

# ORGANIZERS

## Closet and garage systems

The dream of an orderly closet and a clutter-free home is very compelling. But reality intrudes: Our tests found many install-it-yourself systems are poorly designed, made of shoddy materials, and a nightmare to install. Others matched professionally installed systems for a fraction of the cost.

Home centers and box stores sell products that you can take home to organize your closet or garage. Or you can go to a store that offers design and installation services as well as products, for a price.

California Closets, the largest national brand, sells both options. But its do-it-yourself and pro-installed systems had little in common. The pro system looked and worked fine. But its DIY counterpart had parts that didn't line up and drawers that stuck or fell off their tracks.

Among the shortcomings we found in other systems: a Sauder garage workbench that wobbled, a Stanley shoe rack that's so close to the floor that installing it is literally a knuckle-busting experience, and confusing or inadequate instructions from Craftsman, Ikea, and ClosetMaid.

These problems are especially frustrating because the majority of storage systems are installed by consumers. We spent nearly 7 hours installing the worst ones, compared with less than 1 hour for the easiest. And the quality of customer service and online help also varied. Here are the rest of our findings:

**Some innovations are improvements.** With a third of the nine do-it-yourself closet organizers and six garage organizers we tested, assembly and installation worked fine. Rubbermaid's closet system

uses telescoping rails and shelves that eliminate the need to measure and cut shelf supports. The Container Store, which sells the Elfa organizers, will cut brackets and shelves for you after you supply your closet dimensions.

**Pro vs. DIY systems.** If you opt to have a pro install your closet organizer, you'll pay more—double or triple the typical \$400 to \$500 DIY price. But you may get useful design advice, as we did from the sales representative at California Closets. Then again, you may not. The premium for pro-installed garage systems is roughly 25 percent. But instead of advice, the GarageTek rep we dealt with offered a high-pressure sales pitch. GarageTek is the only national pro-installed garage system. Both companies tried to sell us more products than we had asked for.

### Features that count These simplify installation or add versatility.

**Mounting track or rail.** Once you level and install this part, other parts simply clip into place. Systems without this feature, like those from Sauder (7, 14), Stanley (6), and Ikea (9), make you level and install every part individually.

**Clothing rods.** Single for part of the unit, double for another part. Make sure that hangers slide back and forth unimpeded by supports.

**Drawers and cabinets.** Whether particleboard or wire, they should slide smoothly but stop before falling out of the track. Uneven gaps around drawers spoil the look of some units; check the store display carefully. Some units also include shoe racks or boxes, and others let you add such items a la carte.

**Shelves.** Particleboard will not leave lines in sweaters and fabrics. Wire shelves increase air circulation, but can leave lines in sweaters and delicate fabrics unless you place a board over the wire.



### Elfa closet



### WHAT WERE THEY THINKING?

**Shoddy pieces.** Sauder (7, 14) and California Closets (8) had pieces that didn't line up properly, workbenches that wobbled, crooked drawers, or drawers that stuck or fell off their tracks.



**Knuckle busters.** With too little room to maneuver a wrench or screwdriver, you can rough up your knuckles assembling parts of the Sauder (14) and Coleman (15) garage units and the Stanley (6) and Ikea (9) closet units.



**Help is a mixed bag.** Six of the systems we purchased, garage organizers from Sauder and Coleman and closet organizers from Shulte, Mill's Pride, ClosetMaid, and Ikea, had missing or broken parts. So we tested the help you can expect to get from customer service by contacting all the companies in our tests to request a small replacement part. Most were very helpful, but Ikea and Craftsman required a copy of the receipt before they would send the part, and Shulte sent us back to the store where we bought the unit.

Some company Web sites include interactive storage-planning assistance that can help you decide what to buy before you go shopping. On the Gladiator site, which is one of the most useful, you can drag and drop icons for cabinets, shelves, and drawers, fitting them onto a rendering of your garage layout. The Shulte, ClosetMaid, and Sauder sites also offer design ideas. California Closets has basic, general advice on its Web site, along with pitches for its custom system.

Coleman's site has a printable planning grid and product details. The Stanley, Craftsman, and Ikea Web sites offer no design help for their closet products.

**HOW TO CHOOSE**

Americans spent more than \$2 billion in 2004 to organize their closets and garages. And you can spend hundreds or even thousands on closet and garage storage systems, depending on the materials and whether you design and install it yourself or have a professional do it. Though the best can help you fit more stuff in the same space, the worst require spending more money and time, and saddle you with more assembly problems than you may have bargained for.

**Look online first.** After checking our Ratings for the best systems, check the manufacturers' Web sites to see the accessories that are available; the offerings change over time. Add-ons such as shoe storage and extra drawers might make the difference in what you buy.

**Decide how handy you are.** If the sight of a screwdriver makes your head spin, you may want one of the highly rated professionally installed units we tested. But be prepared for a sales pitch, subtle or otherwise.

If you're comfortable using a drill, screwdriver, and level, you can do the work yourself. The three closet organizers and three garage organizers with top scores typically fit together well, had clear assembly instructions, and required little or no cutting. See Doing It Right on the next page for installation advice.

**Match the material to the use.** Avoid garage products that use cardboard or unsealed particleboard where exposure to the elements or normal use can weaken or damage the material. Wire shelves let air circulate, but can leave lines in sweaters and delicate fabrics. So look for closet systems with solid shelves or thin boards you can put over the wire.

*For Ratings and CR Quick Recommendations, see next page.*

**Gladiator garage**



**Mounting wall or track.** These simplify installation and let you move or add accessories as needed.



**Stable workbench.** Look for welded legs and wide supports.



**Piano hinge.** These are strong and don't need adjusting.

**WHAT WERE THEY THINKING?**

**Cardboard in the garage.** Organizers with a cardboard back won't withstand moisture as well as wood, metal, or plastic. On Coleman (15).



**Lots of tiny screws.** The Coleman garage unit had more than a hundred fasteners, including too many little screws. Ikea's closet unit (9) had numerous nuts and bolts. With both, assembly takes time and the chance of losing fasteners is great.



**Unsealed particleboard.** Unsealed surfaces, as on the Coleman, tended to absorb liquids such as oil in our tests. Workbenches with a sealed, laminate, or plastic surface resisted stains best.



## CR Quick Recommendations

The kinds of shortcomings and frustrations we encountered in our tests of closet and garage organizers are at odds with the slick world portrayed in ads for such organizers. If you avoid the poorly designed units, you can find an organizer that will help bring a measure of, well, organization to your life. Or you can hire a pro to put the unit together for you. But no matter who does the installation, see Features That Count on pages 42 and 43 for information on the materials and construction details you should look for, and avoid.

The **Ratings** rank models by overall score. Choose a closet or garage organizer that fits your budget and scored well in ease of assembly. Models we've selected as **Quick Picks** vary in price, but all had clear directions and were relatively easy to assemble and install.

### QUICK PICKS

#### Best DIY closet systems:

- 1 Rubbermaid \$300
- 2 Elfa \$550

Both spare you from cutting support brackets, a possible source of irredeemable error. The Rubbermaid, sold at Kmart, Menards, and Amazon.com, lacks some accessories found in the other models (including a drawer unit and a base cabinet), hence its lower price. Container Stores will cut brackets and shelves for the Elfa components you purchase there. The Elfa system offers many accessories, and both particleboard and wire shelves.

#### If you don't want to install it yourself:

- 17 California Closets \$1,300

For the extra \$750 to \$1,000, the company will design the closet system and come to your house and install it. The pro-installed system was of a better quality than its do-it-yourself counterpart.

#### Best garage systems:

- 10 Gladiator \$2,000
- 11 Rubbermaid \$400

The Gladiator is well-made and easy to set up, and it has many accessories. All the pieces, including metal cabinets, wire baskets, and hooks, slide onto the gearwall base and snap into place. It also includes a very solid workbench. It's sold at Lowe's, Sears, and independent dealers. The Rubbermaid offers inexpensive, basic storage that's easy to install. But it lacks a workbench and didn't score as well for construction as pricier garage systems. It's sold at Home Depot and Lowe's, and on the company's Web site.

# doingitright

## TIPS FOR A SMOOTH INSTALLATION

No matter the storage system and the clarity of the directions, a second set of hands usually makes the work easier. Here are several simple steps you can take to avoid problems:

- Plan on spending several hours to assemble and install the unit.
- Read all the directions before you start putting the pieces together.
- Find and mark wall studs before attaching anything to the walls. Most studs are

16 inches from center to center.

- Do an inventory of the parts. If something is missing, it's better to find out early so that you can request a replacement. If it's a crucial part, you might want to wait until it arrives to get started.
- Measure twice, cut once. Before you cut wall brackets and other pieces, make sure your measurements are accurate.
- Use a cordless screwdriver or drill to speed the work of driving many screws.

# Ratings organizers

• **Availability** Most products at stores through December 2006.

Excellent Very good Good Fair Poor

Within types, in performance order. **Blue** key numbers indicate Quick Picks.

Key number	Product	Price	Overall score	Test results	
				Assembly	Construction
<b>CLOSET ORGANIZERS</b>					
1	Rubbermaid Configurations	\$300	82	●	○
2	Elfa (Container Store) Ventilated Shelving	550	80	●	○
3	Shulte FreedomRail Closet	670	65	●	○
4	ClosetMaid Shelf-Track & Completions	250	60	○	○
5	Mill's Pride Closet Organizer	250	53	○	○
6	Stanley Design Solutions	210	48	●	●
7	Sauder Closets	450	47	●	○
8	California Closets life:stuff:storage	470	45	●	○
9	Ikea Stolmen	600	30	●	○
<b>GARAGE ORGANIZERS</b>					
10	Gladiator	2,000	88	●	●
11	Rubbermaid FastTrack	400	77	●	○
12	Shulte Freedom-Rail Garage	860	75	●	●
13	Craftsman Garage Storage	1,800	60	○	●
14	Sauder Hot Rod Garage	1,800	37	●	●
15	Coleman Tuff Duty	750	32	●	○
<b>PROFESSIONALLY INSTALLED SYSTEMS</b>					
16	GarageTek	2,500	89	●	●
17	California Closets Classic	1,300	79	●	●

□ Lacks workbench.



#### Guide to the Ratings

**Overall score** is based mainly on ease of assembly and quality of construction. Ease of **assembly** includes the time it took our testers to put the closet and garage organizers together and install them where they're designed to go, as well as helpfulness of the instructions and frustration from poor design and excessive numbers of parts. **Construction** is how well the surfaces can stand up to liquids and stains, how well drawers and cabinets are assembled and open and close, and whether shelves and workbenches can withstand the kind of impacts each should be able to withstand. **Price** is approximate retail for a closet organizer with a base unit with drawers, pull-out or wire bins, two hanger rods, and several shelves or for a garage organizer with wall for hanging items, shelves, cabinets, and, unless otherwise noted, a workbench. Other accessories are available for most units at additional cost.