

BY MARY FORSELL

Off the shelf, custom-built, or planned by a designer, the right system will get you organized

Closet control

For much of the 20th century, bedroom closets were outfitted with a rod and a shelf—hardly the most efficient way to organize a complete wardrobe. That all changed in 1978, when Neil Balter, a 17-year-old carpenter, launched a company called California Closets. Within a few years, the closet became the new design frontier, with a wave of entrepreneurs hanging their hats on the promise to organize their clients' clothes and by extension, their lives. The jumbled little box in the bedroom would never be the same.

Today, the continuing obsession with getting organized has brought with it more choices than ever for stretching every inch of closet space. And while it doesn't necessarily increase the value of your home, having neat, attractive closets is a great selling point—not to mention a sanity saver.

"It really does make a difference in your day when you open your closet first thing in the morning and

it's a pleasant experience," says Leah Ansel, a professional organizer in Manhattan. "In the past, closet design was an ignored area, but now people demand it. It's a little change that makes a big impact."

Invest time now in finding the perfect closet system and you'll save hours down the road searching for that perfect shirt you know is in there somewhere. The first step is choosing the best approach to redesigning your closet: hiring a full-service closet company, hiring a local designer, or doing it yourself—with or without some help.

EVERYTHING IN ITS PLACE Flexible closet systems let you design, and redesign, around your stuff. Shelves and hanging bars in the child's closet at left can move as needed and as clothing sizes change. At right, plenty of drawers and shelf space can accommodate a wide range of clothes and accessories.







DO IT YOURSELF
Do-it-yourselfers can draw up a closet plan and purchase components from companies like ClosetMaid (above), at a home store, or online.

Closet specialists: A built-in look with built-in costs

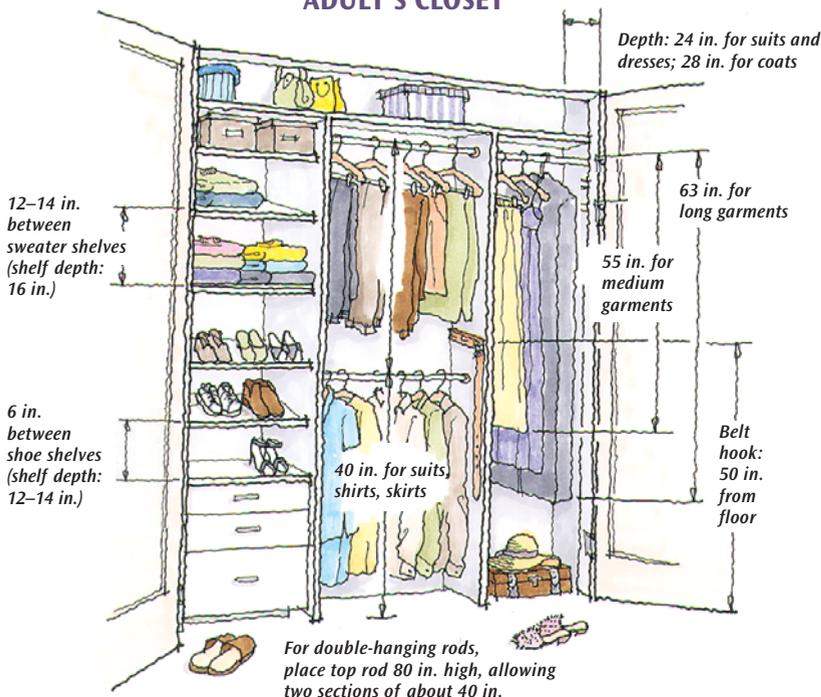
You've seen them at home shows: Closets by Design, California Closets, Closet Factory. With these comprehensive built-in systems, a company representative visits your home and gives you a free estimate. If you sign on, an installer returns within a week or so with all the components cut to fit. The materials are usually high quality, and you end up with a well-designed space with very little effort on your part. But there is a cost: Closet companies like this usually charge about \$100 per linear foot. The average closet remodel costs \$2,500, although it could be as low as \$400 for a reach-in or as high as \$15,000 for a large walk-in. Prices increase with bells and whistles like raised-panel drawers (add 10 percent), tilt-out laundry hampers (add \$300), and center islands (add \$1,500). Installation takes a day or two. ClosetMaid, which sells its DIY components at home-improvement stores, also offers a high-end system, MasterSuite, which uses better-quality melamine laminate and is customized to your space, at about \$70 a linear foot. Instead of franchises, they maintain a network of dealers who install the system.



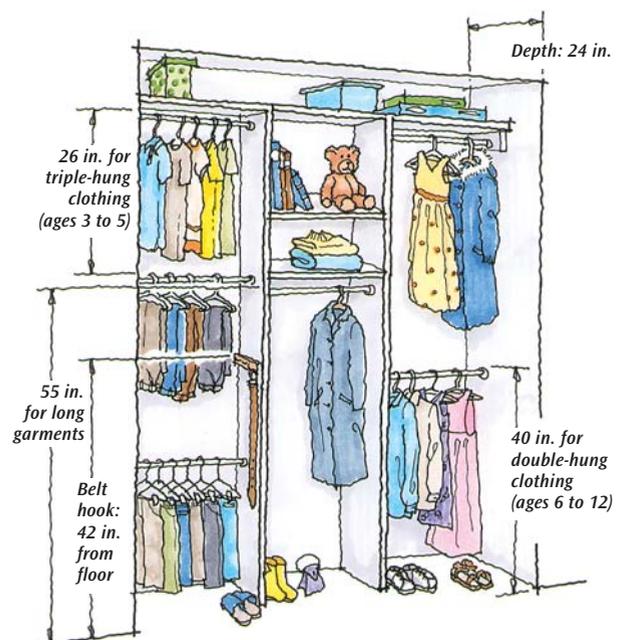
ROOM FOR EVERYTHING

THESE RECOMMENDATIONS from the National Closet Group can be used as a guide in configuring a closet where every item of clothing has its place. A good closet designer will, however, take into account the closet owner's individual size and variety of clothing when laying out a system.

ADULT'S CLOSET



CHILD'S CLOSET





Although these systems are custom-fitted to your closet, the components come in standard widths, and any extra cuts at the factory will cost more. So if you have an especially odd-size space—for instance, under an eave—this is not an ideal option. On the positive side, messy construction isn't done in your home.

At the highest end are European companies like Poliform and Doma. These systems offer either self-contained wardrobes that fit into a niche or walk-in systems with special features like internally illuminated shelves and glass-front drawers—for a price. They start at \$300 per linear foot. These companies will also send a rep and handle the installation.

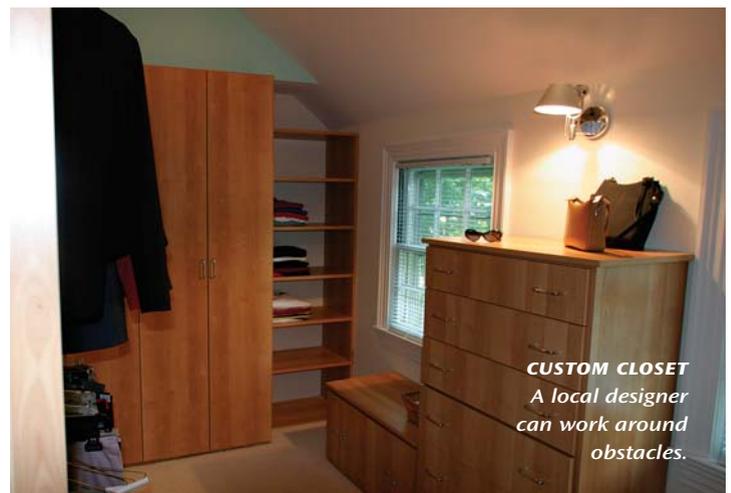
Hire locally for a completely custom closet

For the ultimate in control, you can hire an interior designer or professional organizer for \$40 to \$150 per hour. Either will draw up plans from scratch, counsel you on clutter control, and find a carpenter to install the design you agree on. Some incorporate specific manufacturer's systems, others design their own.

Another option is to buy a closet plan online tailored to your specifications and then hire a carpenter to do the installation. The Closet Lady and Closet Design Group are just a couple of the companies that specialize in this area. How much input you will have, however,

Tips for tidy closets

- Remember the professional organizers' rule of thumb: use 50 percent of the closet for double-hanging clothes, 25 percent for long clothing, and 25 percent for flat shelving and drawers.
- Place pants on the top rod in double-hanging areas, because they have a narrower clearance from the wall and won't cast shadows.
- Reach-ins are most effective with a full front opening, so trade sliding or bi-fold doors for hinged if space allows. Hinged doors also allow for over-the-door accessories such as shoe racks and door-hung full-length mirrors.
- Arrange clothing by type. The more frequently you use the item or category, the closer it should be to the door.
- Place shoe shelves at eye level so you're not constantly bending down.
- Tilted shelves take up less space than flat shelves and can be used for sweaters as well as shoes.
- A center island will cramp the space if your walk-in is less than 8 feet deep and 10 feet wide.



CUSTOM CLOSET
A local designer can work around obstacles.

Which system will work best for you?

AESTHETICS AND BUDGET are the two key factors to consider when choosing what type of components to install in your closet. Once you've chosen your basic system, remember that the appealing ingenuity of many of that system's components will make it easy to go overboard—and over budget. “Start with the basics,” professional organizer Maureen Gainer advises. “Rather than getting swept away by shoe-cubby fever, think about just using boxes. Stay within your budget and make the most of it.”

Wire systems save money

The least expensive of all, wire is the foundation of many do-it-yourself systems. Some people dislike these vinyl- or epoxy-coated steel systems because they allow small objects to fall through, but proponents claim they make clothing more visible and allow air to circulate. Solid shelf liners, available for some systems, can eliminate the drop-through problem. Unlike melamine or wood, wire systems will never warp. However, epoxy can chip,

while vinyl might tear. Manufacturers of both vinyl- and epoxy-coated systems claim their product discolors less. One consensus: Vinyl is more resistant to rust but will get tackier in hot, humid climates. Wire systems should be able to support about 75 pounds per linear foot. If the white wire look doesn't fit your style, Schulte has introduced ventilated shelves with a nickel finish.

Closet companies favor melamine

Closet system components are commonly made of melamine laminate, which is produced by fusing a layer of resin over particleboard. Ninety percent of closet specialty companies use melamine laminate over $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch board; some less-sturdy systems found at home-improvement stores use $\frac{5}{8}$ -inch board. The best grade is thermally fused melamine, which is applied with a heat process for durability. Cold-pressed melamine, which is less expensive, will not hold up as well over time. The national and regional custom closet companies tend to use thermally fused melamine and

usually indicate this somewhere in their product literature. The DIY makers favor lesser-grade, cold-pressed melamine. It's impossible to tell the difference by just looking.

At three to six times the price of melamine, the cost of solid wood is prohibitive for most closet budgets. A middle ground is to go with wood-grained melamine (about 10 percent more than white) for the components, then trim out the front with wood veneer (double the price of basic melamine) or hardwood molding.



MELAMINE

Systems can hang from the wall or be mounted on the floor

If your closet has carpeting, baseboard heat, or nice moldings that you want to show off, then a wall-hanging system is probably your ticket. Melamine systems like the ones from Schulte and Closet Factory can usually go either way. Some people prefer the built-in look of a floor-based system, but there might be more work (and cost) involved to shim uneven floors.

The easiest hanging method is a steel track system like those used by Elfa and Schulte, in which horizontal rails bolt to the wall, and vertical standards hang from them. Because the shelves snap into the verticals on brackets, the closet system can be easily reconfigured.

Depending on the spacing between the uprights, these systems bear 50 to 75 pounds per linear foot. Some hanging systems, such as EasyTrack, require installation in drywall studs; others, like Schulte's, have spiraling anchors that allow them to be attached anywhere. Hanging systems sometimes can't be used in high-rise buildings because the walls have steel studs, which prohibit drilling.



WIRE



WALL-HANGING SYSTEM

can vary greatly. Costs for plans vary from a flat fee of as little as \$25 to an hourly rate of \$50 to \$100. One advantage to this approach is that having a specific plan in hand makes it easier to compare bids when searching for an installer.

A local carpenter can tweak closet designs further, perhaps adding a laundry chute or attractive millwork or changing your closet doors. Their fees vary from about \$300 for a reach-in to \$2,000 and more for a walk-in, depending on materials.

Design it—and do it—yourself

Manufacturers like ClosetMaid and EasyClosets.com offer easy-to-use online space-planning services in which you plug in dimensions to produce a design using the company's components. These can be shipped directly to your home, saving you the trouble of loading up the car. Of course, you then have to install them. Systems like these range from as little as \$150 for a reach-in to \$500 or more for a walk-in.

Companies claim that anyone who has proficiency with common tools—a saw, a drill, and a screwdriver—could install their systems. They provide detailed information about do-it-yourself installation on their Web sites, often with step-by-step photos and diagrams. It's a good idea to check out these demos before deciding on a system.

For slightly less money, you could also head to the home-improvement store and pick out your own design. However, you're on your own when it comes to figuring out your needs—and hauling the heavy components home. The exception is the Elfa system at the Container Store, where a consultant will plan a closet with you, but you still have to install it.

Regardless of who does the designing and installation, the maintenance is up to you. You could spend buckets of money on a deluxe closet, but if you don't hang up your shirts and put your shoes away it won't do you any good. "I always tell my clients, no wishful thinking," says Chicago organizer Maureen Gainer. **H**

Mary Forsell is a frequent contributor to home and garden magazines, who has recently gained a reputation for snooping in friends' closets.

See Resources on page 94.