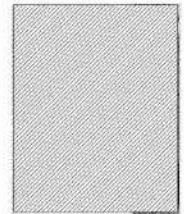


30 Down- and-Dirty Tricks for Big DIY Savings

by
John
Morell

photographs by **Laura Moss**

Penny-pincher. Tightwad. Cheapskate. Bring it on! Here at *This Old House*, we celebrate frugality, especially when it translates into increased efficiency, comfort, or style for our homes. From cutting your hot-water bill by installing a shower timer to brightening a room with handsome sconces that you hook up yourself, the secret to saving real money is a combination of thriftiness, smarts, and sweat. So read on for clever get-your-hands-dirty ways to shrink your expenses and improve your home without spending a dollar more than you have to.





Save up to \$50

1 Shop the dollar store rather than your local home center to buy specialty tools you may use only once or twice for projects such as cable or phone wiring.

COST: \$1 per item.

SAVINGS: \$25 for curved long-nose pliers and \$20 for a coaxial compression crimper at The Home Depot.

BONUS: No worries if tools break.

2 Extend the lives of filters in some air purifiers, bathroom fans, window air conditioners, and even your furnace by vacuuming out dust and loose dirt. Just be sure your vacuum is HEPA equipped to keep fine particulates from being released into the air.

COST: \$0

SAVINGS: About \$40 for two replacement air-purifier filters. You typically have to change them four times a year, but thorough cleaning can cut that down to just two times.

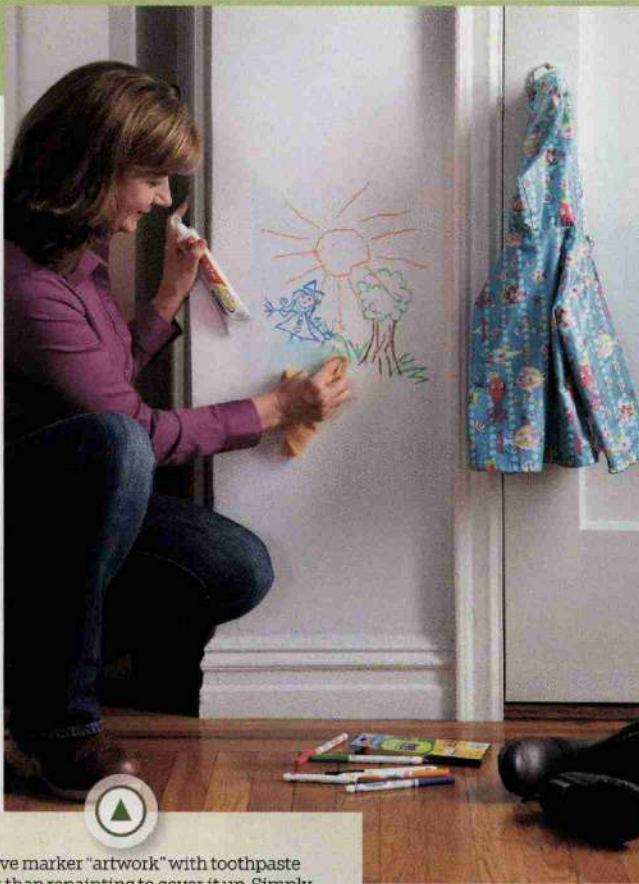
BONUS: While you've got the vacuum nozzle hooked up, use it to suck up dust bunnies and spiderwebs in hard-to-reach places.

3 Silence squeaky wood floors by sprinkling on talcum powder. Use a paintbrush to work the powder into the joints between boards and sweep away any excess. For tight spots you can use powdered graphite that's squeezed from a tube.



COST	SAVINGS	BONUS
\$5 for a large container of talcum powder or a small tube of graphite powder.	Starting at \$50 an hour to hire a carpenter to make repairs.	If you go with graphite, it's also good for keeping locks lubricated.

30 Down- and-Dirty Tricks



4 Remove marker "artwork" with toothpaste rather than repainting to cover it up. Simply squeeze the paste on a rag and wipe on the wall to make doodles disappear. Works with Crayola-type kids' markers as well as felt-tip and ballpoint pens.

COST	SAVINGS	BONUS
\$2 for a tube of white toothpaste.	About \$35 for a gallon of eggshell, a new roller cover, and a disposable paint-tray liner.	Toothpaste doubles as polish for tarnished silver.

5 Prime walls with "oops" paint. These mis-tints and returns at your paint or hardware store are sold at a deep discount. Just be sure to pick a matte finish in a shade that's lighter than your top coat.
COST: \$1-\$5
SAVINGS: About **\$18** for a gallon of interior latex primer.

BONUS: You'll be putting to good use a can of paint that would likely just be disposed of.

6 Dissolve mineral deposits plugging up your showerhead rather than replacing the fixture. Remove the head, soak it overnight in a 50-50 vinegar-and-water solution, flush it out, then reinstall it to improve water flow. If the showerhead is too hard to remove, fill a plastic bag with solution and secure it around the head with rubber bands.
COST: \$2 for white vinegar.
SAVINGS: **\$20** or more for a new showerhead.
BONUS: This also works on clogged sink aerators.

7 Humidify your home in the winter. Furnaces can remove moisture from the air, making rooms feel cooler than they actually are and causing you to crank up the heat. For example, a house that's 69 degrees F with 19 percent humidity feels 3 degrees colder than one with 35 percent humidity.
COST: \$0 to place water pans on radiators or near heat registers. For baseboard units, try the Non-Electric Humidifier, \$16; realgoods.com. The reservoir mounts over the heater and mists the air without using any power.
SAVINGS: About **\$33** a year on your heating bill by turning the thermostat down 3 degrees.
BONUS: Boosting humidity can keep paint and woodwork from cracking.

8 Get a free smoke alarm and/or carbon monoxide detector. As part of a national fire and poison prevention initiative, many state fire marshals and local fire departments offer the life-saving devices at no charge to low-income homeowners and renters, as well as seniors.
COST: \$0
SAVINGS: About **\$40** for a smoke alarm and a CO detector.
BONUS: Many departments handle the installation, too.

Save
up to
\$100

9 Loosen a stuck knob on a water valve with penetrating oil and heat rather than calling a plumber. Spray oil on the threads, dry with a towel, then point a blow-dryer at the knob to expand the metal and release the knob.
COST: \$5 for a can of Liquid Wrench.
SAVINGS: About **\$100**, based on an average plumbing service call.
BONUS: This trick can also unstick frozen nuts and bolts.

10 Mail and track rebates. People often don't redeem these because it can take so long to get the money back—eight weeks or more—and it's tough to keep track of the paperwork. But you can easily follow the money with help from the free online service allmyrebates.com.

COST: \$0
SAVINGS: It's estimated that up to 60 percent of rebates go unredeemed. So if you're eligible for \$200 in rebates and send all of them in, not just three fifths, you've pocketed an extra **\$80**.
BONUS: Getting a check in the mail makes anyone's day.

11 Remove or cover window air conditioner units when it starts to get cold outside, then weatherstrip the window to seal any cracks. If using a quilted cover, be sure to replace any side seals where the AC fits in the jamb.

COST: About \$18 for a cover.
SAVINGS: About **\$100** off your heating bill for three ACs.

BONUS: Weathertight rooms stay cleaner because fewer outdoor pollutants get inside.

12 Improve steam radiators' performance by clearing obstructions, such as drapes, and by insulating risers.

COST: About \$2 for insulating foam pipe sleeves.
SAVINGS: **\$50 to \$100** a year off your hot-water bill.
BONUS: You can direct more heat into the room with a radiant screen made of sheet metal or reflective insulation that fits behind the radiator.

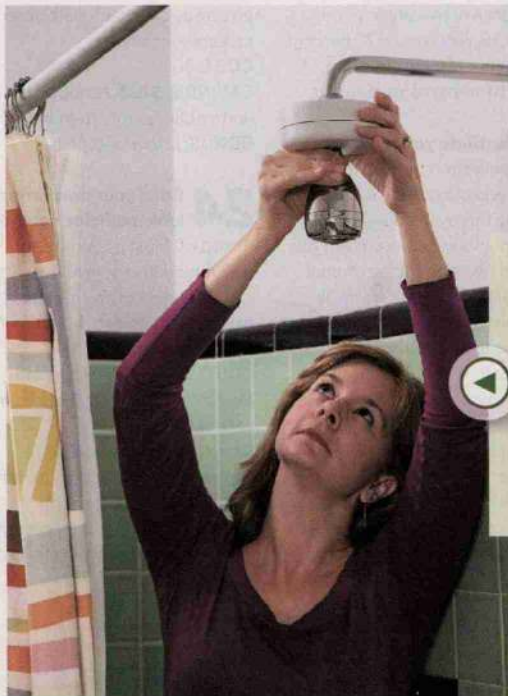
13 Don't buy a leaf blower to clean up autumn leftovers. Instead, raise your lawn-mower deck to its highest level and start rolling. The mower will slice and dice the dried leaves into mulch.

COST: \$0
SAVINGS: About **\$70** for an electric leaf blower.
BONUS: Your lawn gets a healthy trim at the same time.

14 Make a patchwork rug out of carpet remnants or samples. All you need is a little creativity, some colorful strips or squares, and double-sided carpet tape to seam the pieces together and hold them tight to the floor.

COST: Many dealers sell the last few feet of carpet rolls for as little as \$3. Samples are often free, though you may have to cut off the binding with a utility knife. A roll of Intertape Indoor Carpet Tape is \$8 at amazon.com.
SAVINGS: **\$96**, the cost of the Fez 15-by-7-foot mosaic rug with four different-color carpet squares from Flor, a high-end maker of DIY-friendly stick-together plush tiles.
BONUS: Extra carpet squares double as garden kneepads.

15 Install and hide cable lines yourself. If you've got carpet, use a pry bar to loosen the rug at the tack strip along the room's perimeter, and fit the cable in the space under the baseboards. Rent a carpet kicker to reinstall the carpet. For hardwood floors, remove the quarter-round or shoe molding below the baseboards. There's often enough of a gap to fit the cable.
COST: \$14 for carpet-kicker rental.
SAVINGS: About **\$90** for a 3-hour custom cable installation.
BONUS: Use the kicker to tighten up any loose carpeting.



16 Install a shower timer that slows and then shuts off the flow of water after a preset time. Use this to cut your daily showering time from 20 minutes to 10.

COST	SAVINGS	BONUS
\$111 for the automatic timer at showermanager.com .	\$75 or more a year off your water-heating bill, depending on the type of boiler.	Shorter steamy showers mean less moisture-induced mold and mildew.

30 Down- and-Dirty Tricks

17 Prevent a clogged drain by replacing the sink's P-trap with a PermaFlow model. It's equipped with an interior paddle that you can turn via a knob mounted on the side of the trap to sweep away blockage.
COST: \$30 for the PermaFlow; pflowerworks.net.
SAVINGS: About **\$100** for a plumber to unclog the drain.
BONUS: The trap is clear, so you can see and fish out dropped earrings or that diamond engagement ring.

Save
up to
\$250

18 Clean food stains in stone counters with a poultice made of flour and hydrogen peroxide. Mix to the consistency of peanut butter. Spread on the stain, cover with plastic, and let sit overnight. Gently scrape off in the morning.

COST	SAVINGS	BONUS
\$5 for poultice supplies, \$14 for Stone Spray-N-Seal to prevent future stains.	\$250 for a pro to do a light refinishing of a small section of countertop.	The poultice also works on stone tile and concrete floors.



19 Refresh the look of your range with new cooktop parts that'll also extend the life of the appliance and make it work better.
COST: About \$39 each for new burners and \$7 for chrome drip bowls on a typical GE electric range. Get parts directly from the manufacturer or online dealers, such as repairclinic.com.
SAVINGS: **\$216**, based on \$400 for a new GE 30-inch freestanding electric range in black at sears.com, minus the cost of the replacement parts.
BONUS: For \$5 more, you can hide scratches in the porcelain finish with heat-resistant Epoxy Touch-Up enamel; rustoleum.com.

20 Install solar inflector screens on windows to draw the sun's heat into the house in winter and block it out in summer. When seasons change, simply flip the screens.
COST: \$15 per square foot at solarizeinflectorwindows.com.
SAVINGS: About **\$170** a year in energy costs by boosting the performance of two single-pane, south-facing windows by 70 percent.
BONUS: Your too-hot sunroom might be bearable come summer.

21 Ventilate your roof to help cool your home in the summer and prevent ice dams in the winter. Do this by installing intake vents and a solar-powered fan (you may need two, depending on your roof size) that draw out warm air trapped in the attic.
COST: Systems start at \$250.
SAVINGS: In Texas, for instance, where the average annual cost to operate a central-air unit is \$668, fan makers claim you can save 30 percent on your operating costs, or **\$200** per year.
BONUS: You may be eligible for federal and/or state tax rebates to help cover the cost of your setup.

22 "Bundle" service calls. If you hire an electrician to fix a dead electrical outlet one week, then bring him in again the next to finally deal with that blinking kitchen light, you're paying for two visits that could have been handled in one.
COST: Just the extra time and parts required for the additional job.
SAVINGS: Up to **\$175** for the second service call you didn't have to pay for.
BONUS: Many pros will inspect your home for free to identify any trouble spots that might be brewing.

23 Score a free toilet. Commodes made today use a miserly 1.6 gallons of water per flush, compared with up to 7 gallons for some older models. In an effort to conserve water, many city and municipal governments will foot the bill to get rid of those guzzling geezers. Austin, Texas, for instance, covers the cost of replacing as many as three toilets that are original to homes built before 1966. Other cities, such as Seattle, give away low-flow toilets based on family income.
COST: \$0
SAVINGS: **\$225**, based on the cost and installation of one low-flow toilet.
BONUS: Lower water bills.

24 Build your own vintage-look medicine cabinet from a kit. Most are simple to assemble with a screwdriver and come paint- or stain-ready, so you can perfectly match the cabinet to your bathroom.
COST: \$160 for the Recessed Medicine Cabinet Kit in oak from vandykes.com.
SAVINGS: **\$235**, based on a similar, assembled cabinet from restorationhardware.com.
BONUS: You can usually customize a cabinet kit by switching the side the door opens from.





28 Hook up sconces without an electrician. Using a low-voltage FlatWire system, you can plug a transformer into a standard wall outlet and simply connect paintable, paper-thin wiring to the sconces.



COST	SAVINGS	BONUS
From \$199 for a two-sconce kit at flatwirestore.com.	\$325 or more for a master electrician to do the work at about \$65 an hour.	No poking holes in walls or fishing electrical wires.

COST: \$439 for a frame-and-panel kit at frigodesign.com.

SAVINGS: **\$360** on the fridge, based on the cost of a new \$799 Whirlpool 25.1-cubic-foot side-by-side model in white at sears.com.

BONUS: Some panel kits include new matching handles.

29 Steam-clean dingy tiles. High-pressure steam removes grime and mildew from ceramic tile and grout lines.

Rent a heavy-duty steamer and use it on any tile surface in the house, including floors, showers, and counters.

COST: \$60 for a one-day rental.

SAVINGS: **\$872** over the cost of hiring a professional to retile an 8-by-10-foot bathroom floor.

BONUS: Some steamers have attachments for cleaning drapes and furniture, too.

30 Replace aging washing-machine hoses with heavy-duty ones from Floodchek with a 20-year warranty. Burst water lines are one of the most common causes of home water damage.

COST: \$43 for a pair of hoses at safehomeproducts.com.

SAVINGS: **\$500** just for the insurance deductible on \$5,308, the average cost of home flood remediation.

BONUS: With the washer pulled out, you can finally clean underneath it. 📌

Save up to \$500

25 Boost fireplace efficiency so that your furnace doesn't have to work as hard. A radiant grate lifts logs off the floor, allowing air to circulate around them for a better burn. A hearth reflector sits in the back of the fireplace and directs heat into the room rather than the masonry.

COST: From \$95 for the grate and \$139 for a steel reflector at gratewalloffire.com.

SAVINGS: About **\$240** a year in reduced heating fuel bills.

BONUS: Toaster fires to cozy up to.

26 Create your own security system with battery-powered window and door alarms, and motion-detector exterior spotlights. DIY systems like the GE Control Center Starter Kit and

Maxxa's LED Motion-Detecting lights are battery powered, so no need for new wiring.

COST: \$30 for the basic GE setup at homedepot.com, plus \$52 for two lights at homesecuritystore.com.

SAVINGS: **\$278** in the first year alone, including the cost of the equipment. Security monitoring services often install systems for free or at low cost, then charge a monthly monitoring fee of about \$30.

BONUS: No more embarrassing mea culpa phone calls to the security company when you accidentally set off your own alarm.

27 Reface appliances rather than replace them. For the fridge, use a custom stainless-steel or acrylic frame-and-panel kit.

Updating the look of a dishwasher or trash compactor can be as simple as flipping over its existing center panel. Many older models have reversible panels with white on one side and black or beige on the other.