

Spring Clean Your Farm Shop

Learn how to clean and organize your farm shop or shed.

By Gretchen Heim Olson

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It happens to so many of us farm women.

All winter we hustle in and out of a chilly shop, promising ourselves we'll get it cleaned out the first warm day of spring.

Then, all of a sudden, the grass needs mowing, the chicks are about to arrive and we're still climbing over empty gas cans, bicycles and the hubby's rusty 1966 Mustang.

Next year, we swear, we'll get organized earlier.

Well, now's the time. Put on a pot of coffee or tea, bundle up, and head out to the shop with paper, pencil and tape measure to take a quick look at the mess. First job: seeing what's out there, thinking about how it should be organized and planning ahead for disposal.

This isn't the most pleasant task, but as you walk outside, think ahead to both the invigorating work and the beauty of spring, and especially how much you'll enjoy it when this duty is out of the way.

Best Laid Plans

When you get to the shop, pick a central spot (if you can find one!) and observe the area.

Look around at what you have and begin to categorize broadly.

Typically most farm shops or sheds contain: lawn and garden equipment; tools and supplies; home repair tools and materials; auto-related tools and supplies (and sometimes the actual auto, running or not); salvaged wood as well as woodworking tools and equipment; livestock and pet supplies and feed; sporting goods; snow removal equipment; outdoor furniture; and things unique to your farm or items that just don't seem to fit a larger category.

Disposable Confusion

Some items that need to be disposed of are difficult to categorize. Should this tire go in the burn pile, the garbage pick-up or the hazardous waste dump? Here is a list of common household hazardous waste items and where to find information about their disposal: Auto fluids. www.thecarconnection.com Type "fluid disposal" into the search box. Rat poison and other pesticides. Follow directions on product label. Veterinary supplies (syringes, old medicine, etc.) Contact your local veterinarian or agricultural extension agent, or consult the product label. Appliances. Call your local waste management provider. Stained or treated wood. www.ecologycenter.org/fact_sheets/pressure-treated_wood.html Garden chemicals. See the manufacturer's guidelines on the label. Tires. www.epa.gov/garbage/tires/basic.htm Batteries. Contact your local government waste office or a battery store.

After you've thought for a few minutes about what's there, grab the pencil from your coat pocket and write down those major categories.

You'll organize them by type and by your specific needs, so in addition to listing them, examine how much space will be required for each section and what sub-categories exist within the larger groups, making notes as you go. This is where the tape measure comes in.

Take time to get the dimensions of storage containers and boxes you'll be keeping (width, length and height), and measure odd-shaped or extra large items that need special consideration. Don't forget to start a disposal list. You know some of that junk has to go!

Before your fingers go numb, hustle back inside, pour that warm beverage and get settled in a comfy chair with your notes. You've probably got several things on the list, but there are a few more to consider while everything is still fresh in your mind. First, what particular hobbies or areas of interest should you accommodate in the shop reorganization? One advantage of living in the country is that we have room to pursue activities close to our hearts, so be sure to set aside appropriate space. The market gardener or plant enthusiast will have different requirements for tools and equipment than the farm owner who uses the shop primarily for antique auto restoration and woodworking.

Also, what subcategories of items in the shop need to be considered? Within lawn supplies, for example, you likely have equipment of various sizes—mowers, rakes and other tools—that have distinctly different storage needs than fertilizers, pots and baskets. Ask yourself the same question about auto, wood, metal shop and other categories, and make notes about what types of shelving, containers and space are needed for each, as well as how you want to group them in the area available.

Shop Cleaning Supplies

Here's a quick list of what to take out to the shop on the big cleaning day:

broom dust pan old mop or squeegee cleaning solution garden hose kitty litter crack and hold repair supplies chalk or heavy duty tape garbage can empty cardboard boxes or bags permanent marker recycling container(s) HHW disposal guidelines dust mask

This is also a good time to think about the chemicals you typically keep in the shop. All hazardous materials must be stored in their original containers and, of course, kept far out of the reach of children. They should be grouped together in a locked cabinet or within their appropriate categories, but not near sensitive items such as livestock feed or supplements. Make a special note for old chemicals and damaged containers, which will go onto the household hazardous waste disposal list.

Garbage Disposal

As you're working through the specific areas to be organized in the shop, you should also be thinking about items that will be thrown away; this requires a different list altogether. Because so many things cannot go directly into landfills, divide your notes into the following categories: recycling; charitable donations; garbage pick-up; burn pile; and household hazardous waste.

If you're like most of us, you'll be confused about how to categorize some of the things on your list, perhaps because laws have changed in recent years or because you have new materials or modern components in the shop that didn't exist during the last big clean-up. That means you'll need to schedule time in the coming days to research the particulars in your area.

If you don't remember exactly what is allowed in recycling bins or wonder if anything new is being accepted, contact your local provider. For donations, call or stop by your favorite charity and find out the specifics of its donation policy so you arrive during opening hours and you avoid donating items they cannot use. The same advice holds for garbage pick-up. If you have curbside service, visit the company or government office website and print out a list of waste products they absolutely will not take; keep that list with your other shop notes.

Your waste pick-up provider also might offer guidance on the disposal of household hazardous waste products (commonly referred to as HHW) and how you should properly handle them. Most states and counties give direction for HHW disposal on their Web sites; you can also get this information by calling your county administrative offices. Some communities have particular days for HHW drop-off, whereas others have permanent locations open during specific hours. In special cases, you may have to drive your HHW to a private business for disposal.

Perhaps you live in an area that allows burning. If you haven't recently checked the regulations, be sure to contact your local municipality so you aren't visited by the local sheriff. As the United States population grows, more and more communities are limiting burning, even in rural areas far outside towns and villages.

One last consideration as you plan for disposal: If you have other people, particularly adults, sharing the farm shop with

you, be sure to consult with them before unceremoniously junking their possessions. Otherwise you might find out later that those broken things were actually non-replaceable collectible car parts or precious memories from great-grandma's country kitchen.

And finally, before getting up from that comfy spot, take time to sketch a rough floor plan of your newly organized shop so when it's time to head outside again you know where to put things and you know they will fit.

Let's Go Shopping

After you've finished your list of categories and sub-categories, planned for garbage disposal and given thought to your unique needs for organization, phase two begins: preparation and execution. First job? Make a shopping list.

Most likely you'll need some containers and perhaps shelving, so ask yourself a few more questions: What could be contained that isn't? Do we have enough cardboard boxes or plastic see-through containers? Are tool boxes easy to find and carry? Is shelving adequate for boxes, tools, pots, baskets and other supplies? Will current shelves and cabinets accommodate the weight, height and width of boxes and odd-shaped items? Are frequently used items going to be easy to reach and put away? (Bicycle hooks on the ceiling aren't much good if you can't get the bikes down yourself.) Think about the inside of the shop, look at your list and jot down what you still need to acquire to help with storage. If necessary, run back out and measure to save trips later.

Late winter and early spring are good times to shop for storage needs since many stores offer specials around this time of year. Watch newspaper circulars for seasonal sales of organizing supplies, shelving and tool racks, and gather your storage containers while you're waiting for the weather to warm up. Put them directly in the shop.

You'll also want to mark out dates and times on the calendar for cleaning, organizing and disposal. Some women have the ability to schedule one or two days at once; others will need to spread the process over a week or more, so be realistic about your lifestyle. Also, honestly assess how fussy you will be when cleaning time comes. If you know you won't be happy unless the floor cracks have been scrubbed with a toothbrush, make time on the calendar for that, too. Don't forget to add in special times for dropping off household hazardous waste and donations; otherwise you may have to wait weeks or even months to dispose of them if you miss a particular Saturday.

Lift and Separate

We've all seen the "clean up your act" television shows where everything is dumped onto the front lawn—pink flamingos and velvet paintings right along with dented gas cans and broken rakes. Well, the reason they toss all of it outside is because that truly is the best way to clean and organize well. It's also the next step in re-claiming your space.

First, though, watch the weather reports. When it looks like you're going to have a few days without rain, snow or excessive breezes, plan to spend an hour hauling everything out of the shop (and don't forget the dust mask). Recruit anyone who can help.

After you've got a big pile outside the building, take a good look around inside, at the walls and the floor, to see if you need to make any repairs. You know rodents and insects find every nook and cranny in farm structures, so spend a few minutes closing up holes and fixing cracks while the area is clear.

Next, grab the broom and sweep down everything from top to bottom; finish by flushing the floor with water and a de-greasing solution. If you have oil spots, cover them first in absorbent kitty litter, let soak for several hours or days, then sweep. If you use your shop floor to meet short-term livestock needs (such as chick brooding), use a cleaning solution appropriate to the task. After the floor dries, get out chalk or heavy-duty tape and mark off areas that must be kept open for vehicles, large equipment and foot traffic.

Phew!

Now it's time to get out the floor plan. Move or install shelving first, then begin sorting through all those items outside, placing them in containers and putting things back in the shop on the appropriate shelves. You can work through your inventory either by category or randomly, depending on whether or not you think you'll need to move things around later. The idea, as the old saying goes, is to find a place for everything and put everything in its place.

Be sure to have containers for disposal, too, so garbage, recyclables, charitable donations and hazardous materials can be separated as you sort. Watch your time and adjust accordingly. Your shop cleaning doesn't have to be done perfectly, but it should, at the end of your allotted time, allow you to quickly find and reach what you need. Don't forget to put your disposal containers in places where they will be emptied as soon as possible; leave them behind the building and they'll become "out of sight, out of mind."

The last task, of course, is getting rid of all those things you swore would leave the property and never come back. Deliver all of them to their designated resting places, and promise yourself you won't go through the donation bag one more time or resurrect that worn-out whatchamacallit with a final repair.

Once you've happily finished your task, pour yourself another beverage, find that comfy chair again and enjoy your well-deserved rest.

It's almost time to mow.

About the Author: Gretchen Olson just wants to find the pliers in the shop on her acreage in northern Illinois.

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