Tips & Techniques

edited and illustrated by Charles Miller

Tips & Techniques is a forum for readers to exchange information about methods, tools and jigs they've devised. We'll pay for any we publish. Send details to Tips, Fine Homebuilding, *P. O. Box 5506, Newtown, CT 06470-5506.*

Maneuvering a bathtub

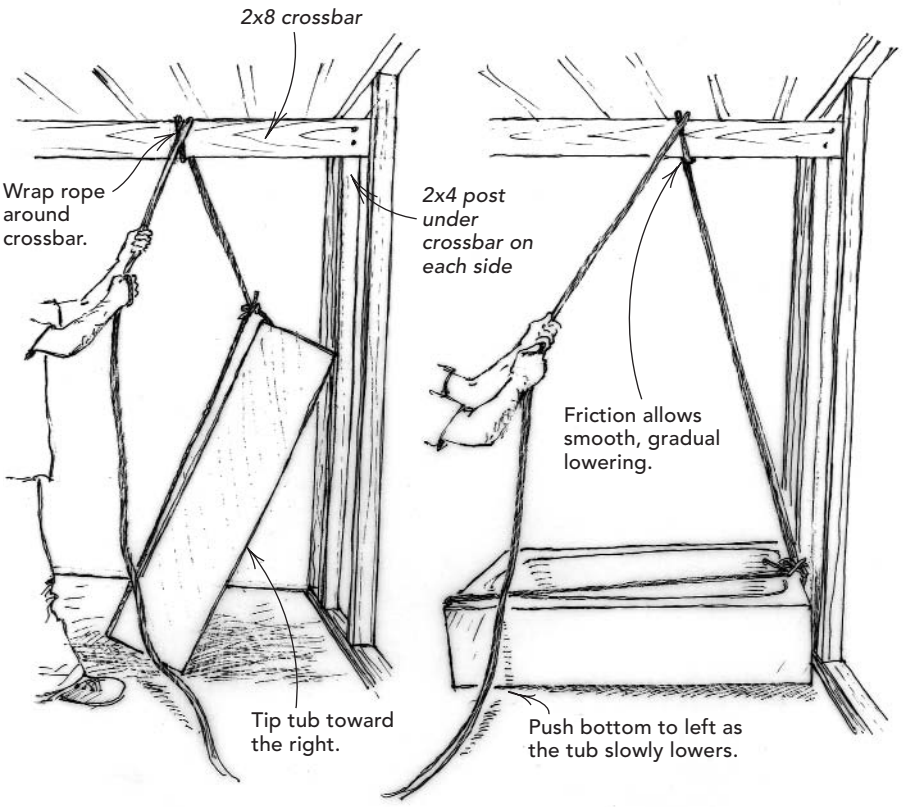
For a number of bathroom-remodeling projects, I have had to install new cast-iron tubs. The real challenge is to get the tub from the vertical position (when it's maneuvered more easily around corners and through the door) into its final horizontal position. It can be a struggle to lower these heavy units safely into place. I've seen people roll them into position, but there is always the risk of getting a few fingers in the wrong place, not to mention all the back strain involved.

The technique that I use takes only a few minutes to set up and allows the tub to be lowered into place carefully and slowly with little physical effort. Prior to installing the tub, a temporary 2x8 crossbar is placed about 7 ft. up (about where the shower-curtain rod normally goes) and is supported with two 2x4 posts (drawing right). These can be nailed temporarily or held with clamps. Two people are now needed, and neither has to be a weightlifter.

The cast-iron tub now can be brought into the bathroom in a vertical position. A heavy rope (I use a smooth climbing rope at least 25 ft. long) is used to lower the tub into place. First, a large slipknot is made around the front apron of the tub, the slack taken out of the rope, and the rope lashed 1½ times around the middle of the 2x8 crossbar. With the slack out of the rope, the first individual maintains tension on the rope while the second starts to tip the tub. The tipping action tends to raise the lower end of the tub, so getting the tub in a horizontal position requires lowering it slowly by releasing the tension on the rope. The 1½ lashings around the 2x8 provide sufficient friction to allow a controlled lowering. The second person then nudges the tub into place as it is being lowered. This technique allows a great deal of control, especially in the last few inches before the tub is placed in its final position.

I also have found this method to be extremely useful in remodel situations where the trap assembly is not readily accessible after the tub is in place and the tub with drain assembly needs to be aligned precisely with the trap for installation.

—Peter Wierzchon, South Bend, IN



Repainting stripped siding

When the paint has been stripped from siding or any exterior wood, the ultraviolet rays of the sun begin to deteriorate the surface cells of the wood. The paint sticks to these surface cells well, but they may not stick to the layers of wood cells beneath them. The stripped surface should be touch-sanded within an hour or two of the time it is to be repainted to remove these sun-damaged cells, particularly if the siding is not repainted for a day or two.

When we were repainting a 1901 Victorian, we kept a palm sander on the scaffold to sand the exposed wood surface very lightly just before applying the primer. The new paint stuck well and has lasted. On the side that was painted by a contractor, who did not pay as much attention to the surface of the wood, the paint started peeling within two years.

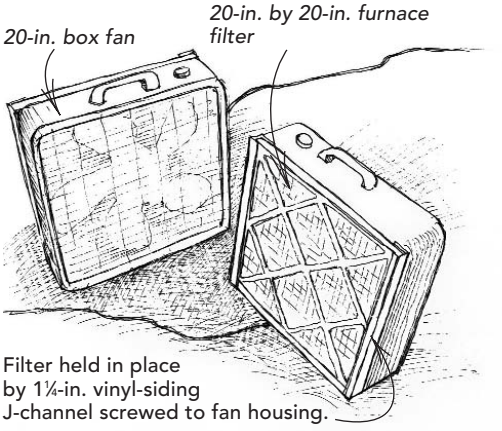
—Hank Spies, Champaign, IL

Cheap dust collector

I came up with an inexpensive dust filter that works for my shop as well as for the interior remodeling that I do.

I bought a 20-in. box fan ($13), a piece of 1¼-in. vinyl-siding J-channel ($2) and a 20-in. by 20-in. furnace filter ($0.50). As shown in the drawing above, I attached the J-channel in a U-configuration on the intake side of the fan and slid in the filter. It works great. Total: $15.50. I usually buy the better particle filters for $2 or $3 and use my compressor to clean them out periodically.

—Phil Giordano, Sterling, VA



Shorthand measuring

I learned this trick by listening to drywall hangers call out dimensions to each other. When my crew calls out dimensions, all are given in whole inches and in sixteenths. Hence, 4½ in. is written as 4 and 8. One thirty-second over that is written with a small plus sign, and we call that measurement 4 and 8 strong.

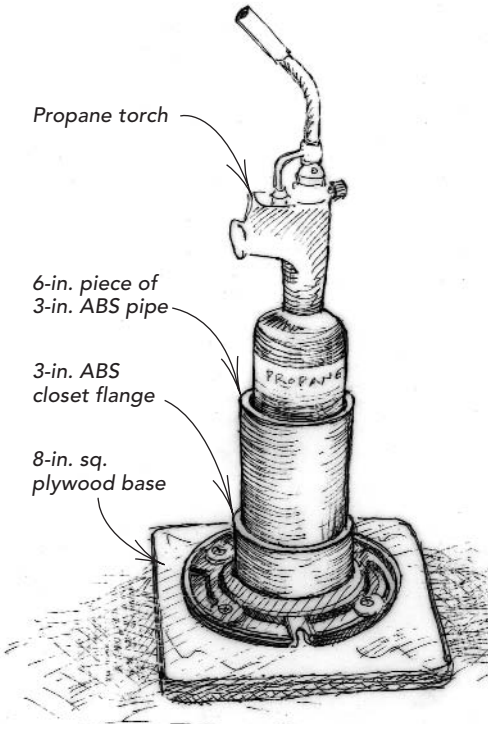
We never mistake 5⁄16 for 3⁄8, and adding the two together is a breeze. Three and one fourth plus 5⅜ becomes 3 and 4 plus 5 and 10. Bingo—8 and 14. One dimension easily could have been strong, too, or if both are, you know to add another sixteenth. You get used to certain frequent equations, and you really can fly then.

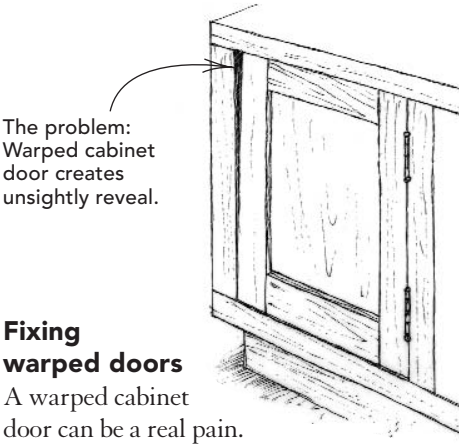
—Mark Padbury, Orcas Island, WA

Propane-torch caddy

With its tall profile and narrow base, a propane torch is knocked over easily, especially on a crowded workbench. So I made a stand for mine using some plumbing parts and a scrap of plywood (drawing below). It's a great way to store the torch and also serves as a third hand to hold the torch when it's lighted, which comes in handy sometimes.

—Ray A. Slocum, San Diego, CA





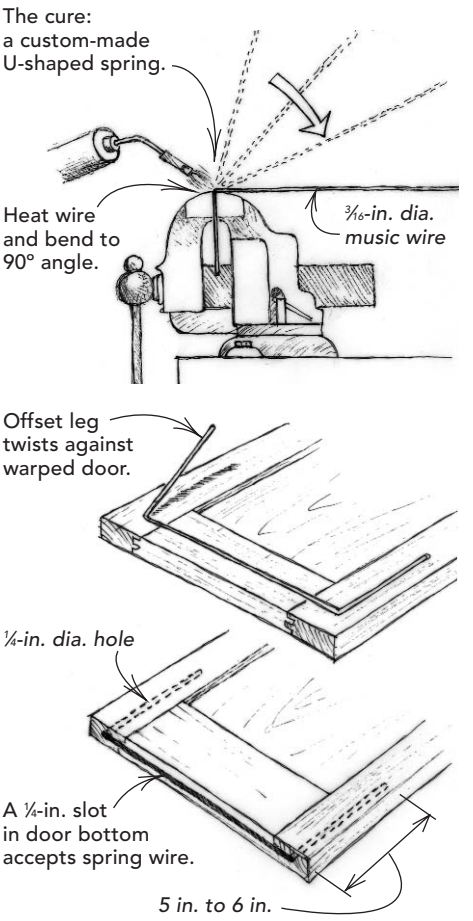
Fixing warped doors

A warped cabinet door can be a real pain. When you have spent hours matching panels, colors and grains, the last thing you want to do is remake a door. My approach takes a couple of hours and $5 in materials. In essence, I make a U-shaped spring, or torsion bar, out of music wire and insert it into the door (drawing right). Music wire is commonly available in hardware stores. It is much stiffer than regular mild-steel rods.

The first step is to lay out for drilling into the end grain of the stiles to miss any hinges or other hardware. Once you have the centers laid out, wait on the drilling until the torsion bar is made. If the distance between the steel legs varies a bit, you can shift the holes accordingly. It's easier to make the holes match the steel than to try to bend the steel to an exact dimension.

To make the torsion bar, you need music wire and a torch (ordinary propane torches really don't work; MAPP gas or oxy-acetylene are the best choices). For a ¾-in. thick cabinet door, I recommend using 3⁄16-in. music wire (drill the holes ¼ in.; otherwise it's too much of a struggle to fit the spring). Clamp the wire in a vise, leaving the leg long (7 in. to 8 in.). Bring the wire to an orange heat, and with pliers, bend the leg to a 90° angle. Finish the corner with a light hammer blow or two to square it up, and let it cool slowly. Don't chill or quench the bend. If you do, the steel will become brittle and can snap.

Using the dimension from the layout marks on your door, locate the bending point for the opposite leg. Now for the fun part. The idea is to offset the legs from each other so that when they are inserted in the door they twist against the warp. Bend the second leg offset to your best guess. Then, using a Dremel tool or grinder, cut off the legs to fit the depth of the holes you will drill in the stiles. Don't try using a bolt cutter on music wire unless you really want to buy a new one.



Now bore the door, using a doweling jig and a bell-hanger bit (available at most hardware stores). For a typical door, I bore in about 5 in. to 6 in. to provide the leverage required; with careful drilling, you can get this far fairly easily, even in a thin door. For thicker doors, you can use thicker wire or more offset as required. After boring, I use a router and a splining bit to rout a channel between the holes for the middle section of the torsion bar. Slip it in for a test fit, with a tape loop or string underneath to pull it out. The door may fit on the first try, or you may need to increase or decrease the spring tension by heating and rebending. A dab of hot glue or epoxy will hold the spring in place. If the door shifts again after a bit of time, you can remove the spring and adjust it. (For a related tip, see *Q&A* on p. 24.)

—Gregg Roos, San Francisco, CA