



Tank Heaven

End bathroom clutter and elude the annoying plop of destiny.

At least once a year I knock something off the bathroom counter, right into the toilet. It's usually a highly non-disposable item, like my favorite hairbrush. There follows the humbling act of fishing the item out of the bowl. Then the challenge of cleaning it off. The dishwasher is tempting, unless you live with nosy people who'd want to know why your hairbrush is in the cutlery rack on Sani-cycle.

I don't blame myself for knocking stuff into the toilet, because it's society's fault. In the old days, a single bar of soap served as shampoo, shaving foam, skin care regimen and deodorant. Washing was a once-a-week proposition. People smelled a bit but they spent most of the day behind a horse who didn't seem to mind. Folks got cleaned up on Saturday night to prepare for the next morning, when being crammed



When you're riding your jigsaw around the curves, guide the blade smoothly so you don't create bumps and dings that you'll have to sand out later. Many jigsaws have a dial that allows you to adjust the stroke of the blade to be either gentle or aggressive, depending on the wood you're manipulating and the mood you're in.

into a church pew was the social event of the week.

In contrast, today's society is a teeming 24/7 press of bodies, with people crushed together in buses, offices, restaurants and movie theaters. We don't do much of anything alone and we can't afford to smell like it.

And here's my huge, salient point: there just isn't adequate surface area in modern bathrooms to contain all the tools families require for personal grooming. Many families have an arsenal of products perched around the sink, the edges of the tub, and atop the toilet tank.

Society gave us this clutter. But God gave us elbows. So on a bad day, one of those personal grooming products is going for a swim.

My answer to society and my elbows was to build a pine tanktop shelf-unit. It hangs in the unused space above my toilet tank, holding every pomade, soap and lotion I've accumulated in years of smelling nice.

This unit is a great beginner's project with some easy options for making it look professionally hand-crafted. To build it you'll need only a few basic tools, my favorite being the jigsaw.

Tool's Errand

If you're new to woodworking and you're only planning to get one saw, make it a jigsaw. They generate about as much noise as a sewing machine, so they're soothing to use, plus they perform almost every kind of cut, from straight to swoopy. I recently got the cordless purse model so I'm ready to jig anytime, anywhere. And while we're talking about tools; for sheer tingle factor, whenever you have a birthday or anniversary coming up, ask for clamps. You just can't have too many clamps. You'll need at least one pair of clamps for this project with a minimum span of 20". If you don't have clamps, you're going to have to engage a helper. Clamps are more useful than most helpers, unless the helper brings beer.

And finally, to make your shelves look especially perky, consider buying a plug-cutter bit. This is a cool little device that fits in your drill just like a regular bit. It cuts tiny cylindrical wood plugs that camouflage the screw heads, so the finished project looks tidy and sleek.

Cut it Out

Lumber is personality-related, so know yourself. Clear pine is slick and cooperative, but the knotty stuff has more character. Also, if you have a low irritation



A Veritas cornering tool makes short work of softening the edges of pine. It acts as a miniature plane, leaving a smooth radius in its path. If the blade chips or binds, then you're working against the grain. Try pulling from the opposite end of the board. Grain lines always get wonky around knots, so you may have to change direction several times, but it's still faster than sanding.



Shellac has to be applied with a patient, steady hand in smooth, long strokes that don't overlap. Beca so there's little downtime. If you're mixing your own shellac, use a good solvent procured from a reliable woodworking supply place.



Plug-cutters come in different sizes and varieties. I used a 1/2" tapered bit to cut my plugs. The resulting plugs are slightly narrower at one end, which makes them easier to push into the hole later. One safety tip: To prevent the plug-cutter bit from bucking and skating on the wood, set the teeth of the bit in the wood by leaning heavily on your drill before you begin. Then keep some weight on the drill as you start the motor.



threshold, avoid boards that are twisted, cupped (the ends of the board are crescent-shaped), split, or sporting "pitch pockets," dark spots that ooze sap and defile your work surface, tools and mood.

your drill as perpendicular to the surface as possible. I went through a troubled phase of having a fish-eye level stuck on the heel of my drill, but it was just distracting.

Take your time in the lumber aisle and use the "eyeballing" technique: Pull a board off the rack and put one end of it on the floor. Then, holding the other end at eye level, scrutinize your subject for twists, warps and wows. Flip it authoritatively, glaring down the length of each surface of the board in turn. If the board is clean and straight, put it on your cart. If it isn't, set it aside and move on to inspecting the next board.

Once you've got the boards cut to length, decide on a profile for the side pieces. If you're feeling jaunty and self-assured, mark the shape directly onto the board and cut it out with your jigsaw. If you've gotten into trouble this way in the past, draw the shape on cardboard first and cut it out to be sure it looks OK. Some people like to construct entire mockups in cardboard just to test the dimensions. I prefer to wing it and live with my mistakes, which explains my van, but that's another story.

Next, draw the wavy shapes for the 18"-long top and bottom rails. To achieve symmetry in your design, take a 9"-wide piece of paper or cardboard and draw a curvy line on it. Cut the design out and trace it onto one half of the 18"-long board. Then flip the cardboard over and trace the design onto the other half of the board. Repeat the process for the bottom border, varying the design a bit so it isn't exactly the same shape as the top.

If you have an earnest reverence for our outhouse heritage, you may have the urge to add a crescent-moon somewhere on your unit. Draw the shape where you want it and drill a generous hole in the middle of the moon. Insert your jigsaw blade into that hole, and proceed to cut out the moon. You should definitely use a scrolling blade for this purpose. A scrolling blade is more delicate than a regular jigsaw blade, and can handle tight corners that would make a standard blade buck.

Once you've cut out all your pieces, "round over" the sharp edges with sandpaper so they're soft and aged-looking. If you find sanding unfulfilling, either lower your expectations or use a cornering tool to ease all the straight edges. Cornering is a hugely satisfying activity, producing lovely curly shavings that can be used later for homemade potpourri.

Shellac Luster

After all that sanding you're going to want some instant gratification. It's tempting to screw the whole

unit together right here, right now. But do yourself a giant favor and put the stain, paint or clear-coat on the individual pieces before you go any further. It is SO MUCH EASIER than having to cover all the multiple surfaces of the shelf-unit after it's assembled. Besides that, glue squeeze-out will glom on to bare wood during the assembly process, but if your boards already sport a coat of finish, the glue can be easily wiped off.

My favorite finish is shellac. It's made from the excretions of "lac" bugs that live in trees in India and Indonesia, and if that's not a great conversation starter I don't know what is. This bug residue is scraped off the trees, and then cleaned, filtered and mixed with denatured alcohol to make one of most interesting and least noxious finishes I know of.

There are two ways to buy shellac: pre-mixed or dry form. The pre-mixed stuff has a limited shelf life, so you usually end up having to throw a lot of it out. I prefer to buy dry shellac flakes and mix them with high-quality shellac thinner. "Super Blonde" shellac from [Lee Valley Tools](#) is brilliantly clear, plus it's de-waxed, which means it doesn't water-stain.

Even if you don't work with shellac as your final finish, at least brush a couple of quick dabs of shellac on any knots. This will seal the knots and prevent sap from oozing up under your chosen finish. In fact, shellac is a great primer coat for pretty much any finish except stain, so don't resist using this fine gift from the bug world.

Fit to be Tried

Now you're ready to dry fit the whole unit. Lay it all out with the sides, shelves and borders in place. This is your opportunity to identify the tallest spray cans in your battery of personal care products. Space the shelves accordingly, so everything fits nicely on the unit when you're done. Clamp everything together lightly, and then square the shelves using a speed-square. Now reef on those clamps so they're nice and tight. Use a pencil to mark a light line on the side pieces under each of the shelves for reference later when you're doing the final assembly under the duress of knowing that the glue is starting to set up.

While all the clamps are in place, pre-drill pilot holes for your screws so you don't split the shelves when you drive the screws. Then, right on top of the pre-drilled screw-holes, drill larger holes to a depth of 3/8" to make a cavity for the plugs that will hide the screw heads. To avoid drilling the plug holes too deep, it's a good idea to wrap a piece of masking tape around your drill bit 3/8" from the end so you know when to stop.

Now for the wet fit. Take all the pieces apart and apply a modest bead of glue along the edges of the shelves and borders, plus a dab on each end of the towel bar. Reassemble and clamp everything together, and drive those screws. Use a damp rag to wipe away any oozing glue around the joints.

Just Say 'Yes' to Plugs

Once your screws are in place, fire up the plug-cutter and cut the plugs in a scrap piece of pine.

Once you've cut about 30 plugs, use a knife or screwdriver to pop each plug out of its little hole. They'll pop easier if you lever the knife perpendicular to the grain. TIP: As an alternative to cutting your own plugs, you can buy pre-cut hardwood plugs at the hardware store, but hardwood looks funny when used with a soft wood like pine; the color of the wood doesn't match, plus hardwood isn't as absorbent as pine so the plugs take finish differently and refuse to blend in.

Before inserting each plug into its pre-drilled hole, place a drop of glue on the bottom of each plug and smear it around a bit.

When you have your unit plugged, wait 20 minutes for the glue to set up. Then use a flush-cut saw to cut each plug flush with the surface of the cabinet. If you don't have a flush-cut saw, you can take the plugs down fairly quickly using a sander loaded with 80-grit sandpaper.

Once the plugs are cut and sanded, touch up the plugs and sides of your shelf-unit with shellac or whatever finish you're using.

Mount 'Em

Now it's time to mount your unit on the wall. My favorite mounting technique is to screw two 2"-long strips of metal plumber's tape (which has prepunched holes) on the back of the shelf-unit, and then lift the unit onto waiting nails anchored in studs above the toilet. Finding the studs is a matter of importance, because you don't want your unit crashing down on you while you're otherwise occupied with a good magazine.

Also, it's vital to leave enough room between the toilet tank lid and the shelf-unit. If the toilet floods, you need maneuvering room to whip the lid off, plunge your hand into the dank tank and slap the flapper back down. You'll remember this ritual from the first time you knocked something into the toilet, and tried to quietly flush it away. For more of Mag Ruffman's plans, visit [Anything I Can Do](#). **PW**

