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### **How Hard Can It Be?**

\* Do-it-yourselfers should consider projects carefully before diving in, experts say. Some home repairs simply aren't meant for amateurs.

By MARNELL JAMESON, SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

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Partway through installing Mexican ceramic tile off their living room balcony, Huntington Beach homeowner Jim Furman looked at his wife, Anna, and said: "Never again."

"My knees were bruised. My lower back hurt for days, and it took my wife, me and ultimately her brother to do in one long day what I later learned a professional could do in two hours," said Jim Furman, a 65-year-old retired police officer who wasn't pleased with the results of his labors. "There's a 1-inch gap at one end of the balcony, so we put a chair there."

He later hired an expert to lay ceramic tile in the dining room, kitchen, entryway, living room and two baths. The professional was done in less than three days.

But for every homeowner who regrets taking on a repair job, another revels in the satisfaction and cost savings.

Richard St. Onge of San Juan Capistrano relishes such projects. A nuclear engineer, St. Onge said he's "very handy. If I could get paid as much for building cabinets as I do for engineering, I would. There's a greater sense of accomplishment. Neighbors come over and say, 'Who did that?' And I say, 'I did.'"

St. Onge is painting the inside of his home, a project he's been chipping away at on weekends for a year. His motto: "If you can do it and save the money, do it."

Most people recognize the tradeoffs. "It's a question of how people want to spend their time," said Allan Horn, of Precision Wallcovering in San Juan Capistrano, who has had people call him after wrecking four rolls of paper worth \$80.

"I weigh grief into everything," said Pete Armes, owner of Armes Electric of Mission Viejo. "I get paid for what I do, and I work six days a week. I want to spend my day off with my kids. I'm not going to spend it doing something I'm not really good at. If I pay someone, there's no cursing and no 50 trips to the hardware store."

Before you decide whether to pick up the phone or the hammer, know what you're getting into.

The accompanying chart outlines some of the most commonly tackled home-improvement and maintenance projects along with the potential cost savings, time commitment and skill level (on a scale of 1 to 7, 1 being the easiest) needed to do the job yourself.

### **Painting**

Description: Paint one 12-by-15-foot room

Special tools/cost: Brushes, rollers, tarps, trays/\$30

Materials/cost: Paint and plastic/\$30

Cost to hire out: \$200 (Includes paint and supplies. Walls only, no trim, one coat; second coat add \$50)

Homeowner time: Seven hours (add two hours for second coat)

Pro time: Five hours (add one hour for second coat)

Skill level: 3

Tips from the trade:

\* If you're changing the color, you'll need two coats, more for darker colors.

\* Most of the work is in the masking and prep. Take your time.

Source: Allan Horn, owner of Precision Wallcovering, San Juan Capistrano

### **Staining**

Description: Stain one 7-foot-by-30-inch wood door

Tools/cost: Same as for painting/\$30

Materials/cost: Stain, stripper, varnish/\$30

Cost to hire out: \$280

Homeowner time: 10 hours

Pro time: Six hours

Skill level: 6

Tips from the trade:

\* Be patient. Homeowners tend to want to plow through a job like this in one Saturday. But it takes a lot of time between steps for coats to properly dry.

\* Not a job for novices. Every imperfection will show. Professionals have equipment to spray on stain. Brush-on applications are more likely to produce brush marks and drips.

Source: Allan Horn, owner of Precision Wallcovering, San Juan Capistrano

## **Laying Ceramic Tile**

Description: Tile 4-by-10-foot entryway

Special tools/cost: Drill with mixing whip, trowels, tile cutter ranges from \$25 for slide cutter to \$600 for saw (see tip below), total: \$155 to \$730. Add \$150 if tools are needed for subflooring: 4-inch grinder, diamond blade, hand drill, bonding material.

Materials/cost: Tiles \$100 to \$320, plus spacers, grout, cement, sponges and buckets. Total: \$150 to \$370

Cost to hire out: \$300 (labor only) if installed on slab. If installed on raised floor or upstairs, add \$200 for labor costs for subflooring.

Homeowner time: Five hours (eight hours if subfloor is needed)

Pro time: Two hours (three to four hours if subfloor is needed)

Skill level: 4

Tips from the trade:

\* Lay out material first. Before making any cuts, arrange to have full pieces of tile as you walk in and along most visible wall; put rows of cut tiles on least obvious walls.

\* To save money on tile saw, figure out which tiles will need cuts and where. Take them to a tile store or hardware store to have the cuts done for you.

\* Installing a flat, square or rectangular floor is easiest.

The skill factor jumps from 4 to 6 when tiling on vertical planes or creating a slope for drainage on a shower floor.

Source: Chris Shewman, owner Style-Tile, Belmont Shore

### **Installing Light Fixtures**

Description: Put four ceiling can lights in a room

Special tools/cost: Drywall saw, cordless drill, basic electrical tools (wire stripper, Romex stripper, fish tape), tarp/ \$170

Materials/cost: Can lighting units/\$120 (\$30 each); connectors, wire, dimmer/\$145

Cost to hire out: \$450, including labor and fixtures

Homeowner time: Six hours

Pro time: Three hours

Skill level: 5

Tips from the trade:

\* Must have basic electrical knowledge.

\* Shut off the power circuit before starting. If you're at all unsure whether the correct circuit is shut off, shut off power to the whole house.

\* Trick is knowing where ceiling joists are. You may know where you want to put your lights but can't always put them there.

\* If can lighting is downstairs or in an upstairs area with

insufficient attic space, there will be drywall holes, which will require painting and patching.

Source: Pete Armes, Armes Electric, Mission Viejo

## **Hanging Wallpaper**

Description: Wallpapering a 12-by-15-foot room

Special tools/cost: Seam roller, cutter, plumb bob, level, tray, metal guide, sizing. \$20

Materials/cost: 16 rolls/\$240 to \$320

Cost to hire out: \$320, labor only

Homeowner time: 10 hours

Pro time: Six hours

Skill level: 6

Tips from the trade:

\* Lay out and engineer job before making any cuts. Aim for fewest cuts on most prominent walls.

\* Plan to spend an hour planning and prepping before hanging first roll.

\* Bedrooms are much easier than kitchens or baths.

\* Overworked seams are the biggest signs of an amateur job.

To avoid them, don't push seams together when they're wet. They dry back, leave a gap and make seams look worn.

Try to get them in the right place to begin with and roll over them only once with seam roller.

Source: Allan Horn, owner Precision Wallcovering, San Juan Capistrano

## **Building an Outdoor Deck**

Description: Build a 12-by-12-foot redwood deck, single level, against a house

Special tools/cost: Basic skill saw, level and square/\$75

Materials/cost: 2-by-6-inch redwood planks and joists, fasteners and cinder block/\$600

Cost to hire out: \$1,500, labor only

Homeowner time: Two or three days

Pro time: One or two days

Skill level: 4

Tips from the trade:

\* Be aware of easements around your property. Check with your local building department for permission.

\* You will need decent basic construction skills. Map out design first, then get advice on how far apart to space joists.

Source: Mike Pelletier, pro sales associate, Home Depot, San Diego

### **Adding Finish Carpentry**

Description: Upgrade baseboards and casings; add crown moldings in a 12-by-15-foot room

Special tools/cost: Miter box, speed square to calculate precise angle of corner, skill or circular saw, coping saw, latex caulking. A nail gun with an air compressor is also handy. Cost: around \$300, or rent them for \$40 a day. Total with rented tools: \$150

Materials/cost: Paint-grade 5-inch baseboards (54 linear feet) and casings to frame one door, one window: \$70. Crown molding (54 linear feet at \$3 a foot. Costs range from \$1.70 to \$9 a foot): \$162. Total: \$232

Cost to hire out: \$650, labor only (includes cost of pulling out old baseboards and casings)

Homeowner time: Two to three days

Pro time: One day

Skill level: 3 for baseboards and casings; 6 for crown moldings

Tips from the trade:

\* Don't be afraid to tackle baseboards and casings, but unless you're super-handy, hire a pro to install crown moldings.

Source: Mike Pelletier, pro sales associate, Home Depot, San Diego

### **Installing Vinyl Flooring**

Description: Put vinyl flooring in 10-by 10-foot room on slab

Special tools/cost: Floor trowel, glue, razor knife: \$15

Materials/cost: Vinyl sheets or 12-inch by 12-inch squares for 100 square foot area: \$155 to \$400

Cost to hire out: \$144 labor only. If pro needs to prepare and strip old floor, add \$13 to \$35.

If pro needs to add sub-floor for a raised foundation, add \$235.

Homeowner time: 10 hours for sheet vinyl; three hours for vinyl tiles

Pro time: four to six hours for sheet vinyl; two hours for vinyl tiles

Skill level: 4 for sheet; 2 for tiles

Tips from the trade: \* If using squares, map out so full tile is in entry to room, put cuts on least visible walls.

\* To avoid bumps and lifting, make sure surface is scraped smooth and cleaned before laying vinyl.

Source: Jason Shields, sales associate, Home Depot, Canoga Park

### **Installing Engineered Hardwood Floors**

Description: 15-by-12-foot family room

Special tools/cost: Panel saw, square and chalk, hard rubber mallet, pry bar/\$220

Materials/cost: Wood flooring (\$540), plus matching molding, under lining, plastic sheeting. Total: \$772

Cost to hire out: \$600, labor only to install flooring and moldings

Homeowner time: 24 hours

Pro time: 16 hours

Skill level: 5

Tips from the trade: \* To install natural hardwood floors, definitely hire a professional.

Source: Jason Shields, sales associate, Home Depot, Canoga Park

### **Installing New Plumbing Fixtures**

Description: Change fixture trims in one bath, including two faucets with spouts and one tub-shower trim set

Special tools/cost: Basin wrench, adjustable wrench, channel lock pliers, caulking, plumbers tape. Total: \$60

Materials/cost: Basic upgrades range from \$80 to \$160 per faucet. \$240 and up

Cost to hire out: \$260 to \$300, labor only

Homeowner time: Five to six hours

Pro time: Three hours

Skill level: 4

Tips from the trade:

\* Getting new parts to fit onto older fittings can be frustrating; plumbing parts are not standardized.

\* When replacing older faucets, replace supply lines at the same time.

Source: Mike Pelletier, pro sales associate, Home Depot, San Diego

### **Installing Windows**

Description: Replacing or installing new 4-by 4-foot window

Special tools/cost: Reciprocating saw, putty knife, trowel/\$175

Materials/cost: Vinyl or wood dual-glazed operable window/\$90 to \$300; on average, wood windows cost \$100 more than vinyl

Cost to hire out: \$300 to install into stucco; \$200 to install into wood; does not include stucco repair or paint

Homeowner time: Three hours

Pro time: Two hours, less for wood

Skill level: 7+

Tips from the trade:

\* Check local code requirements before starting.

Some windows, especially small bedroom windows, cannot be replaced without being enlarged because of new fire codes.

Source: Mike Pelletier, pro sales associate, Home Depot, San Diego

### **Installing Rain Gutters**

Description: Installing rain gutters on a 2,000-square-foot house, front and back only.

Special tools/cost: Ladder, hand or power saw, tin snips. Total: \$145

Materials/cost: 140 linear feet of gutter (vinyl or painted aluminum), plus hangers and four downspouts. Total: \$ 210

Cost to hire out: \$385. Most pros charge by linear foot, plus materials

Homeowner Time: One to two days

Pro time: One day

Skill level: 4

Tips from the trade:

\* Look at the perimeter of house to determine where downspouts need to go.

For proper drainage, plan a quarter-inch drop for every 10 feet.

If fascia is too narrow to allow for sufficient drop, angle down from the middle of the house toward corners in two directions.

Source: Mike Pelletier, pro sales associate, Home Depot, San Diego

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Marnell Jameson is a freelance writer in San Juan Capistrano.

PHOTO: Anna Furman, with daughter, Shanna, on the balcony she helped tile.

ID NUMBER: 20011028hre0103

PHOTOGRAPHER: GERALDINE WILKINS / Los Angeles Times

PHOTO: Professionals finished the tile work inside the Furmans' home.

ID NUMBER: 20011028hre0104

PHOTOGRAPHER: GERALDINE WILKINS / Los Angeles Times

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