

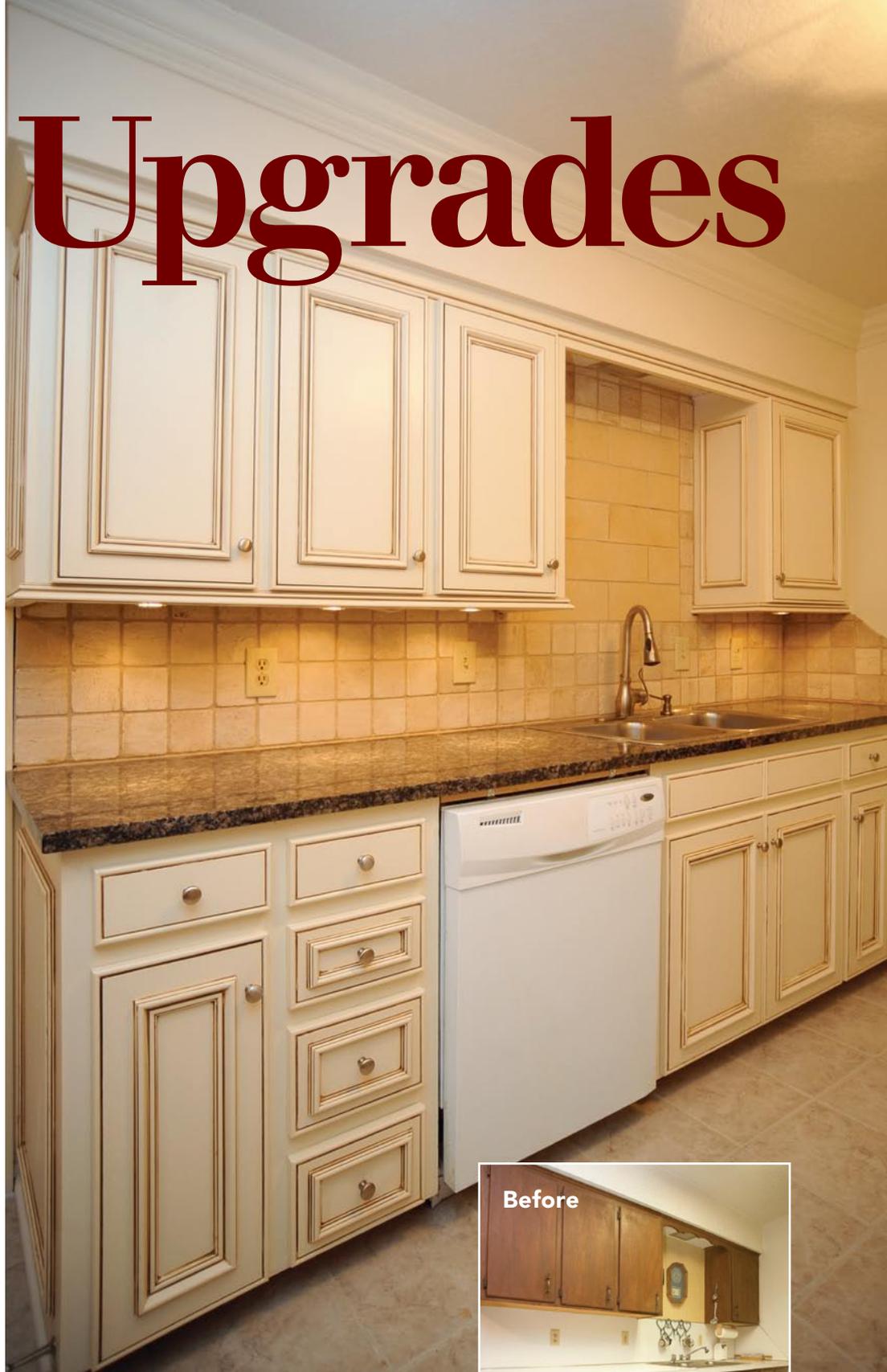
# 4 Quick Cabinet Upgrades

BY GARY STRIEGLER

**K**itchen remodels are a priority for many of my clients, but some budgets won't allow me to gut the kitchen and install all new cabinets, fixtures, and appliances. So I've developed methods to give clients improved function and a style upgrade without breaking the bank. The concept is simple: Give the existing cabinets an overhaul. By adding new doors and drawers, upgrading storage, dressing things up with trim, and then applying a glazed paint job, I can tie the new components in with the old ones for a seamless face-lift. Upgrading these cabinets took me six days and cost about \$600 in materials. The backsplash cost about \$225 and took another day to install. I hired out the granite countertop and the painting, which cost \$1400 and \$1000, respectively.

There are a couple of prerequisites. First, the cabinet boxes need to be in sound condition. Adding new doors and drawers to poorly constructed boxes makes about as much sense as building a new house on a crumbling foundation. Second, the existing materials and style of construction are a big factor. The kitchen shown here had site-built face-frame cabinets made with a combination of solid wood and plywood, common in older houses. If the cabinets had been made from particleboard or didn't have face frames, the process would have been more complicated, and the return on investment less promising.

Gary Striegler is a builder in Fayetteville, Ark. Photos by Chris Ermides, except where noted.



Improve storage and style for a fraction of the cost of new cabinets

# 1

## SOLID DOORS BECOME FRAMED PANELS

On this project, the existing cabinet doors were made from  $\frac{3}{4}$ -in. mahogany plywood. The plywood was in decent condition, so I wanted to find a way to reuse it. Most flat-panel cabinet doors tend to be made with  $\frac{1}{4}$ -in.- to  $\frac{1}{2}$ -in.-thick plywood panels, which are lightweight and inexpensive but also feel cheap in terms of quality. I decided to use the old doors as panels, setting each in a new frame to create a more substantial cabinet door. If I hadn't been able to use the doors for the new panels, I would likely have chosen MDF, which is extremely stable and takes paint well.

For the door-frame stock, I chose poplar, a relatively inexpensive closed-grain hardwood that looks excellent in paint-grade cabinetry. Other hardwoods like maple and oak are good choices for stain-grade door frames as well. In terms of cost and durability, though, poplar can't be beat. The door construction is simple. It's crucial, however, that all of the wood be milled, that the rabbets be cut, and that beaded profiles be routed before the stock is cut to final size, or the cuts may not match up properly.



(1) After the door-frame stock is cut to width and rabbeted to receive the panel, rout the other edge with a  $\frac{3}{8}$ -in. beading bit. (2) A pair of pocket screws (Kreg micro jig) at each miter creates a tight joint. The holes then are plugged and sanded flush. (3) A hinge-boring jig ([www.eurolimited.com](http://www.eurolimited.com)) makes quick work of preparing each door to receive the new concealed hinges. (4) Cut the old doors down to the appropriate size to become panels, and cut a matching rabbet around each so that it will sit about  $\frac{1}{4}$  in. below the front face of the frame. (5) The panel molding, which also gets a shallow rabbet before assembly, is used to secure the panel in place and hide the joint.



**(1)** After cutting a backerboard equal to the interior width of each cabinet, use the face frame as a template to mark the drawer-slide mounts before nailing the panel into place at the back of each cabinet. **(2)** Attach the brackets and drawer slides to a plywood cleat, and install each preassembled unit as one piece. **(3)** Slide the drawer box into place, and use a straightedge to adjust the slides until the drawer box is flush with the face frame. Then drive the screws to secure the assembly. **(4)** Using a spacer jig to establish a consistent height above the cabinet doors, secure each drawer front from the inside of the drawer box with screws.

## 2 NEW DRAWERS IN AN HOUR

The existing drawers in this kitchen were made from 1x pine and assembled with glued rabbet joints reinforced with nails. Decades of use had loosened the drawer boxes and left the aluminum drawer slides sticky or falling apart.

This kitchen (and its budget) didn't warrant a high-end drawer with dovetail joints and hidden self-closing drawer slides. Instead, I built the drawers in this project from birch plywood. They are just as strong as the boxes found in high-end kitchen cabinets, and each takes me less than an hour to complete.

The construction of each drawer—butt joints, pocket screws, and a bottom panel captured in a dado—is simple. Installation is a bit more complicated, however, because site-built cabinets don't typically have back panels, so a plywood backer is needed for solid attachment of the drawer slides.



Doors and larger drawer fronts are routed with the bead profile before the stock is cut to length and assembled. Smaller drawer fronts can be made from solid poplar dressed up with a mitered bead detail installed separately using glue and pin nails.



Base cabinets with doors don't offer much accessibility. Either build a pullout shelf (left), or divide up the space with drawers by adding new rails with pocket screws (above).



# 3

## FIXED SHELVES BECOME ADJUSTABLE

Site-built cabinets typically have shelves set into dados, so they can't be moved up or down to accommodate items of different sizes. I like to rip out these old fixed shelves and then install new painted side panels that cover the dados and allow for adjustable shelving.



- (1) You can make your own shelf-pin drilling template, but a self-centering bit and a compatible drilling guide ([www.eurolimited.com](http://www.eurolimited.com)) make the job go much faster.
- (2) To remove the old shelves, drill a hole in the rear center of the board, (3) then cut up to the hole with a jigsaw so that the shelf can be removed in two pieces.
- (4) Insert the new side panel into place over the old inside of the cabinet, and secure it with finish nails.

# 4

## TRIM TAKES IT FROM PLAIN TO PRETTY

If I were building cabinets from scratch, I would install the boxes and add the molding on site. An old kitchen isn't much different because what you have is a bunch of plain boxes ready for molding.

Old-style cabinets were typically designed for utility, not so much for elegance. The addition of molding helps to balance the look of the new doors and drawer fronts, adds depth and shadowlines, and most important, gussies up the whole installation. For a job like this, I typically add band molding at the bottom, crown molding at the top, and picture-frame molding wherever end panels will show.

(1) Depending on the space remaining below the cabinet doors, another nailer may be necessary to provide solid backing for the band molding. Some extra blocking may be necessary at the top, too. On this job, the author added a valance to provide solid nailing for part of the crown molding. If the cabinets don't extend to the ceiling, a nailer may be necessary at the top edge of the cabinet as well.

(2) The best approach for end panels is to preassemble the picture-frame molding and install it as one piece. Use spacers to center the molding, and then attach it using nails that won't penetrate into the cabinet interior.

