Minimize the impact of a metal box in a roomful of wooden ones. A basic refrigerator enclosure that matches the rest of the kitchen cabinetry adds a lot to the looks of a kitchen. The cabinet over the refrigerator provides storage.

Hide That Ugly Refrigerator

If you don't want to spring for a true built-in refrigerator, just build a cabinet around your old icebox

by Rex Alexander

A run of handmade kitchen cabinets bumping up against the stark metal surface of a refrigerator makes my skin crawl. That's why I try to camouflage this homely appliance: To make it more appealing to the eye and more in harmony with the rest of the kitchen, I build it into the cabinetry. It's a relatively inexpensive way to add charm and sophistication to any kitchen.

Building in gives the kitchen a finished look—Generally, what distinguishes an ordinary built-in refrigerator from a true built-in, such as a Sub-Zero, is the depth of the unit from front to back. Conventional refrigerators are 32 in. deep. True built-ins vary in depth from 23½ in. to 25⅜ in., a real plus in a small kitchen where the appliance needs to be flush with the cabinetry.

Because many of my customers still use conventional refrigerators (normally 32 in. square by 65 in. tall), I developed my own method of building in these appliances. This amounts to side panels and a cabinet above the refrigerator. The side panels run the height of the refrigerator and form the sides of the upper cabinet (photo facing page). If the refrigerator doesn't come with doors that accept panels, I leave the doors as they come from the factory.

First, notice how the door is hinged—Before building in a conventional refrigerator, I have to decide dimensions, clearances and the operation of the door in relation to the cabinet. I first look at how the refrigerator door is hinged.

I always size the width of the upper cabinet to coincide with the width of the refrigerator opening. The doors of many units open and stay parallel to the side. With a ¾-in. to 1-in. spacing around the unit, my cabinet can be flush with the door, although the handle will stick out. The newer doors that hold gallon-milk containers open with the thickness of the door extending beyond the side. For these, I hold open the door and set the distance between refrigerator and side panel and the depth of the side panel accordingly. That way, the door can open fully.

Once I've established the depth of the refrigerator cabinet, I complete a construction drawing for both the cabinet above the refrigerator and the side panels. I like to keep the clearance around the refrigerator as narrow as possible. So I measure the width of the icebox and add 1½ in. to 2 in. to the width of the cabinet that goes on top. Manufacturers recommend a ¾-in. to 1-in. clearance around the sides, top and back. Newer refrigerators have cooling coils on bottom, so there's no need for much ventilation.

I've built cabinets over refrigerators that run the full depth of the icebox—anywhere from 28 in. to 32 in. (photo below). However, I've found that keeping the depth at 24 in. is more convenient. At that height, it's easier to retrieve things from a shallow space. A shallow cabinet also gives the refrigerator breathing space.

Refrigerator cabinetry can match any style of kitchen. Even the most sophisticated kitchen can be improved with the addition of a refrigerator enclosure.

Construction is as simple as building a box—No special construction techniques are involved in building the side panels or the upper cabinet. Both the style of the built-in and the way the pieces fasten together depend on the style of the other cabinetry.

Depending on how much of the sides show, the sides can display various raised or flat panels, or I can use plain, edged plywood. Cabinet doors above the refrigerator typically match the rest of the kitchen's cabinet doors. If the top of the cabinet is still a distance below the ceiling, I usually trim the top of the refrigerator built-in with some type of molding. Otherwise, I match the cabinet molding to the crown molding around the rest of the kitchen.

I use ¾-in. stock for the cabinet and side panels. I usually tack ¼-in. plywood or melamine to the back of the upper cabinet. Side panels can be built with rails and stiles applied to plywood to simulate rail-and-stile construction or with plywood finished to match the kitchen.

Finally, put it all together and fasten in place—With the side panels, top cabinet and moldings completed, I usually move the refrigerator in place and build around it. I level and scribe-fit the side panels to the wall and floor, then shim the top cabinet using the top of the refrigerator as a level base. Next, I remove the refrigerator and, from the inside of the cabinet, screw the top cabinet to the top of the side panels. I finish by applying the molding to the top of the whole unit.

I put a large piece of laminate on the floor, set the refrigerator on top of it and then slide the appliance into place. After the refrigerator is installed, I tilt it up and pull out the laminate. □

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