

How to Safely & Easily Do DIY Work Alone — The Family Handyman

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28 Helpful Tips for Doing DIY Work Alone



[Jenny Stanley](#) Updated: Mar. 08, 2023

When a project requires extra hands but there aren't any available (or you're too stubborn to ask for help!), try one of these tips for doing DIY work alone.

1 / 28



Handy Helper for Under the Sink

To replace a garbage disposer, I used the scissor jack from the trunk of my car. That not only saved me some heavy lifting but also allowed me to precisely adjust the height of the disposer. Scissor jacks can help out with other heavy lifting too. I used one to position a heavy shower door. — reader Mike McCleish. Next, check out 12 high-tech tools to trick out your home workshop.

2 / 28



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Using a Lever

Lever posts out of the ground by wrapping a chain around the base of the post and slipping a long plank through the chain. Pry against a block resting on the ground to keep the lever from digging into the soil. Sometimes you'll have to excavate around the tops of stubborn concrete-embedded posts to remove some of the dirt trapping the top of the concrete.

3 / 28



Stabilize Your Sanding Project Hands-Free

Belt sanders are essential woodworking tools, but you need to make sure the piece you're sanding stays put. That's sometimes difficult when you're sanding something on your workbench, as clamps can get in the way of sanding. The trick is to screw boards to two edges of your work surface, creating a corner. As you sand, the belt's spin pushes the workpiece against the boards or "fiddles" as they're sometimes called. Make sure your fiddles are thinner than the part you're sanding. — Travis Larson, Senior Editor



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Hang it High Helper

With this hang-it-high extension pole, you can hang objects in high, hard-to-reach areas. Attach a spring clamp to the end of an ABS or PVC (plastic) drain pipe, and use the end of the clamp as a hook to lift items on or off a hook or nail. — readers Joseph and Debra Wronkowski. Next, check out these additional [45 hugely helpful handy hints!](#)

5 / 28



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Screw On a Cleat to Hold a Board

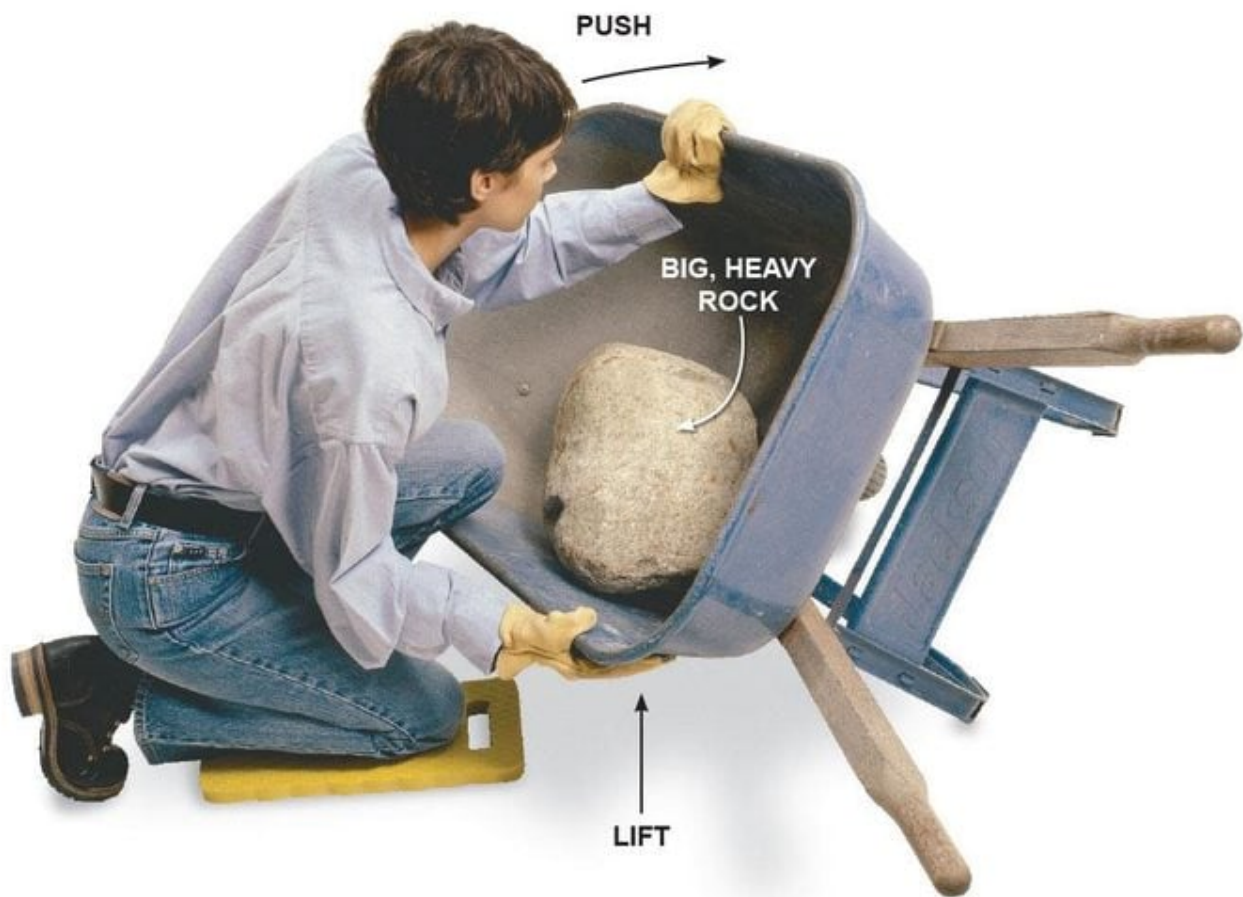
A small plywood cleat screwed to the top of a joist will hold it up while you nail the opposite end. Plus, it will hold the tops flush while you nail on the joist hanger. Use scraps of 3/4-in. plywood rather than boards for small cleats. Plywood won't split when you drive screws into it.

6 / 28



Use Your Miter Saw Stand with Your Planer

Planing long boards alone isn't easy. You get plenty of exercise running from the infeed side to the outfeed side before the board flips your portable planer. Granted, it won't flip if it's properly bolted down, but here's a better way: Fasten your portable planer to a board; then fasten the board to a miter saw stand. The stand's board supports act as infeed and outfeed for planing, greatly reducing the exercise part of planing long boards. Then you'll have more energy to start your project right way! — reader Terry Blanchard. [Next, check out our favorite woodworking tips for beginners.](#)



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Tip It Into a Wheelbarrow

We all know how easy it is to move heavy stuff in a wheelbarrow, but what if you can't load it alone? Use the technique shown here to avoid having to lift heavy stones, bags of potting soil or shrubs up into a wheelbarrow. Just tip the wheelbarrow on its side and roll the object into it. Then push on the top edge while you lift on the bottom to right the wheelbarrow. Be careful when you reach the top not to tip the wheelbarrow over in the opposite direction. Balance the load in the wheelbarrow and you're ready to roll. [Plus: More great landscaping tips.](#)

8 / 28



Solo Fastener Driving Tip

Start nails or screws before hoisting the load. How many times have you tried to hold a board or sheet of material in place and start a nail or screw? When hanging drywall, plywood or even a rim joist (the board that ties a whole bunch of joist ends together), mark the framing locations and tack a few fasteners in the material before hoisting it. Then you can hold it with one hand while driving in the fasteners.



Easy-Reach Tape Measure

Here's a tip I discovered by accident. I had been installing some rare earth magnets in a project, so I had a few in my pocket. As I stepped away from my workbench, I noticed that my 12 ft. tape measure was attached to my pocket! It's not a lot of trouble to use the tape's clip as intended, but having the tape measure stuck to your pocket is even easier. I keep a couple magnets stuck to my tape measure's clip so I don't lose them. This won't work with a 25 ft. tape; they're just too heavy. And don't put the magnets in the same pocket as your phone or credit cards. — Brad Holden, Senior Editor. [Click here for some amazing woodworking projects you can start today!](#)



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How to Snap a Chalk Line By Yourself

Everyone knows how to pound in a nail to hold the end of a chalk line when they're alone, but what do you do on a basement floor? You use a brick to anchor it down, that's what. That's simple, but here's another trick that's a little tougher to master. When you have less-than- 4-ft. snaps and you don't want to fool with or damage the surface with a nail, learn how to snap lines by holding the handle on the chalk box with the line extended past the mark. Hold the line tight and tip the box down so you can pluck the line with your thumb and index finger.



Easily Move Your Heavy Tools

I had a truckload of lumber to transport from the truck down a long hallway to my shop, and I wasn't looking forward to carrying it all by myself, an armload at a time. That's when I noticed a pallet leaning up against the wall and had an idea.

I don't own a pallet jack, but I did have a set of swiveling casters! After adding some reinforcement blocking to the pallet, I installed a 4-in. caster at each corner. It worked perfectly for hauling my entire load of lumber in one trip.

I've since kept my pallet dolly and use it frequently as my multipurpose heavy-stuff mover. — reader Keith Jones

12 / 28



A Helper Up High

Working up high with lengths of gutter or lumber can be tough, especially if you're working alone—or if you only have one ladder! To make the job easier, use one-hand bar clamps to quickly connect a sawhorse to two 8-ft. studs. Then use C-clamps to position a 1x4 cross member at the desired height. For the best holding power, set the C-clamps at an angle with the jaws up. You can use heavier material for bigger jobs, but be careful: Top-heavy loads are tippy! [Plus: Plans to make your own sawhorses.](#)

13 / 28



Use Clamps to Support Pipes when Soldering

When you're soldering pipes, tighten a clamp across two floor joists for temporary support. Use the same trick to support drain-pipes, ducting or framing members while you work on them. Use the same trick to support drain-pipes, ducting or framing members while you work on them. [Plus: Top 10 plumbing fixes you can do yourself.](#)



Hands-Free Light Hack

Make a hands-free light in a snap with a flashlight, a pair of pliers and a rubber band. Place the flashlight in the jaws of the pliers; then wrap a rubber band around the handles of the pliers. That's it! Point the light wherever you need it.

15 / 28



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Use Balance and Grip to Haul Heavy Plywood

Lift sheet goods by placing one hand under the sheet, slightly in front of center, and your other hand at the top, slightly behind the center. Hoist it so that the middle of the sheet rests on the ball of your shoulder. Your shoulder and back handle the bulk of the weight while your hands only need to balance it. Bonus: You'll be able to see where you're going, thread through doorways and even navigate up and down stairs. [Learn how to choose the right plywood for the job.](#)

16 / 28



Skateboard Workshop Helper

A skateboard isn't just useful for rolling through the park, it also makes a handy hauler on the fly. Just load it up with your heavy items such as tires or large sheets of plywood, and easily tote them from one area of your shop to another. If you don't have a skateboard handy, keep an eye out for one at garage sales or at thrift stores. Even if you don't ride it, it's worth a few bucks to buy one exclusively to haul stuff around your workshop! [Click here for even more moving techniques.](#)



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Use Sturdy Scaffolding

Working alone on ladders can be inefficient and dangerous, especially because you'll be tempted to overextend your reach and carry too many tools, paint cans, shingles or lumber when no one is on hand to pass you things. Nothing speeds up high, solo work like the spacious elevated work platform scaffolding provides. You'll be able to keep materials and tools at arm's length and safely reach a wide area without constantly moving ladders. The scaffolding doesn't have to be anything fancy. When you have a job less than 10 ft. from the ground, set a couple of solid, crack-free, 2x12 boards (avoid large knots) over a pair of sturdy sawhorses for a platform you can move around on. Just make sure your setup is on

even ground to keep the horses from collapsing, and avoid 'walking the plank' by remembering that there are no safety rails. Keep plank ends close to sawhorses or they'll flip up when you step on the ends, like they do in slapstick movies (only it won't be nearly as funny in real life). For higher jobs, like painting second-floor eaves or replacing windows or siding, go to the rental store and examine your scaffolding options. You can rent long, lightweight aluminum planks with various styles of jacks to support them and the same platform 'section style' scaffolding you see the pros use on big construction sites. Tell the scaffolding supplier about the job you're planning to do and how high you'll be working to get help choosing the best scaffold. Most scaffolding can be carried in a pickup, but rental stores will deliver too. You'll forgive the cost when you see how your productivity increases.

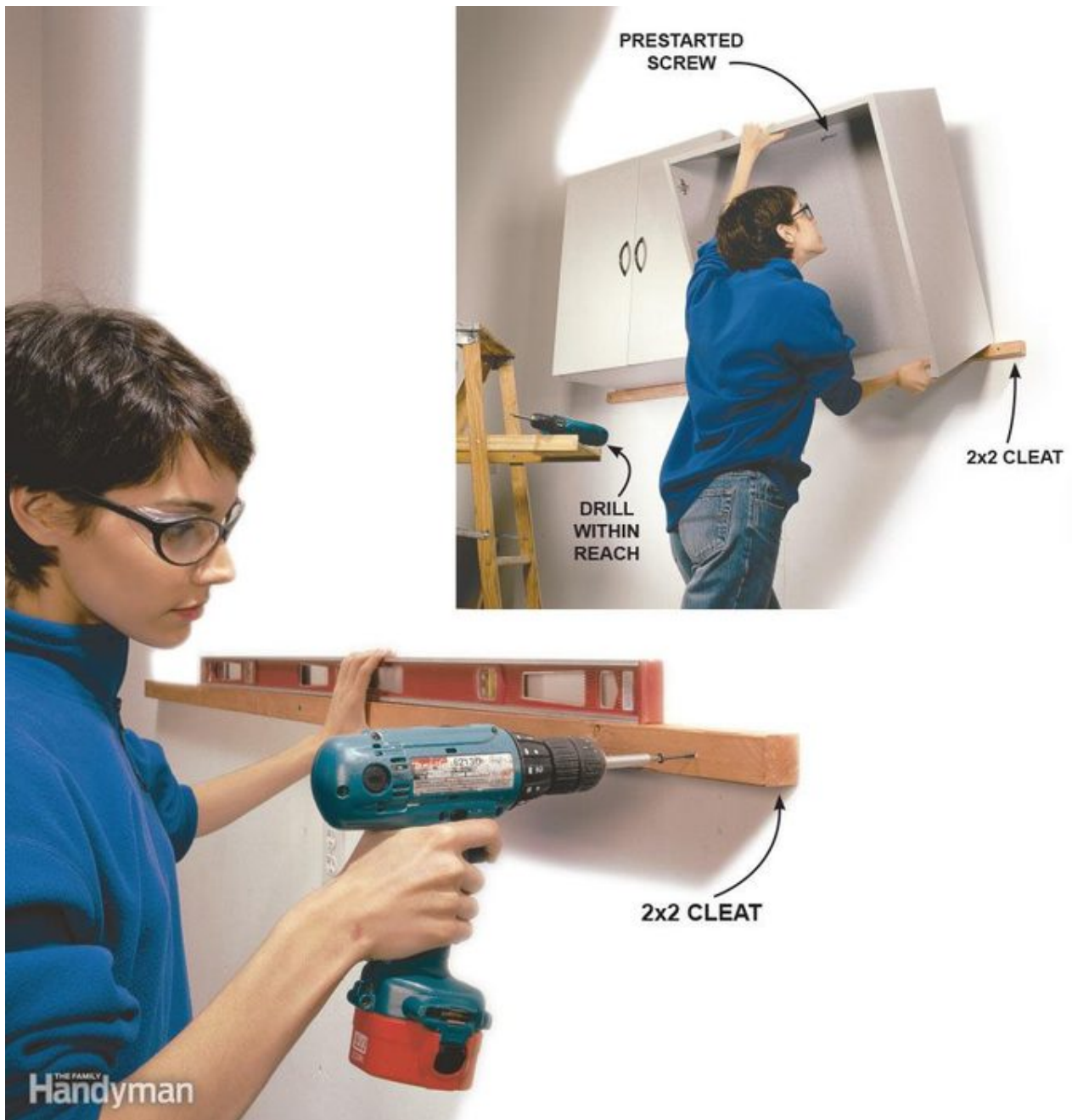
18 / 28



Extend Your Saw Table

It's not always easy to find a willing helper to hold up long boards when you're ripping on the table saw. Here's a setup that you can rig in just a few minutes: Lay 2x4s perpendicular to sawhorses to support the lips of the saw table. Screw the 2x4s to the tops of the sawhorses. Lay a sheet of plywood directly behind the saw and lock it in place with 1-5/8-in. drywall screws.

19 / 28



Use a Cleat to Hang a Cabinet

An old carpenter's trick is to level and screw a temporary 2x2 cleat to the wall to support wall cabinets while you attach them. Prestart screws in the cabinet to hit the wall framing and make sure the drill is within easy reach. Then hold the cabinet against the wall with one hand while you screw it to the studs with the other.

20 / 28



Don't Carry or Drag—Slide

You can buy furniture slides in many shapes and sizes at home centers and online. It's also easy to make your own sliders from plastic container covers, Frisbees, bedspreads, moving blankets, towels and carpet remnants. Use hard plastic sliders for carpeting, and soft, padded sliders for hard flooring.

21 / 28

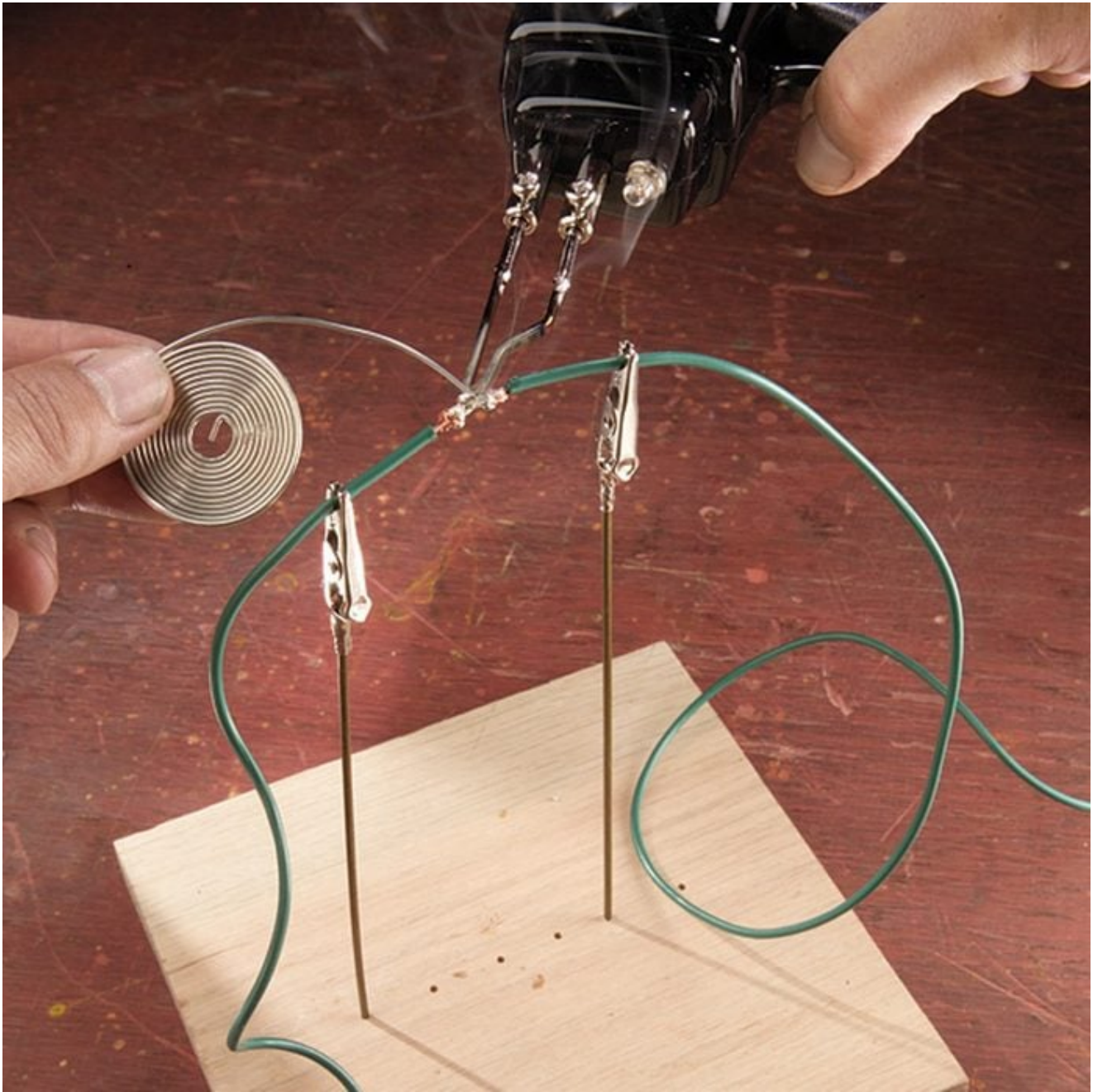


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Use an Appliance Dolly

If you need to move a stove, dryer or other heavy, bulky item, don't forget your local rental store. Appliance dollies and other special dollies are available to move everything from trees to pianos. Appliance dollies like the one shown have straps to secure the load and rollers on the back to assist in going up and down stairs. The strap mechanism can be confusing, though, so ask the rental salesperson to show you how it works. Load the appliance onto the dolly by pushing against the top to tip it away as you slide the lip of the dolly underneath. Then wrap the straps around the appliance and tighten them. Be careful, though. Properly tightened straps exert a lot of pressure, so make sure they're underneath and away from handles or other parts that could be damaged. Now brace the bottom with your foot and pull back on the handles of the dolly to tilt the appliance off the ground and roll it away. It's easiest to roll backward over bumps or rough surfaces. Get help if you have to go up or down stairs. To set the appliance down again, brace the bottom with your foot and hang from the top of the handles. Let your weight do the work as you gently lower the appliance to the floor. [Learn how to build a pallet dolly here.](#)

22 / 28



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Simple Soldering Stand

Ever try holding two strands of wire in one hand, a spool of solder in the other, and maneuver a soldering gun besides? Solder more effectively with this great tip from reader Randy Witmyer. Cut a couple of 6-in. pieces of wire from a coat hanger and crimp alligator clips (\$2 for a four-pack at a home center) on the ends. Drill holes in a board, stick in the alligator clip wires and clamp in the wire ends you're soldering. You now have two hands free, one for the gun and one for the solder.

23 / 28



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Bar Clamps for Framing Jobs

Bar clamps are ideal for working alone because they tighten with one hand, leaving the other hand free to hold up the board. They're available at home centers and hardware stores in a variety of lengths. These clamps come in handy for all sorts of framing tasks too. For example, you can clamp a board to the bottom of deck joists as shown to support the front joist while you nail it on. Keep a set of clamps handy when you work and you may not even miss having a helper. [Here's how to use a bar clamp for a vise.](#)

24 / 28



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Ironing Board Back Saver

Working under the sink on your back isn't exactly comfortable, especially when the sharp cabinet edge cuts into your shoulder blades. Make it more comfortable by lying on an ironing board. Set one end of the board inside the cabinet and support the other end with a scrap piece of 2x4. It won't make the repair any easier, but it's definitely easier on your back. Check out where to store an ironing board to save space.

25 / 28

Smarter Leaf Collection

If you have lots of leaves to gather and haul to the compost site, rather than buy and fill a bunch of plastic leaf bags, save lots of time and effort by raking leaves into a Bagster bag from a home center (or Amazon). That's how to get rid of leaves in large loads. Pull the full bag into your trailer, transport the leaves and store the bag for the next season.

26 / 28



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Use Pivot Points and Balance with Long Ladders

The longer the ladder, the harder it is to control. Here's how to handle the longest ladders alone. Anchor the feet of extension ladders against the base of the building and 'walk' the ladder up to raise it. The solid wall keeps the feet from kicking out as the ladder's raised. To lower ladders, move the feet back against the building and reverse the process. Extend the ladder while holding it vertical, and roll the top of the ladder to walk it sideways. [Plus: Tips for using extension ladders safely.](#)

27 / 28



Screws that Stick

Using a handheld screwdriver in tight spaces can be very frustrating, especially when there isn't enough room to hold the screw in place with your free hand. Here's a solution for how to magnetize a screwdriver situation: Attach a small magnet to the shaft of your screwdriver. The magnetic magic will travel through the metal of the screwdriver, down to the business end, holding the screw right where you need it—with no hands!

This trick for how to magnetize a screwdriver works with other tools, too. Magnetize the head of a hammer to hold a nail, add a magnet to the metal bit in a power drill/driver to hold a screw—you get the idea.

28 / 28



The Helper You Wear: A Tool Belt

If you've got someone helping you, it's easy to say, 'Hey, grab me that cordless drill, would ya? My hands are full.' But if you're working alone, a tool belt is like having a helper with you all the time. If you think ahead, the tools and fasteners you need will be right at hand whenever you need them. And once you get used to wearing a tool belt, you'll work twice as fast, just from the saved steps. This helper is just about perfect: He doesn't whine, likes the same music you do and never gets tired out. Put tools that you grab with your dominant hand on that side of the belt, and fasteners on the other side. Also, have a fixed spot for your most-used tools so you can find them instantly.

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