

Useful, clever and downright diabolical tips for your home, workshop and garden that will save you time and money, and generally make life a little easier

(Selections from tips submitted by the readers of Popular Mechanics Magazine)

1. Tone it up (or down)

You'd be surprised to discover how paint techniques can transform the look of your house – and I'm not talking about the choice of colour. For example, if your house has a low design, and you'd like to raise it's profile a little, you need to emphasise the verticals: paint the doors, corner trim and shutters (if fitted) in a colour that contrasts with the brickwork or plaster. If your home is an offensive hodge-podge of architectural features, tone it down by painting everything the same colour.

2. Holy hoses!

Pool cleaner hoses are expensive to replace. One way to prolong their life is by preventing abrasion against the pool wall, especially at the point where the hose emerges from the well. Prevent this by making a jacket from a discarded section of hose to cover the point of contact between the cleaner hose and the abraisive surface. Cut out a section of discarded hose about 300mm long, slice it lengthwise and fit it over the vulnerable section.

3. From your point of view

Here's a simple idea that works like a bomb. If you'd like to see how your planned landscaping will change the look of your garden, simply take a picture of the property from an appropriate angle (we found that a slightly elevated view works best), using colour slide film. Project the image onto a large sheet of paper, trace the outlines of the new feature, and fill it in with large crayons or watercolour paint. What you see is what you'll get.

4. Slide that light

A useful idea for positioning a light right over the job at hand on your workbench: securely mount a strip of curtain rail above your workbench (about the same length as the bench). Attach a working lamp to a curtain hook on the rail, so that it can be slid on the rail as needed to the right spot above the job. Its power cord is also attached to a series of curtain hooks on the rail.

5. A sticky end

If you run out of insect spray and you really need to zap a flying or crawling bug, try a quick squirt of hairspray (you know, that stuff you use to keep your Sixties coiffure in place). The sticky stuff will generally immobilise the insect, allowing you to, um, dispose of it humanely.

6. A roof over your head

Wire tent pegs have a nasty habit of rotating in the ground, allowing loops or elasticated guy ropes to come loose in the wind (this typically happens when it's raining). To tackle the problem, slip a rubber grommet underneath the top bend of the peg to provide a more secure purchase for the tent loop.

7. When the bell tolls

Cats may not be intellectual giants, but they're certainly cunning. We were distressed when our favourite feline began catching small birds and depositing the remains on the kitchen floor (did he really think we would be impressed?). We tied a small bell to his collar to give the birds fair warning, and that worked for a while, but it soon became clear that the cat had learned to move silently even with the bell. We've now attached a second bell to the collar, and that seems to be working (that is, the bells don't tinkle in synch!). We can live with the reproving looks from our pet.

8. Steady on!

When you're routing a narrow length of wood, lightly clamp a couple of lengths of timber to the workpiece; this effectively increases the width of the work surface and makes it much easier to keep the router steady.

9. Making your mark

Before opening a can of paint for the first time, "index" the edge of the lid and lip of the container with a felt-tip marker or hacksaw blade. This will ensure that the lid goes back in the same position each time it is replaced, thereby ensuring an airtight fit. Your paint will last considerably longer without forming a skin or going off.

Still with painting: a hole drilled in the handle of your paintbrush allows you to suspend it in solvent until you have time to clean it. Simply put a piece of dowel or wire through the hole and lay it across the top of the can. The bristles will not take on a "set" through having sat on the bottom of the container.

10. Tomato tip

Have you ever had a bunch of tomatoes that stayed green and hard and refused to ripen? The solution to this common problem is very simple: put the green tomatoes in a bag and add a ripe tomato. Before you know it, all of the tomatoes will be red and soft. The explanation is straightforward: the ripe tomato produces ethane gas, which causes the green tomatoes to ripen. The trick also works with bananas and citrus fruits.

11. Happy camping

If you're a regular camper, you have probably encountered situations where the ground is too soft or sandy to hold the pegs for guy ropes. Here's the solution: pack 4-8 large, strong bags along with your other camping gear (they take up no space whatsoever). When you need to anchor your tent, simply fill the bags with earth or sand, put them in position, and tie the guy ropes around them.

12. Ample warning

When laying cables or pipes in the garden, partly fill the trench with soil, then pour in a layer of builder's sand or lay in a length of red and white plastic 'danger' tape. Finally, top up with the original soil.

Years later, when you need to dig in the garden and have forgotten where you buried the pipes or cables, the sand or plastic tape will give you ample warning.

13. Taking on the bottomless reservoir

The flow graph of a traditional ball-valve toilet flush reservoir probably resembles a hyperbole – it never reaches the point it is striving for. The fuller the bowl gets, the slower the flow, and the slower it fills up, the longer it takes to get to the point where all flow ceases. In theory, it might never stop filling up.

In practice this means that the annoying dripping following the whistling can take hours, something that's especially undesirable in an en-suite. The solution involves altering the fill-up pattern so that the bowl can be filled beyond the "full" point, thereby shutting off the valve quickly and completely. I put a plastic bottle under the inlet spout that is filled first, then overflows into the rest of the bowl. It stands higher than the full mark of the reservoir.

In line with the full mark I make a very small hole. Here's what happens: the container fills up and overflows into the main bowl (the water emerging from the tiny hole is irrelevant at this point). When the flow drops to almost nothing, a point is reached where the inlet flows slower than the tiny stream coming out of the tiny hole in the container. Now the container empties into the reservoir through the tiny hole; this takes about 30 seconds. This bit of "buffered" water is enough to push the ball valve to a fully closed position. Problem solved.

14. No flies on us

Don't spray insecticide where you're working with food. If flies are bugging you, grow basil or mint in little pots on the windowsill (for some reason, flies seem to hate these herbs). Alternatively, sprinkle balls of cotton wool with a few drops of lavender oil and place them on saucers near your work surface.

15. Get a grip

If you need to install a battery or SIM card in a cellphone and the cover is difficult to remove (a common problem with today's small handsets), don a pair of latex gloves and try again. The grip provided by the rubber gloves will enable you to slide apart the two halves with ease.

16. Keeping track

Over the years my wife and I have amassed a large collection of excellent books. Problem is, people keep borrowing them, and worse still, don't bother to give them back. Here's how we tackled the problem: we printed out a few sheets of paper with four columns – for the borrower's name, book title, date borrowed, and date returned – and stuck them up on the side of the bookcase. Now we have details of each and every book that leaves our house. It's an easy way to keep track of our precious collection, and no one can possibly take offence.

17. Stay in touch

If you're travelling overseas (or locally, for that matter), you can save yourself endless hassle by writing your name and phone number on a piece of paper and sticking it inside each checked suitcase. That way, if your luggage ends up in Moscow sans tags, you can still be traced without strangers having to rifle through your underwear.

18. You've been warned

I live in a high crime area, and I've never had a burglary. The reason? Ten red LEDs distributed around the garden, all powered by their own batteries (which last many months). None of them are connected to an alarm, but the criminals don't know that. When the garden is in darkness, the lights look quite scary, and you would swear I had the most sophisticated alarm system on the planet.

19. When seconds count, what would *you* rescue?

Consider what objects you would want to save if your house caught fire and you had only a few minutes to retrieve them. Just for fun, my family and I sat down one evening to compile a list – and the result was an eye-opener. Rather than rescue "valuables" such as cameras, DVD players and computers, we decided our first priorities were irreplaceable personal items such as family photographs and legal documents.

After all, you can always replace consumer electronics, but memories...? This led to a discussion about how and where these items should be stored, and we came up with a plan to keep all such items in a locked steel trunk in a front room. How about valuable and irreplaceable information in computers, you might ask? Well, that's another issue entirely:

we invested in a backup system that allows us to keep regularly updated files off the premises. We also store about 100 MB of files online, where they remain secure no matter what happens to the hardware.

20. More on backing up data

If your business is heavily dependent on valuable data stored on your office (or home) computer, backing up your data is essential. I invested in a portable 120 MB hard drive (about R1000) and a "data cloning" program (downloadable from the internet). Once all valuable data has been copied to the portable hard drive the first time, backing up on subsequent occasions is quick and easy, as my backup software (FolderClone) only copies files that have changed since the last backup. This takes about 5 minutes a week. I keep my portable hard drive at home and store it in a built-in steel safe. I also use FolderClone to backup the data from the portable hard drive to my home computer. A small price to pay for peace of mind.

21. In case of emergency

At accident scenes and other medical emergencies, paramedics will turn to a person's cellphone for clues to his or her identity. You can make their job much easier with an idea they are trying to get everyone to adopt: it's called ICE (for In Case of Emergency).

You simply prefix the name of your chosen emergency contact with the letters ICE. The paramedics know what to look for, and will make that all-important call. Do it now.

22. None of your beeswax

Don't use beeswax to lubricate wooden drawer guides; silicone spray gives far better results. It lasts for years and, unlike wax, does not collect dust or dirt. It even works on soft wood such as pine and tubular wooden curtain rods with wooden ring curtain hooks.

23. Calling back the past

If you or your child needs to "age" a document for a school project, or you'd like to create this effect for fun, here's what you do: leave the piece of paper in direct sunlight for one day, dip it in water, then repeat the treatment. Make a jug of weak tea and soak the paper until you achieve the desired brown tint. Once it's dry, fold the paper several times, then place it in a hot oven for a few minutes, or heat it over a candle flame – and Voila! Your ancient document is ready.

24. More than just a phone

Buy a USB Bluetooth device and use it to transfer essential files to your cellphone. Your phone can be used to store just about any file format, and, depending on its memory size, could replace your memory stick. There's more: most new cellphone displays are also bright enough for use as an emergency "torch" when you go camping, and your phone book can be used to store non-telephone data such as your decoder number, car engine number, PIN codes and so on (remember to protect this data with a password).

25. Slip-sliding away

Do your sliding glass doors do anything but slide? Try spraying the tracks with aerosol furniture polish. The wax reduces friction and allows the doors to slide easily.

26. Packing a punch

Here's a useful tip I picked up at a friend's dinner party. Instead of using ice cubes to keep the punch cold (they tend to dilute the mixture), our hostess used frozen seedless grapes. They not only looked good, but could also be eaten once they thawed!

27. When shoes go bad

If the pong from a pair of shoes threatens to asphyxiate the entire household, try this: sprinkle a tablespoon of bicarbonate of soda inside each shoe and leave it to, er, sleep overnight. If this doesn't work (and now we're talking major public health hazard), put some unscented cat litter into two socks, put the socks into the shoes, and allow the litter to do its job. If this doesn't work either, burn the shoes or leave town.

28. Don't lose your head

If the head of your axe or hammer is becoming increasingly loose, or flies off when you use it, now's the time to take action. Hammer a couple of steel nails (ordinary nails will probably bend) into the centre of the handle (axe or hammer end); this expands the wood and helps to keep the head on.

Another method is to soak the top end of the wooden handle in linseed oil. This will swell the wood and secure the head.

29. Just for the record

If you're like me, you get terribly excited about a new cellphone, playing with the camera and other functions until you get bored, at which point you start using the phone for its primary purpose – to make money for the networks. Strangely enough, the camera CAN be useful. For example, I use mine to make a record of where I leave my car at airports and parking garages.

I also used to keep a photographic record of all the valuables in my house (I sent the images to a special folder in my Yahoo! E-mail account). If I have a burglary, I can print out images of the stolen items for the investigating officer

– even if my computer has disappeared with everything else. On one occasion I took a picture of a car's number plate at a traffic light after it sideswiped me. My insurance company traced the driver and made him pay for the repairs.

30. Sounds of silence

Has your sound system lost its voice because you managed to gash one of the speaker cones? Don't toss out the speaker – rather repair it. Simply cut a small patch from a paper coffee filter, apply a layer of rubber cement to one side and press it gently over the tear, making sure the patch follows the contours. Allow it to dry thoroughly before playing your favourite Eagles album. The frequency may be slightly compromised by the patch, but unless you're a rabid purist, you probably won't notice.

31. All wrapped up

Unless you have just won the lottery, you are probably just as disgusted as I am about the price of Christmas wrapping paper. Sometimes a roll costing R10 or more will contain just enough paper to wrap one gift. Last year, however, we tried something different – and saved ourselves a bomb. We bought a catering pack of aluminium foil and used it to wrap 22 gifts of varying sizes. Although you need to work carefully, foil makes very effective wrapping – and it looks fabulous under the Christmas tree. The bonus is that we have lots left over to use in the kitchen.

32. Whatever it takes dept.

My humane mole-zapper has the added benefit of cleaning up after my dogs. Open up the nearest mole hole, insert a generous dollop of doggy do, add a litre of water, and cover up the hole. I managed to clear my 1ha plot using this method.

33. Spit and polish

If you forgot to replace the lid on a tin of shoe polish and the contents have hardened, don't throw away the tin. You can probably soften the polish by placing the tin (with the lid on, naturally) in a bowl of very hot water. Alternatively, try adding a few drops of olive oil or turpentine.

34. Measuring up

I wanted to install a bookcase adjoining an irregular stone wall beside our fireplace, and needed to match the contours exactly. The solution was simple and effective: I put a soft pencil in a pair of compasses and used the sharp point to trace the contours, pressing gently on the pencil to replicate them on a length of wood. I then used a jigsaw to cut out the desired shape. The fit was perfect.

35. Don't lose that tool

If you are not a particularly tidy workman (like me) and have a workshop packed with a million assorted tools and accessories as I do, try using this method to find stuff: use a consecutive numbering system to mark each shelf and/or drawer with a felt-tip pen, in a logical order eg. S1, S2, S3.....D1, D2, D3. Then spend a lazy Sunday morning jotting down a list of all tools and accessories, nuts, bolts, screws, nails, bits & pieces etc in your workshop – each with its shelf/drawer number. Type each item/location vertically into an MS-Excel spreadsheet column in any order. Select everything and click Data, Sort, Sort by Ascending, OK to place all items in an alphabetical order. Print out the list and place it in your workshop for easy reference when looking for that elusive centre-punch.

36. Hurrah for schoolboy science

It's amazing what you can accomplish by applying a little schoolboy science. Recently my wife asked me to pull a carpet from under a very heavy cupboard so she could send it away for cleaning. However, the cupboard was full of books, and I couldn't budge it.

I wasn't keen on unpacking several dozen books, but then I had an idea: why not try a lever? So I went to the garage, found a solid-looking piece of wood (an old gatepost) and placed the tip under the cupboard, using a couple of bricks as a fulcrum. I pressed down on the other end of the gatepost and lifted the cupboard with ease, allowing my wife to pull out the carpet.

37. When seconds count

Years ago I made a list of emergency telephone numbers – ambulance service, doctor, nearest clinic, police, fire brigade and so on – and pasted it on the wall beside the telephone. I also listed my family's medical aid details, and the contact numbers for the electricity department (in case of power failures), Telecomms, DSTV and internet service provider. Do it now – you won't believe how much time and anxiety it will save you, especially in case of a medical emergency.

38. Gutter Sense

To keep leaves and debris from entering your roof gutter system and causing blockages, force a piece of gauze or netting wire (rolled into a ball) into all drainpipes.

39. Cheap needn't mean nasty

To greatly improve the quality of cheap PVA paint, mix one cup (250ml) of bonding liquid with each 5-litre can. Bonding liquid is basically dissolved latex, and adding it to PVA improves both the elasticity and the water-repellent properties of the paint. The powdery finish produced by lower-quality PVA paints will also be eliminated. Bonding liquid is available from most hardware stores.

40. Enzyme action

If you are stung by a bee, treat the sting with a paste made from water and meat tenderiser. Works every time.

41. Sleep easy

If you insist on sleeping in a bed equipped with those old-fashioned springs, and they keep you awake at night with their squeaking, try giving the springs a quick spray of cooking oil. You'll sleep like a baby.

42. One for the nutters

If you have to tighten a nut or bolt and the only spanner you have is just too big, place a piece of inner tube over the nut and try again. It may just do the job.

43. Into the fray

To stop the ends of nylon rope from fraying, melt the fibres together using a match, candle or cigarette lighter. Caution: don't burn your fingers on the hot nylon. For ropes made from hemp or other 'natural' fibres, coat the ends with shellac.

44. All wrapped up

To avoid having to wash out your paint trays after use, first line the tray with plastic wrap, or place the entire tray inside a plastic bag before pouring in the paint. When the job is finished, simply remove and discard the plastic.

45. Scrubbed raw?

Many of us have had to scrub our hands raw to remove the last vestiges of paint after a DIY job. Here's how to avoid the pain: before you start painting, rub petroleum jelly onto your hands. When you're finished, the stray dabs of paint will come off easily.

46. Frozen distributor

Some time ago I needed to adjust the engine timing on my 3-litre Ford, but found the distributor was immovable. Taking a hammer to it was not an option, so I tried something else – a CO2 fire extinguisher.

All you need to do is aim the extinguisher's nozzle at the distributor shaft where it enters the engine and fire off a few blasts. The icy CO2 causes the shaft to contract, allowing you to loosen it with a light tap of a mallet; mine came off at the first twist.

47. Take a leak

To stop a radiator leak in an emergency, block the hole with a piece of well-used chewing gum. If the leak is in one of the hoses, you may be able to stop it by wrapping the hose with insulation tape, a strip of old inner tube or even adhesive tape from your first aid kit.

48. Oranges and lemons

If you enjoy camping and getting back to nature, this tip should satisfy the environmental purist in you. Cut an orange or lemon in half and remove the flesh, leaving the peels intact. Place them carefully in the coals of your campfire and use them to cook eggs.

49. Keep on turning

Here's how to prolong the life of an electric fan. Once a year, drip 2 to 3 drops of ordinary motor oil onto the felt pads of the front and rear brushes of the motor's spindle. Don't use thinner oil such as 3-in-1, because it doesn't last. It is usually very easy to remove the protective shield and motor cover housing to get to the brushes. This also allows you to re-grease the little gear system that oscillates the fan. I treat all my household fans this way. One of them has been running smoothly for more than 15 years without even a hint of a rattle.

50. Play on, chaps

If there's a small leak in your cheap rugby or soccer ball, instead of throwing it out, simply inflate the ball with one of those instant "puncture kits in a can", available from your local garage or automotive shop. This seals the leak and re-inflates the ball.

51. Give it a blast

If you need to pull flex through a conduit and don't care to (or haven't got) a "fish tape", try this instead: tie a small piece of sponge (just smaller than the diameter of the pipe) on to the end of a thin string and blast it down the pipe with compressed air. It easily passes through bends in the pipe before shooting out the other end. Use the string to pull a heavier piece of nylon cord back down the conduit for use as the draw line. It works very well, just as long as there is no moisture in the pipe, which causes the string to stick to the sides.

52. Keep it cheap and simple

Don't waste money on expensive solvents to clean your brush or hands when working with polyester resin (glass fibre resin). Sunlight soap (in the yellow wrapper) and warm water does the job just as well. It costs next to nothing, it's ecologically friendly and kind to the skin.

53. The magic of magnetism

This one is for anyone who's ever knocked over a jar of loose screws or dropped a packet of nails on the floor. Find a powerful magnet, put it inside a clear plastic bag and run it over the errant hardware. When all the metal debris is stuck to the magnet, just turn the bag inside out.

54. Keep it smelling sweet

To keep the interior of your car always smelling aromatically pleasing, keep a sealed plastic tube of Sta-Soft fabric softener under or between the seats. Every few weeks give it a "kneading" to release more odour. It works like a charm, costs very little and lasts almost indefinitely.

55. Drill extension

Ever have to drill holes in a confined space, only to discover there's no room for the power tool? Then make yourself a drill extension: buy a second chuck and screw a bolt of appropriate diameter into the back. Use a hacksaw to remove the bolt's head, insert the end into the original chuck, and off you go.

56. Fix that itch

I discovered a novel and extremely successful way to remove the itch after sanding cured glass fibre. Take a strip of box tape (3M has a very good product) or even plain adhesive tape or Elastoplast and apply it to the affected area. When you rip off the tape (in the same way that women remove depilatory wax from their legs), the tiny fibres come with it, and the itch disappears.

57. Sticky tracks

If your shower door won't run smoothly on its track, chances are the bottom track has become fouled with accumulated gunk and mildew. Pour undiluted grape vinegar into the track and let it stand for 15 minutes. Plug the drain holes beforehand with tape or Prestik.

To keep the door sliding smoothly, simply rub candle wax up and down the aluminium sliding rail and you won't need a wrench to get out of the shower any more.

58. Clogged showerhead

Here's a quick fix for a clogged showerhead. Pour white vinegar into a plastic sandwich bag until it's half full and submerge the showerhead, taping the bag in place. Leave it overnight, remove the bag and scrub out any remaining lime scale with an old toothbrush.

59. Out, damned dent

I recently took my car in for a service and noticed a small dent. A service staffer suggested that I get rid of it by putting a few blocks of ice in a dishcloth and holding it against the dent for a minute or two. I tried it, holding an ice pack on the spot for about 2 minutes, and was very surprised to find that the dent had pulled out by about 95%.

The theory is quite simple: when metal is chilled, it contracts and pulls back to more or less its original shape.

60. Oil you need

Make your own batch of furniture oil easily and inexpensively. Mix three parts of olive oil to one part vinegar.

Alternatively, mix one part lemon oil to three parts olive oil. Both work well, but remember to shake the container well before applying.

61. In case of emergency

Many people have old cellphones that could be put to good use. My suggestion: buy a car charge adapter (available from street vendors for next to nothing) and put it, together with that old cellphone, in your car's glove compartment. Now you have an emergency call kit. You may not know it, but you can make a 112 emergency call (in RSA) without a SIM card.

62. How to drizzle a little oil

The next time you buy one of those "power" drinks, keep the container – it's very useful for storing and dispensing sunflower and olive oil. The nozzle opens easily, and it doesn't spill. Use a permanent marker to identify the contents, and keep it close to your kitchen's work area.

63. Bag takes care of the bugs

Cleaning your car's windscreen of dried-on bugs can require a lot of effort. To make it easier, use an old orange pocket/bag. Roll the bag into a ball shape, squirt some windscreen-washing liquid on to the glass, and scrub with the bag. The synthetic mesh won't harm the glass, but will get rid of the insect residues.

64. Getting rid of Old Smokey

If you've bought a second-hand car privately that hasn't been valeted – and the previous owner was a smoker – here's how to rid the interior of that musty nicotine odour. Fill a shallow container with ammonia and let it stand in the car for a full day, with the windows closed. Once the ammonia has done its job, remove it, open the windows and let the car air for a couple of hours.

65. Slippery stuff

Ordinary (and cheap) aqueous cream makes an excellent lubricant for fitting tyres to rims, and may be used for any other rubber-lubricating jobs. Unlike soapy water and dishwashing liquid, it does not run off or dry up, and it's completely safe

for us on rubber, metal and car paint finishes. The cream can also be used to gently remove insect stains from paintwork, chrome and glass.

66. Workshop notepaper

Here's a handy idea I got from my dad. For a plentiful supply of notepaper in the workshop (for that next award-winning design), mount a box of old fanfold computer printer paper on a shelf attached to the wall about 160cm above the floor. Lead the fanfold paper backwards over the top of the box (towards the wall) and downwards through a slot in the shelf. The paper then passes under a hacksaw blade mounted horizontally on a board attached to the wall.

Pull through the required length of paper under the hacksaw blade, press firmly on the blade and tear off paper against the teeth of the blade.

67. Bottoms up!

If you open a partly filled can of enamel paint that has stood on the shelf for quite a while, chances are a solid skin will have formed on the paint surface. Don't break the skin as the hard bits will contaminate the paint. Rather turn the can upside down and open the bottom with a can opener. Pour the paint into a glass jar or empty can. Used cans of paint should rather be stored upside down on a shelf (provided that the lid forms a leakproof seal) to prevent a skin from forming.

68. Bend it your way

When laying electrical PVC tubing, save money by bending the tubing with the help of a hot air gun instead of buying special elbow sections.

69. Aluminium's the answer

Having trouble painting out watermarks on the ceiling, or knots in wood? A simple and highly effective solution is to use aluminium paint as an undercoat. Once dry, it is ready to take either PVC or oil paint to finish the job.

70. Sucking up

If you have a lot of small nuts and bolts strewn around your workshop, use a vacuum cleaner to pick them up. Just put an old sock on the inlet pipe, hold on to it, and let the suction do the rest.

71. Tube tip

To prevent tubes of glue and epoxy adhesive from drying out after use, store them in a glass jar. A dab of petroleum jelly smeared on the thread of the caps will also prevent them from becoming glued to the nozzles.

72. Longer reach

To extend the nozzle of an oil can for lubricating hard-to-reach places, slip a plastic drinking straw over the tip of the nozzle.

73. Filter tip

To increase the grip of an oil filter wrench, fold a length of sandpaper double (grit side up) and place it between the filter and the leather strap.

74. Fire-starter

Don't throw out your used tea bags. Keep them in a large glass jar half filled with paraffin. When lighting the braai or camp fire, insert them between the charcoal blocks and light them. They will burn long enough to light the charcoal.

Alternatively, simply soak a few pieces of charcoal in paraffin for a while, then light them.

75. Solder on

Many years ago I moved into a cottage and found a water tap in the back yard was leaking very badly at the gland nut. On investigating, I found there was no seal of any description. All I had at the time was resin-core solder, which I applied and secured with the gland nut. I then repeated the process, adding more solder. Today, 25 years later, the seal still works perfectly.

76. Cool tip

If you scrape the frozen condensate from the inside of your freezer and allow it to thaw, you end up with pure distilled water for topping up your car battery water.

77. Up the humble potato

Whenever you take a long car trip, make sure there is always a potato and a knife in the glove compartment. When it's raining cats and dogs, and the wipers can't keep up, reducing visibility to dangerous levels, just stop under the next bridge, cut the potato and rub it over the windscreen. The potato juice makes the raindrops run off the windscreen as if by magic.

78. A hole lot better

To enlarge an existing hole in wood or chipboard is really tricky because it's virtually impossible to get the drill bit positioned exactly in the centre of the old hole. Overcome the problem by placing a tight-fitting piece of dowel inside the

existing hole, about 2mm below the surface. Make a small pilot hole in the centre of the dowel and use it as a guide when drilling the new hole with the larger bit.

79. Cutting-edge economics

Here's how to extract many more shaves from an ordinary two- or three-blade shaver. It's a real money saver, and I've been doing it for 8 years. Hold the blade under the hot water tap (as hot as you can bear) for 15-20 seconds, then rub it on a smooth surface (a bathroom mirror or tile is ideal) about 15 times in both directions, applying a fair amount of pressure.

For even better results, aim the showerhead at a smooth tile and, once it has heated up, rub the blade 15 times with the hot water still flowing. Does it work? Well, I've shaved for up to 14 days with a twin "throwaway" blade and twice as long with a standard twin blade.

80. Going soft on us

Every DIY practitioner needs an effective hand cleaner in the home workshop. Try this: fill a pump-action dispenser with cheap foam bath liquid from your local supermarket. Pump two squirts into your hands and rub them together vigorously for excellent results. This affordable hand cleaner leaves no dirty deposits in your washbasin, keeps your skin soft, and even smells good.

81. Holy, holy

So you need to repair holes in a concrete or cement screed floor? Here's what to do.

Clean out all loose debris and wash out the hole with water. Make up a dry mixture of 2 parts clean sand and 1 part cement, and mix a separate batch of white wood glue and water in equal proportions.

Add the glue solution to the dry mixture and mix it together to get the consistency of toothpaste.

Paint the inside of the clean, dry hole with the glue solution, then fill the hole with the wet mixture. If the hole is more than 15mm deep, fill in layers of not more than 15mm deep. Paint each dry layer with the glue mix before filling in the next layer. Finish the surface to match the existing floor. It can be walked on with stiletto heels after 24 hours.

82. Bag it

If you live in a hard water area, you could find unsightly calcium deposits forming around your taps. To break down these tough deposits without having to remove the tap, simply pour vinegar into a small freezer bag and tie it around the spout with a rubber band, ensuring that the vinegar covers the calcium deposit. By morning the spout will be sparkling clean.

83. Clear the clog

A safe and non-caustic drain cleaner can be made by mixing half a cup of bicarbonate of soda, a cup of household salt, and two tablespoons of cream of tartar. Pour some of the mixture down the drain and let it stand for half an hour. Flush thoroughly with boiling water afterwards.

84. Wet, wet, wet

Have you ever had to write off a cellphone after dropping it in a pool, bath or toilet? It's an expensive mistake: repair shops generally tell you the phone is beyond help. If this happens to you, here's how you might save your costly equipment:

Remove the phone from the water as quickly as possible and take out the battery. Next, submerge the phone in a jar of methylated spirits for at least 10 minutes, then place it in the sun to dry for a week or two (hey, no-one said this was a quick fix). Alternatively, open up the phone and place it in the blast of a hairdryer for a fairly long time. If you're lucky, you'll be able to re-insert the battery and start using the phone again. If not, try to remember not to dangle your phone over toilets.

85. Old wood, new look

An old piece of furniture that's covered in a layer of grime built up over the years can look as good as new if treated as follows: dip an old rag in undiluted ammonia, wring it out, and give the grimy surfaces a thorough rubdown. Rinse the cloth in clean water if it gets too dirty.

86. Solve kitchen sink woes

Here's a good use for discarded milk bottles. When your kitchen sink trap gets blocked by tea leaves, coffee grounds, or worse, fill a plastic milk bottle with hot (not boiling) water and place the inverted bottle in the drain hole. The warm water makes the bottle pliable, so one vigorous downwards push collapses the bottle and shoots the water down the trap, freeing the drain at once. It works every time.

87. Easier with an egg carton

When fixing an appliance or any complex item, it's no good taking it apart if you can't put it back together again! One half of an empty egg carton is just the thing to keep track of what goes where, and in what order. By numbering the 12 cups – and using them in that order to store removed small parts when dismantling the broken appliance – you'll be able to keep track of all the bits and pieces. Assembly then means just working your way back again in sequence through the cups.

88. Save those brushes

When paint brushes have become hard (perhaps you allowed the turps to dry out), simmer them in boiling vinegar for half an hour, then wash the brushes with soap and water. They'll turn out like new.

89. Fly off

Here's how to prevent flies from settling on light bulbs and lampshades: simply wipe them with a little camphorated oil (no, not the flies, Wally).

90. Perfect penetration

To control the exact depth when drilling a hole in wood or in a wall, slip a length of tight-fitting rubber tube or gas hose over the rear part of the drill bit so that only the required depth protrudes.

91. Stability control

To stabilise unbraked castors on the workbench or workshop floor, place a bottle top from your favourite bottled beer upside down under each wheel. For larger diameter wheels, use tin can lids. If the floor is particularly slippery, allow a thin layer of silicone sealant to set on top of the stopper before placing it under the castor wheel; this acts as a non-slip interface.

92. Perfect parking every time

Having parked your car in the ideal spot in the garage, suspend a small plumb bob from the ceiling or rafters to line up about 2-5 cm above the right-hand windscreen washer nozzle. Now you can always park your car in exactly the same spot; simply line up the washer nozzle every time you drive in (but beware what your kids are up to on 1 April).

93. Plugged nails

Want an easy way to drive nails into concrete or a hard brick wall? Drill a hole twice the diameter of the nail, using a masonry drill bit. Fill the hole with a glue gun, wait for the glue to set, then drive in the nail. The glue will act as a mini-masonry plug, expanding as the nail enters. No more bent nails and sore fingers.

94. Dampness does it

When laying bricks for a wall, wet them thoroughly before applying the mortar. The cement will adhere far better to the damp bricks and the moisture will stop the mortar from drying out too rapidly – especially in hot weather.

95. Out on the tiles

Here's a useful tip for grouting tiles. Fill a strong plastic bag with grout and cut a small hole in one corner. Press the grout into the spaces between the tiles, much as you would decorate a cake.

96. Welcome advice

A woven straw doormat can last indefinitely if first treated with clear wood varnish or sanding sealer when new. If slightly diluted, the varnish or sealer can penetrate the woven fibres thoroughly, thereby preventing moisture from rotting the straw.

97. Drill tip

Drilling a hole in glass or a ceramic object is not too difficult if tackled the right way. Cut a short length of copper tubing (the diameter should correspond to the size of the hole you need), fit to your electric drill chuck and spread valve grinding paste on the edge of the tube. The drill must have variable speed control as the tube has to rotate slowly. Also spread a little paste on the spot where the hole must be drilled. Drill slowly and don't press hard. Get someone to hold the object firmly while you control the drill with both hands. This method works well if you want to convert a wine bottle or ceramic vase into a lampstand and you need an entry hole for the power cord.

98. Screwing off

To unscrew the over-tightened lid of a jar or canister, rotate the container while gently tapping the lid's outer rim. It will invariably come off with no further problems.

99. Gently does it

To prevent clamps from damaging wooden surfaces, glue thin rubber strips (cut from an old car inner tube) to the clamping surfaces. Alternatively, use plastic bottle caps.

100. Handle with care

When moving house wrap valuable china, ornaments and glassware in wet newspaper; once dry, it forms a protective casing. Bubble wrap is a better alternative, but costs more.

101. Towel rail tip

Two chromed towel rails mounted one above the other against a garage or workshop wall (about 1m apart) makes a great storage space for lengthy objects such as tubing, rods or strips of timber. The lower rail should be mounted about 30cm from the floor.

102. Clean calculator

Keep a small packet calculator on hand in your garage or workshop for quick calculations. Protect it from grubby fingers by covering it with glad-wrap.

103. Dirty trick

Here's a sensible way to get your 4x4 vehicle's chassis cleaned up after some muddy bundu-bashing: park the vehicle on the lawn and place a garden sprinkler underneath. Turn the tap open all the way. The strong jets of water will wash off all the mud and dirt and save you the costs of steam-cleaning the chassis. While you're watering the grass, the nutrient-rich mud will feed your lawn.

104. Cold care

Superglue tends to dry out rapidly after the tube has been opened. To make it last longer, pop it in a ziplock bag and keep it in the refrigerator.

105. Bag lifter

To help you lift a full garbage bag from a regular sized rubbish bin, nail two pieces of wood together in a cross-shape, just big enough to fit in the bottom of the bin. Attach two lengths of cord to the wood (the end of each length to the end of a piece of wood). Two short lengths of hose can be cut and slipped over the rope to form two handles. Place the wooden base in the bottom of the bin and allow the two looped ropes to hang over the edge of the bin. Pull ropes to remove full garbage bag.

106. Tool hanger

Collect pull rings from soft drink cans, nail or screw them to the handles of lightweight tools and paint brushes, and hang them on a tool board.

107. Grout gunk

To get rid of fungus growth on damp walls and grouting in bathrooms, mix a paste consisting of household bleach and bicarbonate of soda. Apply to the affected area with a stiff brush. Leave the mixture in place for a few minutes before rinsing off with soapy water.

108. Strip tip

Use paint stripper to clean old paint residues from paintbrushes, or soak them in automotive brake fluid for a few hours.

109. Rotten advice

Dry rot in timber can be treated by painting the affected area with petrol. The fungus will turn black and die. Rinse off with a soapy solution.

110. Straight as a die

To obtain a straight and accurate cut along a piece of timber, score the wood with a sharp hobby knife (run it along a straight edge or ruler along the cut line). Then, holding the knife at an angle, make a second cut parallel to the first, forming a wedged cut line. This groove will prevent the saw from wandering and result in a perfectly straight cut.

111. Liquid compost

To make liquid fertilizer for your garden, you need a large open-ended drum or plastic container. Fill an onion bag with compost or manure and hang it inside the container filled with water. Stir the water every few days. The water will turn into a rich brown brew that's great for reviving sickly plants or stimulating crop growth. After a few refills with water, the contents of the bag must be replaced.

112. Bonding problem

When you want to bond plastics and other materials, apply adhesives to both surfaces, and sprinkle immediately with sodium bicarbonate. This creates a chemical reaction that fuses the two materials together. It's strong enough to drill and tap.

113. Non-iron soldering

To solder a join on electric wire, wrap resin-cored solder tightly around the join, then melt it with the flame from a match or cigarette lighter.

114. Good impressions

To make accurate rows for planting seed in soft soil in a jiffy, press a length of metal pipe into the earth.

115. For the birds

Keep birds coming to your garden during winter by putting out seed cake for them. To make one, fill a paper cup with birdseed, pour hot fat over the seed, and place in the refrigerator. Once it has set, peel off the paper cup and place the seed cake in the garden.

116. Coffee cure

If you're filling holes in wood with wood filler that's lighter in colour than the final finish, add a few granules of instant coffee when preparing the mixture. The coffee should darken the filler and ensure a close match with the final finish.

117. Tar trick

A paste made from bicarbonate of soda (baking soda) and water will remove tar spots from your car's paintwork without marring the finish. Apply polish after removing the tar.

118. Splitting nails

When driving very large nails into timber, first drill a small pilot hole (smaller in diameter than the nail). This reduces the chances of splitting the wood, and makes it easier to drive in the nail. If you're using timber that has the tendency to split easily, nip off the points of the nail with a sidecutter; this forms a spaded end. Now place the nail "spade" across the grain and hammer away.

119. Sticky stuff

The glue residue from stick price tags on containers, kitchenware and other products can easily be removed by spraying with a dash of hairspray or Doom.

120. Oh, screw it

To prevent damage to worn or tight wood screw and small bolts such as Phillips and slotted screws, place a little grinding paste on the screw/bolt head or driver tip; this will increase the grip and prevent slipping.

121. Perspex problem

To get rid of a scratch mark on Perspex, rub it with toothpaste or brass polish and buff it with a soft cloth.

122. Leading light

Stuck without a lead light? A quick replacement can be made by fitting a bulb holder to one hole in the handle of a large bulldog clip. The light can then be clamped by means of the clip and held in any position.

123. Gutter sense

A PVC roof gutter mounted along the inside of your garage wall is the perfect storage area for thin strips of timber, tubing and other long but light items. Even the bare brackets without the gutter will do the trick.

124. Sharp tip

If you don't have a whetstone or knife sharpener to sharpen a knife or tool blade, the rim of a clay or ceramic flower pot makes a good substitute.

125. Unplugging it

Here's an easy way to remove an expansion (welch) plug from an engine block without harming the plug seat. Drill a small hole into the centre of the plug and insert a self-tapping screw into the hole. Leave the head of the screw well out, then simply slip the claw of a hammer under the head of the screw and pull it out.

126. Coke for corrosion

Car battery terminal corrosion can be effectively removed by pouring a little Coke on the affected area. Rinse with warm water and wipe petroleum jelly on the terminal and terminal post to stop further corrosion. A tablespoon of bicarbonate of soda in warm water is also effective.

127. Always tangles

Do you always manage to get the extension lead tangled? Then try this: remove the plug at one end of the lead, bore a hole in the bottom of a cheap plastic bucket and thread the lead through the hole before reattaching the plug. Then coil the lead inside the bucket for easy transportability and tangle-free storage.

128. Carpet polisher

Cut a circular piece of carpet tile to fit your disc sander and use it as a polisher on wood or metal surfaces.

129. Soft soap

Make your own liquid soap to use in the garage or workshop by dissolving scraps of toilet soap in a solution of 250ml hot water and 3ml borax.

130. Sharp tip

A plastic rawlplug slipped over the end of an awl will protect the tip from damage.

131. Cold cut

Cutting foam rubber can be tricky. To simplify the task, soak the foam in water and place it in the freezer. Once it has hardened it will be much easier to cut with a sharp knife. Holes can also be drilled in the frozen block.

132. Fitting funnel

A plastic funnel screwed to a wall is the ideal dispenser for a ball of string. Drip the ball into the mouth of the funnel and pull the end of the string through the spout.

133. Home made paint stripper

1/ 1 kg builder's lime; 2 tablespoons washing soda; 3 litres water to form a paste. Spread onto the surface and let it stand for 15 minutes before scraping off. Wear rubber gloves.

2/ 1 cup washing soda; 1 cup Scrubb's ammonia; 1 cup lime. Spread onto the surface and let it stand for 15 minutes before scraping off. Wear rubber gloves.

134. Let it rip

Here's a neat way to cut sheets of sandpaper into usable sections. All you need is a block of wood (100 x 350 x 15mm), an old hacksaw blade, two flat washers and two wood screws. Screw the blade onto the wooden block, using the washers to form a gap between the blade and the wood. Position sandpaper under blade and pull to cut.

135. Clever cut

When cutting thin metal plate with a hacksaw, first sandwich the metal between two layers of plywood. This will ensure that the metal doesn't bend, and your cut will be far more accurate.

136. Fouled-up fireplace

If the brickwork around your fireplace or braai is coated with a layer of black soot, scrub the affected area with a half-and-half vinegar and water solution. An aerosol oven cleaner will also do the trick.

137. Back-to-front advice

Sanding the underside of a door that's sticking in the jamb (without taking it off the hinges) can be a real hassle. To simplify the task, attach a flexible sanding disc (facing the wrong way round) to your power drill. You can now slip the disc under the door edge with the sanding surface facing upwards.

138. Up the spout

To unclog the spout on a cartridge of silicone sealant, remove the spout and screw a wine bottle corkscrew into the dried silicone at the wide end, Give a tug and the silicone will pop out. A long wood screw and a pair of pliers will also do the job.

139. Clever cartridge

Clear plastic film cartridges can be converted into handy storage units for small screws, tacks, pins and so on. Use the old jam-jar trick by attaching the lids to the underside of a shelf, and press the cartridges home.

140. Drilling by numbers

Due to their small diameter, it's pretty awkward to read the sizes on thin drill bits. Solve the problem by wiping white typewriter correction fluid (Tippex) over the markings. Wipe off the excess, and the size of the bit will be clearly legible in white against the dark metal of the shank.

141. Hang it all

If you find it awkward to hang paint brushes by means of the small holes in the handle, saw the handle end off square near the tip, drill a small pilot hole in the wood and screw in a large eye-hook. The brush is easier to hang and the round eye-hook is easier on your hand than the pointed end while painting.

142. Aerial survey

An old telescopic radio aerial can be used to take measurements in inaccessible areas, or used as a depth gauge. Insert the fully extended aerial into the difficult spot and push it until you reach the desired length or depth. Then measure the length of the aerial with a tape measure or steel ruler.

143. Hose help

Tired of struggling with a tangled length of garden hose? The hose (up to 20m) can be neatly stored in an old car tyre. This protects the hose from deteriorating in direct sunlight, it's much tidier, and the tyre can be easily rolled from the garden shed to the lawn. Your local tyre shop usually has old casings.

144. Shine on

Copper and brass items will retain their lustre after polishing if coated with a film of hairspray.

145. Rough stuff

When cutting laminated chipboard with a handsaw or jigsaw, the melamine tends to chip, leaving a rough finish. To solve the problem, first tape the cutting line with masking tape.

146. Target practice

If you're among the many people who battle to reverse your car into a parking space, try this: affix a small circle of black paper to the rear window, placing it so you can see it clearly in the rearview mirror. Aiming the car as you would a rifle, using the driving mirror as the back sight and the black spot as the front sight, keep the black spot aligned with the drifting target by swinging the steering wheel as needed. A bit of practice on a quiet stretch of road or in an empty parking lot will soon have you parking like a pro.

147. Knowing your limits

Continuing on the theme of parking, if you park in tight spot in a crowded garage with the front bumper close to the back wall of the garage, hang a small weight (such a small block of wood) on a length of thin string from a strategically located beam so that the car's windscreen stops a few millimetres short of the weight (exactly in front of your eyes) when the car is parked to its maximum depth into the garage. In future you'll be able to park with your front bumper close to the wall without knocking the garage down.

148. Drill glass

If you need to mount a wall mirror that's too heavy for double-sided tape, use this method to drill holes for the screws. First, buy a special glass drill with a tungsten carbide tip. Use a china marker to mark the exact spot where you want the hole, then make a circle of Prestik or putty around the mark and pour in a small amount of white spirit.

Drill slowly until the tip of the bit just goes through, then turn over the glass and finish the job from the other side.

149. Inconspicuous consumption

Recent power cuts in the Western Cape prompted us to reconsider the amount of electric power we actually require on a daily basis. A stock take revealed that we really need hot water only at night and in the morning. I had a time switch with a current rating of 15 amps fitted to the geyser circuit (costing about R250), and our geyser is presently switched on only from 8:30pm to 9:30pm, and 6:15am to 6:45am. This provides us with ample hot water for our requirements and is even sufficient for our daily housekeeping purposes.

The result is a significant saving on our electricity account as well as a reduction in consumption during peak hours.

150. He's got it taped

To repair a leak in a water pipe, first turn off the supply at the mains, dry the area, then bind the puncture point tightly with a few turns of good quality plastic insulation tape. Secure the seal with a stainless steel hose clamp or Jubilee clamp.

I have known such "temporary" repairs to last for several years.

151. Every nook and cranny

Let's assume your Wendy house is falling apart because you refuse to apply wood preservative to those hundreds of little corners. Now let's talk trellises: have you ever tried to put sealant on a trellis? It's almost easier to take the thing apart and coat each piece individually.

Here's the solution: buy yourself a cheap plastic spraygun – the type used for spraying roses. Dilute the sealant mixture so that it will not block the nozzle, or choose a spraygun with a bigger nozzle (alternatively, use a pressurised spraygun). With very little effort, you can apply the solution to every nook and cranny.

152. Getting fresh

If you'd like your car's interior to smell good and you don't want to cough up for fancy car fresheners, try this: place a refill sachet of fabric softener on the back parcel shelf once a month and use the old one in the laundry.

153. Great grout

Here's an easy way to apply tile grout. Take an empty silicone sealant tube and use a 10mm steel rod to push the plunger out from the front. Next, place the spout on the front and fill the tube from the back (trim the spout to ensure an easy flow). Insert the plunger, place the tube in the application gun and apply the grout in the gaps between the tiles. Hint: remove excess grout with the index finger of a surgical glove (the whole glove can be unwieldy), then use a wet rag to smooth the surface and tidy up your work. No mess, No fuss.

154. Drill extension

Ever have to drill holes in a confined space, only to discover there's no room for the power tool? Then make yourself a drill extension: buy a second chuck and screw a bolt of appropriate diameter into the back. Use a hacksaw to remove the bolt's head, insert the end into the original chuck, and off you go.

155. Fix that itch

This is a good way to remove the itch after sanding cured glass fibre. Take a strip of box tape (3M has a very good product) or even plain adhesive tape and apply it to the affected area. When you rip off the tape (in the same way women remove depilatory wax from their legs), the tiny fibres come with it, and the itch disappears.

156. Sticky tracks

If your shower door won't run smoothly on its track, chances are the bottom track has become fouled with accumulated gunk and mildew. Pour undiluted grape (or standard) vinegar into the track and let it stand for 15 minutes. Plug the drain holes beforehand with tape or Prestik. Alternatively, rub a candle up and down the aluminium sliding rail.

157. Clogged showerhead

Here's a quick fix for a clogged showerhead. Pour white vinegar into a plastic sandwich bag until it's half full and submerge the showerhead, taping the bag in place. Leave it overnight, remove the bag and scrub out any remaining lime scale with an old toothbrush. Your showerhead will look as good as new.

158. Out damned dent

I recently took my car in for a service and noticed a small dent. A service staffer suggested I get rid of it by putting a few blocks of ice in a dishcloth and holding it against the dent for a minute or two. I tried it, holding the ice pack on the spot for about 2 minutes, and was very surprised to find that the dent had pulled out about 95%.

The theory is quite simple: when metal is chilled, it contracts and pulls back to more or less its original shape.

159. You've been warned

I live in a high-crime area, and I've never had a burglary. The reason? Ten red LEDs distributed around the garden, all powered by their own batteries (which last for many months). None of them is connected to an alarm, but the criminals don't know that. When the garden is in darkness, the lights look quite scary, and you would swear I had the most sophisticated alarm system on the planet.

160. Don't lose those settings

On most modern vehicles, the problem of losing the adaptive settings when the battery is disconnected (for example, pre-selected radio stations, clocks and seat positions) can be overcome by making sure there is an uninterrupted supply of power to the car's electronics. Buy a lamp that plugs into the cigarette lighter socket, then remove the light and attach battery clamps to the wires that remain. Plug the cable into the cigarette lighter socket and use a multimeter to locate the positive battery clamp (paint it red).

Next, take a spare battery and connect the cable to the battery, taking care to observe the correct polarity. Now you can remove the vehicle's battery. Both the adaptive memory and the radio code will be retained by the spare battery, enabling you to recharge the old battery or fit a new one.

Another method is to use a set of jumper leads and a spare battery this way: Firstly place the spare battery close by and connect the jumper leads to the existing battery cables (that is, not the terminals), attaching the earth to earth and positive to positive. Next, disconnect the cables from the old battery, making sure the jumpers stay connected. Replace or recharge the old battery, reconnect the cables to the terminals, and disconnect the jumper leads.

161. Multitasking mania

Want to avoid making a mess when you drill a hole in a wall? Buy one of those rubber ring seals that are used to seal the down pipe in a toilet cistern (they're available from any hardware store for next to nothing), slip it over the drill chuck, and press the ring against the wall while you drill. All the dust and grit will be caught in the rubber seal. When you're finished, tilt it upwards and carefully move it away from the wall. With a little practice, you should be able to catch all the debris.

162. Welding plastic

You'll occasionally find it difficult to repair fractures in plastic items because the solvent in some glues do not dissolve the plastic. My solution: use a hot soldering iron to weld the breaks. If any infill is required along the break, the void can be filled by using the plastic handle of an old toothbrush.

163. Gut feeling

A friend recently gave me this advice when I needed to draw phone cables through a conduit in my home: rather than battle to get a fishtape through all the bends, attach a lightweight fishing gut to a small piece of polystyrene and use a vacuum cleaner on the other end of the conduit to suck it through. Then you simply attach the cable to the gut and pull it through.

164. Defrosting your fridge

Want to defrost your fridge's freezer compartment quickly, without damaging the plastic walls or elements, or making a big mess? Buy a pump-action water pistol, fill the reservoir with hot water, and direct it at the ice. The jet cuts the ice like a laser, and can easily be directed at hard-to-reach areas. Leave the lower tray in place to catch dripping water and falling ice.

165. On the cutting edge

If you've ever been cut by extremely sharp glass remnants while removing a broken light bulb from its socket, you'll appreciate this hint: simply push a raw potato against the remnants of the bulb and twist it out.

166. It's all about connecting

A neighbour had left his SUV parked all night with the headlights on. I lent him my jumper leads, but after many attempts to start his vehicle, and lots of revving from the "donor" car, his engine wouldn't even turn over. Then I remembered a tip: attach the negative lead of the jumper cable directly to the bodywork of the car rather than the battery terminal. We tried it – and the SUV started immediately.

167. On a saucy note

Have you ever battled to get the contents to start flowing from a new bottle of tomato sauce? You need to get some air down there. To release the sauce, insert a plastic straw until it touches the bottom of the bottle, withdraw it, and start pouring.

168. It's all in the timing

Recently there have been a deluge of battery-operated tools in the market. Most are powered by nickel-cadmium (NiCad) or nickel metal hydride (NiMH) batteries that are built into the tool or packaged into a removable battery pack. In both cases, the batteries have to be recharged by connecting them to mains power through a special charger.

These batteries have two distinct disadvantages that have made it very awkward for "do-it-yourselfers" who want fully charged tools to be available for their occasional weekend projects. Firstly, the batteries lose charge over time (even if they are not being used) and secondly, they can be damaged or lose their capacity if they are left on charge indefinitely.

The solution is to connect your battery chargers to mains through a 24-hour mains timer. These devices, costing R40 or less, plug directly into a mains outlet and allow you to switch the mains power cyclically on and off over a 24-hour period, down to a resolution of 15 minutes at a time.

By plugging all your battery chargers for the various tools into a single "multiplug"-type extension connected to mains through the timer, you will always have properly charged power tools. Experience shows that setting the timer for two to three charge cycles of 15 minutes each per day works quite well.

169. Softly, softly

To prevent the paint from being chipped when you open your car's door in the garage, use masonry nails to attach a length of old hosepipe (horizontally) on either side of the garage, so that the edges of the doors strike the hosepipe rather than the hard wall. Alternatively, use a thick rubber strip with adhesive backing – available from your local hardware store.