



If I Had a Hammer

MORE THAN 100 EASY FIXES AND WEEKEND PROJECTS



Andrea Ridout

Host of the *Ask Andrea* Radio Show

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 HarperCollins e-books

*Dedicated to my family and friends—
most of whom helped with this book.
Without them, I would not be here.*

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foreword

by Ed Del Grande, Host of Ed the Plumber on the DIY Network

I always say that first impressions are the best guide to know what a person is really like. So far, Andrea has made two very good impressions on me since we've known each other. Andrea and I met a few years ago over the phone, and to this day we have maintained a close friendship. At our first meeting, she was kind enough to invite me to be on her radio show, and I was expecting the interview to be like a standard radio interview. Usually the guest stands by while the host does a lot of talking, and every now and then the host will ask the guest a question. Boy was I wrong! Andrea welcomed me like part of her family and was well informed about our subject. Then she practically turned the show over to me, letting me talk one-on-one with her audience, becoming a listener herself. It is very uncommon to work with a host who is so giving, and my first impression was "what a kind and confident person this is." In our many radio interviews since then, I realized my first impression was right on the money!

The second very good impression that Andrea made was when she recently sent me an unpublished copy of this book to read. What follows is my actual e-mail that I sent her after I started to read the book. I think this letter says it all:

Hi Andrea, I already started to skim through your book and my first impression is, "Hey, this is Andrea talking to me." I know we have been friends for a few years now and we have a mutual respect and admiration for each other. Because of that, I always expect the very best from you. However, this is a breath of fresh air to see that you write as you speak and your wonderful personality comes through with words as it does when we talk over the phone. This is a gift that many people in our business cannot achieve: the ability to mix good information with a real down-to-earth personality. I look forward to continued reading and seeing what other surprises you have in store for me!

Sincerely, Ed

After I wrote the e-mail, I continued to read Andrea's book. The more I absorbed, the more I appreciated the technical aspects of the projects. For instance, when Andrea tells us how to change a faucet, she not only goes over the installation instructions, she also teaches us how to choose the right faucet for the job. From a Master Plumber's point of view, this is key information that most "How-to" books overlook. Another example is the simple but very effective tips contained throughout the manuscript—such as the little known tip about pressure treated wood. Andrea tells us that most pressure treated wood is not really waterproof, and a wood sealer or stain should be applied for proper waterproofing protection. This is all valuable information that every homeowner needs, and Andrea tells it like it is.

This is how I feel about Andrea, and I want to add something very special to what I've told you so far. ~~As of yet, Andrea and I have never met in person. Eventually our travel paths will cross and when that happens, I know I'm going to get a very good third impression from Andrea!~~

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introduction

As I sit in my office typing this, I look around at the myriad of unopened boxes of brass hinges, wrenches, toilet seats, window film, a sack of paint rollers, and a pile of cordless drills. The pockets of my overalls bulge with the usual: leftover washers, cabinet knobs, and screwdriver tips. My overalls are my standard uniform—I have more pairs of them than I have blue jeans! Not that I’m complaining. In truth, I love it. I host a home improvement radio show, you see, so I live and breathe this stuff 24/7.

How did I ever get so hooked on the “do-it-yourself” bug? How can I explain a lifetime obsession with home improvement products and processes and the people who make and use them? I think the addiction can be blamed on my parents. They restored a Victorian house in Connerville, Indiana, during the mid 1960s when I was just a wee lassie. Well, I say that *they* restored the house, but that’s not really the truth...all of us kids were expected to help, too. From my brother Jim and my sisters, Kate and Christy, who were in high school, to Phil, who was in junior high, and finally down to me, just a grade-schooler at the time—we all learned how to use hammers, drills, and other tools with aplomb. Through all the smashed fingers and spilled paint, my parents were reasonably patient teachers. They must have been, because I do not think Valium was invented yet. Though we children might have contributed to some of our parent’s gray hairs, I look back on those days with fondness. I could drive a nail long before I could drive a car. It was great fun.

Just as many people do, after we fully restored the house and got it just perfect...we moved. And not just around the block—but all the way to Texas. But we brought the do-it-yourself legacy with us. By the time we were able to say “Howdy, ya’ll,” my folks had bought another house and we all helped to fix it up, too, sometimes with a bit too much enthusiasm. One weekend when my parents were on a trip, my sister and I painted all of my mom’s Duncan Phyfe mahogany furniture bright orange. Are you cringing yet? Well, believe it or not, she loved it. It was the 1970s, after all.

As an adult, I ended up owning a hardware store that specialized in products for antiques and old houses. The more I learned about history and hardware, the more of a purist I became. So eventually the orange paint had to go and my mom’s furniture was refinished back to its original mahogany red. This is just a small example of how tastes change and why one should always think before buying orange paint.

In my hardware store, I developed a love of gizmos, gauges, and gadgets. And as I became more proficient at using them, I wanted to help my friends and family enjoy these wonders of the modern world, too. When my inner circle got tired of listening to me, I began a home improvement radio show. I love to pass on what I have learned to anyone who asks for help. That’s why the show is called *Ask Andrea*. So be careful what you ask me. I may give you an earful.

For instance, I went to a friend’s 1950s home not too long ago and noticed that many of her glass

doorknobs were loose. She was frustrated that they kept falling off and some had even been broken. In no time, I scooted from door to door, adjusting each knob and tightening all of the setscrews. An easy job for anyone who has done it before, but she thought I had worked a miracle. Before leaving, I gave her a quick lesson on what to do if the knobs ever fell off again. My friend was so excited that she suggested I write a book full of tips for fellow homeowners on making simple home repairs. She may have just been trying to get rid of me, but in any case, *If I Had a Hammer* was born. As the sixties song by Peter, Paul and Mary implies, if I had a hammer (or a screwdriver) I could accomplish quite a bit, and it's really true.

So here it is: this book is my advice to you as one friend to another. In it, I've assembled many of my favorite do-it-yourself projects—some that can be accomplished in short bursts, many in one hour or less. You'll find an assortment of preventative measures that can keep small problems from becoming bigger ones. For larger issues, I'll walk you through how to resolve them as quickly and as comfortably (on you and your pocketbook) as possible. You'll also find many fun decorative projects too. So whether you're fixing or updating your home, you'll find plenty of ideas to suit your needs.

While I have been a do-it-yourselfer since I was young, I am constantly learning new ideas and techniques. That is why I invited many of my friends—the experts who visit on my radio show each week—to contribute their suggestions here, too. I've also highlighted some of my favorite tools and products throughout each chapter. To help you decide which projects you'll want to take on yourself, I've applied a rating system of one to five hammers, with one being the easiest and five the most challenging. If you are a newcomer to home improvement, you might want to start with one- or two-hammer projects and then gradually tackle more complicated tasks. In truth, there's no rhyme or reason to the selection of projects included here. It's much like my radio show in that it is a potpourri of ideas. But I hope that you'll find a few to suit your needs and maybe have some fun along the way.

Doing your own home repairs, maintenance, and improvements is not rocket science (or brain surgery, for all of you rocket scientists out there). Simple instructions coupled with the right tools can save you hundreds, even thousands, of dollars and lots of hassle. Plus, you'll be building memories with your family and friends that can last a lifetime, like I have done for years. So grab your hammer, keep reading, and let the repairs begin.

the right tool for the right job

Tips, Tools, and Techniques to Get the Job Done Right

The big secret in life is that there is no big secret. Whatever your goal, you can get there if you're willing to work.

—OPRAH WINFREY

Whether you are replacing a broken tile, regluing a wobbly chair frame, or waterproofing a deck, to complete any home maintenance project correctly and efficiently, you need the right tools. Half the fun of working around the house is learning to use the gizmos and gadgets that help you achieve your goal.

We'll begin this chapter with my picks for the top-ten household tools that everyone should have, then we'll pull together a basic home repair kit that all do-it-yourselfers need. We'll also go over a few safety suggestions and troubleshooting ideas. For all you old-home restorers, we'll discuss some of the do's and don'ts of getting the most out of your historical location. And while you may want to conquer many home improvement projects yourself, we'll address when, why, and how to hire a contractor—just in case you need some professional help along the way.

- ▶ Household Tools 101
- ▶ Project: Assembling an Everyday Home Repair Kit
- ▶ One-Hour Wonder: Create an Instructional-Booklet Binder
- ▶ Safety First
- ▶ Ladder Safety
- ▶ Learning to Use Glues and Adhesives
- ▶ Stain-Removing Solutions
- ▶ The Cost vs. the Value of Home Improvements
- ▶ Do's and Don'ts for Restoring Older Homes
- ▶ Tips for Do-It-Yourselfers
- ▶ If You Decide to Hire a Contractor

Andrea's Choice: An Instant Rubber Grip

One of the most popular products that I demo on TV has been the AirGrip Cold-Shrink Handle Wrap from Stiletto Tools. This nifty rubber covering is stretched tightly over a coiled installation tube. Slip the whole assembly over almost any tool handle, pull the coiled tube out, and the grip shrinks to fit without actually gluing the rubber to the handle. I have used it on several antique tools because it covers and protects the old wooden handles but does not damage the vintage value. And the tacky grip won't slip off in wet or humid conditions. It can be used on wheelbarrows, shovels, picks, posthole diggers, hammers, screwdrivers, and even flashlights. www.StilettoTools.com



Household Tools 101

Buying the right tools can be a daunting experience. Walking into one of the many huge home improvement stores with brand names blaring their messages at you can alarm even the most experienced tool owner. I myself have collected a huge assortment of gadgets over the years, some of which I have never used. I even have a few hand-me-down items that look more like torture devices than practical tools. So don't fret if you're sometimes baffled by a tool's appearance or function. I've compiled a list of the top-ten must-have tools every household should have, whether you are a newcomer to doing it yourself or an old hand.

1. Hammer

If I had a hammer, I'd hammer in the morning, at noon, and at night. In fact, the hammer is one of the most used tools in any home. Abraham Maslow, the great psychologist, said, "If the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail." Perhaps that's true, but it would sure be hard to accomplish much around the house without this basic tool. For everyday tasks, I keep a small 7-to 10-ounce household model in my kitchen tool drawer and a midsized, 14-to 16-ounce version in the garage tool kit. Depending on your needs, you may also want a large carpenter's hammer for jobs like deck building or wall framing. Though hammers are simplistic in theory, there are many new hammer technologies on the market, ranging from those with tuning forks in the handle, which cut down the reverberation on your arm, to \$200 contractor models made with titanium heads.



Before you buy, visit your local hardware store or home center and try out several types of hammers until you find one that's a good fit for you, especially if you will be using it frequently. If you're going to be hammering above your head or in a strange position, look for a hammer with a magnetic nail-holder in the tip that makes a hard-to-reach place much more accessible. Specialty hammers such as a rubber mallet and sledgehammer can also be useful for certain projects. Rubber

mallets should be used on materials that are easily damaged or broken, such as a brass faucet handle or a tile backsplash. And a sledgehammer is just the ticket when extreme muscle is needed for jobs such as breaking apart a sidewalk or tearing down a wall.



2. Screwdriver

Probably the second most-used tools in the home, good quality screwdrivers can be lifesavers. To save money, instead of buying several versions, choose models that have a center shaft with four interchangeable tips (including a smaller and larger size of both flathead and Phillips-head tips) to accommodate a wide variety of jobs. You may also want some mini screwdrivers for use on toys and computers or even your glasses. Battery-powered versions can make repetitive jobs a snap. A cordless drill can also double as a power screwdriver if you have the screw tips to go along with it.



3. Cordless Drill

A cordless drill with a variety of drill bits can help you complete many jobs more quickly and easily. Look for a drill that fits your hand comfortably and feels well balanced. If you have room, keep a small drill (under 10 volts) in the kitchen and a larger model (18 volts or more) in the garage. A fast-charging battery (one hour or less) is also convenient. If you use your drill a lot, you may want to keep a spare battery or two in reserve. Some manufacturers now make batteries that can fit several tools interchangeably, going from a drill to a sander or a circular saw, thereby saving you money on duplicate power packs.



4. Saws

A small hacksaw and a cordless circulating saw can be extremely useful. Hacksaws are just right for cutting small tubing or wood projects. I keep a small cordless power saw in the garage for cutting plywood, paneling, and other thin materials. I save my larger corded model for projects like deck building and wall framing. Another handy tool is a reciprocating saw. This bad boy is like an alligator cutting through almost any material with no discrimination. They are very handy for hard-to-reach spots and demolition. Just be sure to follow all safety instructions carefully and keep all saws out of reach of kids. Another tip: before sawing, spread a drop cloth out under your work area to make cleanup easier.



5. Measuring Tape or Yardstick

Measuring tapes come in many different lengths and widths. You'll want to keep a 16-foot tape in the kitchen and a 25-foot tape in the garage tool kit. It's handy to have both inch and metric measurement scales, which are usually found on the same tape. Choose a tape measure that is strong enough to support its own weight when extended at least 3 to 4 feet away from your body. A stiff tape can be useful when you're measuring across a room, since it basically guides itself. Check out the new electric versions that extend and retract automatically, which are especially useful when you need an extra hand. A yardstick can double as a tape measure, plus it makes a good straightedge for hanging wallpaper and other decor.





6. Level

Whether you choose a laser level or the old-fashioned bubble variety, a good level is essential for hanging pictures, bookshelves, wallpaper, and curtains. Laser levels which use a beam of light to form an absolutely straight line can also be used in place of a chalk line to set tile, carpet squares and other flat materials that must stay along a straight path.



7. Pliers and Wrenches

Every home needs a pair of slip-joint and needle-nose pliers. Needle-nosed pliers feature a long nose that can reach into tight spaces. Most versions also sport a handy wire cutter. Standard slip-joint pliers are made to grip nuts and other objects to tighten or loosen them. Another handy plier is a groove-joint plier, which has wide jaws that can grip larger items.



As for wrenches, the grip-type wrench, featuring a rubber belt or strap that wraps around an object, is quite handy for jobs such as opening a jar or loosening faucet handles. The straps and grips can be used on delicate surfaces, without scratching. New versions of wrenches that have multiple pins inside of a socket or “head” can adjust to fit various nuts and bolts and other irregular shapes. Since

they are infinitely changeable, you can use them on multiple sizes of jobs, particularly if a bolt head has been stripped or is hard to reach, such as in a tight corner. However, if you only have room for one wrench in your home, make it an adjustable spanner, also known as a Crescent wrench, just like your grandpa had in his toolbox. They are still quite handy for a wide variety of jobs.



8. Staple/Nail Gun

A cordless or manual staple or nail gun is very useful for upholstery, curtains, and even home crafts. Choose a small model that is rated for household use and be sure that you can operate it, especially if your hands are not very strong. More than once, I've had to use someone else's staple gun, and it has left me with an aching hand and wrist. Cordless, powered guns are extremely helpful, as they can usually dispense staples and small nails, and have become quite affordable. I also recommend keeping a hammer around when using any type of nail or staple gun, to pound in those stubborn holdouts that need to be shown who's boss.



9. Glue Gun

Any crafter will tell you that a glue gun is indispensable for hobbies and many home repairs. Choose a model that uses 1/2-inch glue sticks, because they're suitable for both small and large jobs. I admit, the newer cordless glue guns are quite convenient, but they may not be able to keep up with high-capacity usage, so for all of you serious hobbyists out there, I'd stick with the traditional version. Pay attention to the types of glue sticks that you purchase, too, because they are rated for various types of projects. You don't want to use wood-rated glue sticks on a scrapbooking project.



10. Utility Knife

A utility knife is a must for trimming vinyl floor tile, wallpaper, leather, and carpeting. There are

many great versions on the market, some with a light to help guide your cuts and several with built-in blade storage. Modern blade technology has produced versions that can last up to ten times longer than older models. When laying carpet or vinyl flooring or doing other repetitive cutting jobs, you want the blades to last as long as possible. Break-off-blade models are less expensive and will work quite well on thinner materials. Just remember, when handling any kind of utility knife, always stroke the knife away from your body.

While you're tool shopping, pick up an assortment of protective gear, such as goggles, glasses, earplugs, gloves, an apron, kneepads, and a sun-shading hat to keep your head properly covered and ventilated while working outdoors. You might also want to invest in a tool belt to keep things close at hand while you work.

PROJECT: ASSEMBLING AN EVERYDAY HOME REPAIR KIT

Level of difficulty: 7

When a repair is required, nothing is more frustrating than searching in vain for the proper screwdriver or wrench. Giving tools a proper place in the home can be a real time-saver when a problem arises. Most of us hide our tools in the garage or basement, but I recommend keeping an everyday tool kit in a drawer in your kitchen or laundry room for problems that arise on a regular basis.

You will need:

- ✓ A drawer in the kitchen or laundry room
- ✓ An assortment of essential tools
- ✓ Labels and a permanent marker

1. ORGANIZE THE DRAWER SPACE. Make a list of tools and tidbits you use frequently (each of us has our own needs, but many items are universal: see my suggested checklist in step 2), then divide the drawer into segments accordingly. If you don't want to spend money on organizers, just look around the house. An old plastic silverware tray can find new life as a tool holder and a discarded plastic egg tray makes the perfect nut and screw sorter. Select a square cookie tin or large margarine tub for bottles of glue and other liquids.

2. GATHER ALL YOUR ESSENTIAL TOOLS. Set aside the items you already have from the list you made in step 1 and then go shopping for the remainder. Here's a suggested checklist for what you might keep in a kitchen or laundry room kit.

- ▶ Small, 7-to 10-ounce hammer
- ▶ Multitip screwdriver

- ▶ Cordless screwdriver or mini cordless drill
-
- ▶ Mini screwdriver set—for toys, eyeglasses, and computers
 - ▶ 16-foot measuring tape
 - ▶ Ruler
 - ▶ Superglue
 - ▶ White glue
 - ▶ Glue gun and glue sticks
 - ▶ Assorted pliers
 - ▶ Adjustable wrench
 - ▶ Grip-type wrench
 - ▶ Picture hangers and cup hooks
 - ▶ Various nails and screws
 - ▶ Duct tape
 - ▶ Carpenter's pencil or marker
 - ▶ Bubble level and small laser level
 - ▶ Heavy, good-quality scissors
 - ▶ Safety glasses or goggles
 - ▶ Goo Gone or other adhesive remover
 - ▶ Small flashlight
 - ▶ Light-duty extension cord
 - ▶ Assorted spring clamps and spring clothespins
 - ▶ Velcro strips and/or other items that you use frequently

Quick Tip: A Lifesaving Tool



What tool can be your best friend? The humble flashlight. Although it is one of the most overlooked gadgets in the toolbox, don't take it for granted: it may save your life, or at least your sanity, during a power failure. Locate the flashlight in a place where you can easily find it in the dark. Every few months, make sure its batteries are fresh and your bulb is good. Keep a spare bulb and extra batteries on hand as well. Ask yourself if the light is bright enough to help you find those extra blankets stored in the basement on cold nights. It's also wise to keep a rechargeable flashlight or two plugged in at key areas in the home, such as in the kitchen and near the breaker box. For homes with kids or older folks, choose models that light up automatically during a power failure. Some flashlights can even be shaken to recharge the batteries in an emergency. These are great for situations in which you might not think about changing the batteries often or where recharging is difficult. I store one in my car glove compartment, and it has proven to be invaluable several times. (Resource: Paul and Kerri

3. LABEL EACH TOOL. Be sure to label everything with a permanent marker or labels that say “Kitchen Tool Drawer” or other location to help each item find its way back after use. Another idea is to paint the household tools a bright color, such as fire engine red, and be sure that everyone in the household knows that the red tools always go back into the kitchen drawer (or whatever the location). Yet another idea is to label the inside of the drawer itself or trace around each tool’s location with a permanent marker so it is obvious when it has been left out of the drawer: like a crime scene and you have to find the culprit! ■

ONE-HOUR WONDER: CREATE AN INSTRUCTIONAL-BOOKLET BINDER

If you’re one of those people who can never find the instruction sheets or booklets when you need them for appliances, tools, and toys, you’re not alone. We all seem to keep them in the wrong place or optimistically throw them away, assuming the item will never break. To avoid future frustration, create an instructional binder for storing them all in one place. Buy a brightly colored three-ring binder and fill it with clear plastic sheet protectors. Then simply place each booklet and assembly instructions in its own protector. Keep warranty cards and original store receipts there as well to make repair claims easier. Label the edge, front, and back of the binder so that it’s obvious what’s inside. Find a centralized spot to store it and you’ll always have the info that you need when you need it. I keep mine with my cookbooks in the kitchen.■

***Quick Tip:* Handy Multitools**



Keep a few all-in-one multitools in strategic locations around the house for quick fixes. A multitool usually consists of a screwdriver, a knife, a corkscrew, and other tools in a handy gadget that often looks like a large pocketknife. One version even has a small hammer on the end. I stash one in the glove box of my car for those on-the-go problems. Multitools can be a real time-saver when a simple repair is needed. Just be sure to keep them out of reach of children.



Safety First

Any time you are doing any kind of home improvement, safety must be your primary concern.

Invincibility and manual labor do not go together. My friends from DoItYourself.com offer the following advice for avoiding accidents when working with tools.

1. Wear protective glasses or goggles when using power tools, and when chiseling, sanding, scraping or hammering, especially if you wear contact lenses.
2. Wear ear protectors when using power tools, since many operate at noise levels that damage hearing.
3. Tie long hair back and do not wear loose clothing or long necklaces or scarves that might get caught in tools.
4. Wear the proper respirator or face mask when sanding, sawing, or using substances with toxic fumes. Try to do all of these projects outside or in a well-ventilated area.
5. Keep blades sharp. A dull blade requires excessive force and is therefore more likely to slip and cause accidents.
6. Always use the appropriate tool for the job.
7. Repair or discard tools with cracks in the wooden handles or chips in the metal parts, as they may fail and cause injury.
8. Don't drill, shape, or saw anything that isn't firmly and properly secured.
9. Take care when storing oily rags, which can spontaneously combust (I am completely serious—it's not as cool as it sounds).
10. Don't abuse your tools. They have feelings, too.
11. Keep a first-aid kit on hand.
12. Don't work with tools if you are tired or under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Power tools are like cars in this way, except you generally escape with your life from tool accidents.
13. Read the owner's manual for all tools and know the proper use of each.
14. Keep all tools out of reach of small children.
15. Unplug all power tools when changing settings or parts.

Quick Tip: Don't Lose Those Tools!



Have you wondered what to do with unusual wrenches or other gadgets that are supplied with furniture

kits, toys, or other products? Don't throw them away! You may need that unique tool someday for repairs or disassembly. Wrap a piece of tape around one end of the tool and use a permanent marker to identify it. Then create a section of your toolbox for all of these "special" gadgets. Another idea is to seal it in a zippered plastic bag and tack or tape it to the back of the furniture it came with so you have it when you need it.

Ladder Safety

According to the American Ladder Institute, close to two hundred thousand ladder accidents occur in the United States each year. Don't become a statistic. Follow these simple tips and stay safe.

Quick Tip: Tools for Less Common Jobs



When serious repairs are needed or it's time for a heavy-duty project, be sure that you have the proper tools to do the job right. When you use the correct gear, you will not only complete the work more quickly and safely, but your finished product will have a more professional look and feel.

Large tools (as well as extras of your everyday tools) can be stored in a garage, basement, or shed. Choose a cool, dry spot, out of the reach of small children. Avoid moisture, which can cause surface rust and damage to motorized equipment, as well as excessive heat, which can deteriorate rubber and plastic parts over time. It's best to keep your tools as close to a normal room temperature as is possible. Tall, roll-around tool cabinets are a convenient way to hold everything you need. I purchased one recently that features a removable top portion that is a small toolbox itself. When you just need a few tools or want to tote them around, you just snap it apart and take the top with you. You might also select a smaller model on casters or just a conventional toolbox with a sturdy handle. Some folks prefer to hang their tools on Peg-Board or other wall units. The inside of a door can even be used for this purpose; just be careful when opening it.



- 1.** Whether you are cleaning your gutters or repairing a roof leak, if you feel uncomfortable or unsafe going up or down a ladder, no matter how new or sturdy the ladder may be, hire a professional. The money spent may save you a trip to the emergency room.
- 2.** Wear flexible, closed-toed shoes, not sandals or high heels, when climbing a ladder. Tennis shoes are ideal.
- 3.** Set up the ladder on a flat, level surface. If possible, have someone spot you from below, keeping

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