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Clean sweep: Spring cleaning starts with ridding your home of clutter

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I have a neighbor who is so organized, her spices are arranged in alphabetical order. She never has to do a deep cleaning or declutter her closets and drawers because she keeps everything in its place all year long.

And while I admire my neighbor, I'll never be like her. For me, spring has to show its sunny little face before I can get in the mood to do my annual cleaning and organizing ritual.

If you identify with my neighbor, you could probably write this story yourself.

If you're like me, you need a little help.

That's why I called one of the country's most successful organizers, **Denise Caron**, and asked her for some guidance.

The owner of **In Order to Succeed**, Caron can help you get your closet in order or redesign a more efficient workflow for your business.

Here's her magic advice:

"Everything in your house needs a home and you need to be able to get your hands on it when you need it."

Wouldn't that be nice?

Caron said anybody can do it

"You need three boxes to start," she said. "One for what you want to donate, a second for what you need to repair and/or keep, and a third for what you want to throw out.

If you do that with every room, every closet and every drawer in your house, you'll have an orderly house in no time.

Many people, she admitted, will probably need a fourth box for things they simply can't decide about.

"Save and label the box and revisit it next season," she said. "If you haven't used anything in that box, you're not likely to use it anytime soon. Eventually you need to get rid of it."

As hard as it may seem, this isn't a thankless task. If you organize that sock drawer or that one horrible closet that won't hold any more clothes, Caron said, a miracle happens:

"You get instant gratification," Caron said, "and a great sense of satisfaction."

That alone, she insists, will help you go on to the next bit of clutter.

Another essential step, she said, is to label the space after you've finished.

"You can buy all kinds of labelers," she said, "and can pay anywhere from about \$25 to over \$100. It's worth the price because it tells you where to put things back."

Labels can go on the inside of doors, on the edge of a shelf or inside a drawer.

I took Caron's advice last weekend and began in my kitchen. Right away I realized I needed some special containers and little drawer dividers to keep things visible.

I looked for organizing gadgets at Target, Office Max, Home Depot, Bed Bath and Beyond, Pier One Imports, and wound up spending about \$150 all told. That included some nifty storage bins that can be pulled out when you're looking for the right pot.

The project took about 10 hours over three days and now I can find the chili powder, the tops to my cooking pots, and all my vitamins.

That might not sound like a lot for all that time and money, but to me, it was a miracle.

(I still have to buy the labeler. One step at a time.)

Here are some other tips I got from Caron, my ridiculously organized neighbor, and a few friends and acquaintances:

- Don't limit your decluttering to household objects. Do the same thing with all your paperwork and give some serious thought to paying your bills online. I know that sounds scary, but millions of people have gone before us. If you can surf the Internet, you can pay bills online.

- If you have a lot of framed photos of your family and friends taking up space all over the house, consider paring down to a more manageable number. Keep the frames, but add new pictures as you get them. File photos under the name of the family member or, in the case of vacation pictures, put them in boxes and label the year and destination.

- My friend Trish - who is a natural organizer - said to always start with something that will only take a few minutes or, at most, a couple of hours. That way you don't get overwhelmed.

- If you live with someone who wants to save absolutely everything, from plastic Coke bottles to prescription pill bottles - like I do - don't get all huffy if he or she doesn't get into your project. Just go ahead, do the work, and your significant other may or may not get involved. Some things you just have to live with.

- If you don't want to run from store-to-store for organizational tools, shop online. The Container Store is a great place to start.

- Once you get your home organized the way you want it, take a good, hard look at your buying habits. Do you need another picture frame? Can you live without those adorable oil and vinegar bottles from Italy? Will one more basket really be used, or will you wind up filling it with papers and magazines you don't really have time to read anyway.

- Rethink this yard sale business. Sure, you might make a few bucks, but you can also give those unwanted items to charity, get a receipt, and take that off your income taxes. You'll save a lot of time and won't have to sit in an uncomfortable chair in your driveway for two days.

- If you want to get yourself into the mood for organizing, type in "organizing tips" on Google and you can get hundreds of ideas from the pros. If you don't have a computer, visit the library or your favorite bookstore for books on getting organized.

- Finally, get it through your head that keeping clutter down means maintenance. You need to spend a few minutes a day making sure things are put back where they belong. And since nobody's perfect, you might wind up with two or three days worth of stuff you have to put away. Just don't let it go longer than that because you'll have to start the process all over again. For the messy among us, that would be a very sad thing.