. You're limited only by space and budget.

**DIY skill level:** Easy

**Tip from the DIY pro:** This one will earn bonus points from the wife, for

sure. Baker estimates his missus stores more than 100 pairs of shoes in the closet he remodeled for her.

**Hidden dangers:** It's all about studs. Keep in mind the pieces you install will have extra weight on them, so either anchor to a wall stud or install a support board.

**When to hire a contractor:** If you are looking for more detailed, custom-built pieces, especially for larger closet spaces.

**Advantages of hiring a contractor:** Some companies, such as Closet Factory, offer one-stop shopping with design, manufacturing and installation services. Such companies might think of new concepts a DIYer might not have considered. "We'll bring our ideas to what the clients' needs are," says Bob Pietrick from Closet Factory in Cleveland. "There's a vast array of options we have in material, finishes and accessories."

#### 5. Updating your bathroom

**What's involved in the project:** Without gutting the entire bathroom, you can spruce it up quite nicely with a new vanity, tub or shower — or all three. Remov-



ing the old toilet and vanity, and either removing the tub or placing a covering over it, are options.

**DIY skill level:** Medium to hard

**Tip from the DIY pro:** Plumbing can be very interesting, especially in older homes. Do tons of research before fussing with your plumbing — read books, attend clinics or classes, and consult people in the know to avoid a catastrophe.

**Hidden dangers:** Go figure, bathrooms are the moistest rooms in the house, meaning that walls behind showers and vanities can be moldy and mildewy. You'll want to replace or repair these, don't just use a cosmetic fix.

**When to hire a contractor:** If you're not an old hand with the plumbing and you lack the patience to learn how to do things correctly. Also, if you get into copper pipe and soldering territory, you're really going to want a pro to avoid extremely expensive mishaps.

**Advantages of hiring a contractor:** Toilet bowls can leak if not installed properly, sewage gas can leak when removing a toilet if not handled correctly, and splitting water lines can be a problem for novices. "You could get yourself in trouble real quick if you don't know what you're doing," says Greg Faustina of Plumbing Source, headquartered in Bedford Heights. "There's a risk that a homeowner won't recognize a problem and know to call a professional."

#### 6. Ceramic tiling of bathroom/kitchen

**What's involved in the project:** Ceramic tiling requires patience and willingness to learn, as well as technical skill and precision. The Home Depot's most popular clinics are on the subject of ceramic tiling, and if you can learn how to do it correctly, you'll be in high demand among neighbors and relatives. It's best to learn the laying and grouting skills on a small, more manageable space first, like a bathroom.

**DIY skill level:** Hard

**Tip from the DIY pro:** "I tell people there are three T's to ceramic tiling: tedious, tenacious and tire-some," Baker says. Read the books, watch the videos — and then you should come into the store with at least a dozen questions.

**Hidden dangers:** If you mix your grout on different days, odds are your grout will be different colors. Use a pre-



mixed grout to ensure consistent color, or make sure you measure your water to grout mix ratio extremely precisely.

**When to hire a contractor:** If your room is large, if the tiles aren't manufactured material and therefore perfectly even, if the project will require lots of cut tiles, if you're not a patient person.

**Advantages of hiring a contractor:** Roger Jackson of Cleveland Tile & Cabinet says it can take years to become a great ceramic tile layer. It's very difficult to make sure every tile is evenly spaced and level. There are other, less obvious perils, such as subflooring that will shift or bow under the weight of tile. "You want someone who knows what to look for. Usually you don't feel it, it's so minor and subtle," Jackson says. "The tile has a nice solid feel, but it's not really solid. There can be all kinds of problems."

## 7. Recarpeting a room

**What's involved in the project:** After pulling up the old carpet, you'll need to lay the padding and the carpeting, then stretch and affix it to the floor correctly using different tools.

**DIY skill level:** Medium

**Tip from the DIY pro:** Make it a family affair and get your kids involved — they can help with certain parts.

**Hidden dangers:** Seams. Try to have seams in inconspicuous locations, like closets, whenever possible. If you can't, explore all your seaming options and make it perfect. You don't want one wonky seam to ruin all your hard work.

**When to hire a contractor:** If it's a real-

ly big room, requires odd shapes and lots of seams, or you're doing stairs.

**Advantages of hiring a contractor:** Jerry Cohen, CEO of Carpet Capitol, a fourth-generation Cleveland carpet source, provides carpets to DIYers and offers an installation service. He says many projects are great for self-installation, but some projects can be too complicated. It can be more expensive to fix mistakes than to have it done cor-



rectly the first time. "The perception that people can save money by not purchasing an installation package is not true in all cases," Cohen says. "It's actually more cost effective to have the job done. A job done in a substandard way is never right, nor is it a bargain."

## 8. Remodeling a stairway

**What's involved in the project:** A new railing, new flooring on the stairs or new actual steps can be installed. Baker recommends DIYers try small flights of steps first.

**DIY skill level:** Hard

**Tip from the DIY pro:** When you're coming into the store, bring a photo of the stairs in addition to measurements, so everyone is on the same page.

**Hidden dangers:** If you don't support it properly, there can be a wobble or even worse, it could collapse when someone puts weight on it.

**When to hire a contractor:** If your stairway is higher than 8 feet, or your railing has lots of angles.

**Advantages of hiring a contractor:** Patrick Hurst, of Hurst Construction Inc.



in Middleburg Heights, says customers want stairs that are aesthetically pleasing, functional and safe. Stairs also have to be up to building codes. "Stairs and railings are generally toward the front of home, a public area, the first thing guests see. You really want the quality and craftsmanship at a higher level," Hurst says. "You don't want to build stairs or railings wrong. That's dangerous. Railings need to be sturdy."

## 9. Drywalling a room

**What's involved in the project:** If you want to finish your basement or similar space, you'll need to stud the walls and install the drywall, then prime and paint.

**DIY skill level:** Medium

**Tip from the DIY pro:** Get a buddy for this one — drywall sheets are large and heavy. And don't forget to sand when you're done.

**Hidden dangers:** Make sure the two-by-fours you choose for your studs are as

straight as possible. When you're in the store, hold them up and look down the length to make sure it's not off. Otherwise, your drywall won't match up and your seams will be even more difficult.

**When to hire a contractor:** If the room is big, or you're not confident in your precision, call in the experts.

**Advantages of hiring a contractor:** "The quality will be much better, the time would be shorter," says Glenn Bickens of A1 Olmsted Drywall in Olmsted Falls. "You don't want the walls to fall down."

## 10. Plumbing an extra bathroom

**What's involved in the project:** Adding a bathroom will add value — and convenience — to your home. Installing a half bath in the basement would be great for a rec room or kids' playroom, and would mean installing a toilet and sink.

**DIY skill level:** Medium to hard

**Tip from the DIY pro:** Consider flood-safe lines, which can prevent a tiny leak from becoming a big problem.

**Hidden dangers:** Expect the unexpected in plumbing — if you're not comfortable with basic plumbing, you don't want to fiddle with this project. It's not for novices.

**When to hire a contractor:** If there's concrete cutting and rerouting of plumbing and for sanitation reasons.

**Advantages of hiring a contractor:** Patrick Hurst of Hurst Construction in Middleburg Heights thinks that sanitary reasons are a very important reason to contemplate a contractor. "I've gone into added bathrooms that were done incorrectly. You get a little bit of sewer smell. It's faint, something people don't notice after a period of time, but it can be there if it's not vented correctly," Hurst says. "I think homeowners should at least consult construction professionals before deciding to do something like this on their own." ♦

"The quality will be much better," Glenn Bickens says of hiring a pro to drywall a room. "You don't want the walls to fall down."