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Garages make an ultimate play space

By Michael McHale/Lincoln Journal Star

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As wind thrashes the trees on a chilly October day, Lincoln resident Gary Pepin watches leaves skid into his garage.

The foliage doesn't know it is invading Pepin's territory, the place he has come to call his own as the decades have ticked by.

Ladders and shovels neatly line one wall. Paint scrapers and wrenches hang on another. In back, a stool sits next to a long wooden desk — a makeshift office where Pepin sometimes makes recruiting phone calls.

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The longtime head coach of the Husker track and field team enjoys spending part of his evenings hanging out in the garage.

He is not alone. A slew of men have turned the space into a personal haven, somewhere more than just a spot to park a couple of cars.

"The truth is," Pepin said, smiling, "I'm a pipe smoker. My wife doesn't like me smoking in the house, so I can come out here and puff on my pipe.

"It's kind of a nice place to get away to."

Sara Shragal, a representative of the national home design service DirectBuy, said more people in recent years have personalized their garages. Sometimes they set up an office for work, or they wire an entertainment center for friends and relatives to enjoy. The uses are endless.

A weakened housing market might be a reason for the trend, Shragal said — and the fact a lot of people like to work from home. Whatever the cause, garages are often ideal spots for men and families to relax.

"They're making do with what they have," Shragal said. "They're creating that ultimate space."

The idea was nothing new for Pepin, who took over his garage when his family moved to Lincoln nearly 30 years ago. He organized his lawn equipment and bought a heater for the winter, ensuring he could work with all his tools, mowers and whatever else he had on hand as the evenings took on a chill.

Get more out of your garage

Let's face it. The garage can be a dungeon to hide things away, a cave to store personal artifacts that haven't been touched in years.

From lawn equipment to boxes of books, items can pile quickly inside the dark walls of the garage.

But cleaning once in a while doesn't hurt, and actually finding what you're looking for isn't a bad thing.

Sure, the road to organization may seem daunting. Then again, that's what weekends and evenings are for.

The process is doable, said Sara Shragal, a representative of the national home design service DirectBuy. And she has some tips to help you get started.

-- Throw it out: Spend some time sorting through the mess, then save the necessities and get rid of the excess.

"The more you can put away, the better,"

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Shragal said. "Get rid of extra tools. Go through everything."

Have a garage sale. Give to charity.

And if something is utterly useless, throw it away. Trash cans are useful tools.

-- Organize, organize, organize: Eliminate the clutter and put things away by installing garage cabinets or buying some cheap shelves. This will help clear the floor of annoying clutter.

Plus, cabinets and shelves conveniently store tools, supplies, athletic gear and more. And they help prevent equipment from moisture and other leaks.

"You really do want to get organized," Shragal said. "And make use of the walls and ceilings."

That means hammering in some nails or some sort of pegs to hang items from, including bikes, rakes, tools and ladders.

Especially ladders, Shragal said. Then each rung can serve as its own mini-shelf or a place to hang more supplies.

-- Label, label label: Make your life easier by marking boxes and storage bins. Label them by their contents or stack similar items together.

For once, find what you're looking for.

-- Personalize: Make the garage another room in the house. Put down some epoxy floor paint, Shragal said, and give the space a comfortable feel. Then prop a TV on a corner shelf, pull out some folding chairs and have some drinks courtesy of a kegerator, the combination of a keg and refrigerator that requires little space.

If you have some extra time, paint the walls or hang sports memorabilia. Decorate the garage, and bring in a pub table you can sit around with some friends.

"Have some fun with it," Shragal said.

Michael McHale

He set up a video system so he could study athletes from home, and he brought in a folding ping pong table and honed his skills against former Husker swimming coach Cal Bentz.

The video equipment now rests in Pepin's basement, and the table tennis board currently sits at the Bob Devaney Sports Center. The guys were getting too good to play in the confines of a garage — and they were sick of chasing the little ball down the driveway.

"I wish this garage was bigger," Pepin said, noting he's been tempted to install a door and a couple of windows. "It's used a lot."

Many garages in Lincoln do more than house cars.

Bill Hams leaves his garage door open on nice days, revealing the log bed frame he's building for his wife.

Hams he said he likes being outdoors, so when his wife said she wanted a log bed, he gathered some wood and started chipping away in the garage.

He leaves room for the car, and he keeps the space as clean as possible. But the sawdust is difficult to keep under control.

Above, a 16½-foot red canoe stretches snugly across the ceiling. It used to hang diagonally across the living room of his old duplex, Hams said.

It was a relief when he and his wife could finally put in a garage. Now Hams can work on the log bed in comfort, and he hasn't ruled out more

projects in the future.

After all, someone will have to make use of the space.

"(My wife) gets the kitchen," he said. "I get the garage."

Mandy Fristoe and her husband, Omega, have their own arrangement. She said one half of the garage is her side — the spot where she can park her car.

She said the other half is "the man cave."

A pile of dirt and blocks are piled near the driveway, where Fristoe's husband is building a retaining wall. Movie posters of Martin Scorsese films and many others are propped up along a ledge. Several folding chairs are facing a television and a PlayStation 2.

Fristoe said her husband spends an hour or so there at night, watching sports or playing video games where he won't annoy anyone.

"It's quiet for him," Fristoe said. "And it's kind of like our little time away."

She gets to hang out on football Saturdays, when they wheel in their big screen TV and host mini football parties. But when the games end and the crowd leaves, the man cave returns to its rightful owner.

"He's just kind of deemed it his personal space," Fristoe said.

That's the way it goes with garages.

That's why Pepin looks on carefully as the wind hurls leaves up his driveway and past the open door. After a while, he glances around at his array of tools. He has two of everything, from bicycles to brooms — his wife organizes garage sales twice a year to keep Pepin from overstocking.





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But today he needs something specific to combat the breeze. Those leaves don't belong scattered wildly on his property.

With one hand on his pipe and the other in his coat pocket, he turns his gaze toward a couple of leaf blowers.

Pepin has more work to do in his garage.

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