

Question: Can you tell me how to organize my messy, crowded pantry?

The poor, stuffed, overworked pantry. Such a teeny, tiny room (or cupboard, or shelf), and yet, we ask so much of it - store food, paper products, cleaning supplies, vacuums, pet food, recycling, small appliances, wrapping paper, have I missed something? Don't you just dream about a spacious, sparkly-clean, walk-in pantry with pull out shelves, a built in wine rack and all your crackers in neatly labeled and matching bins? The pantry of your dreams is just a few steps away. You might not get the ultimate remodel you're longing for, but you can certainly create a functional and attractive space to store your food. And it can all be done in an afternoon.

Step One: Get Real - Your pantry can't do everything. Its main function is to store non-perishable foods. Only after this is accomplished can it master other tasks such as housing small appliances and cookbooks.

Step Two: Clean and Sort – Remove everything from your pantry and sort into boxes with these labels: “Rice & Pasta;” “Canned Goods;” “Cereals & Breakfast;” “Snacks;” “Treats;” “Beverages;” “Paper Products;” “Condiments & Sauces;” “Baby;” and anything else you store in your pantry. Sort non-food items into boxes, too. Toss anything outdated. Wipe down the shelves.

Step Three: Make the Cut - Take a look at your boxes of sorted food and decide what is pantry-worthy. Consider alternate spaces if there's just too much. Your oils, vinegars and spices might function best near the stove; coffee, tea and cocoa work well near the mugs and coffee pot; and baking supplies are perfect near the mixing bowls and measuring spoons. Beverages, paper products and small appliances can easily be stored in the garage, basement or even a hall closet.

Step Four: Gather Supplies - Organizing products can really help maximize pantry space. Bins are perfect for corralling packages of rice and pasta, and they keep bags of chips tidy, too. Stackable, airtight containers are just right for cereals, crackers, nuts and dry goods. They keep items fresh, visible, and neat. Woven baskets are great for potatoes and onions. Canned goods are nicely organized on shelf risers. Turntables are ideal for high spaces and tight corners – give them a twirl and see what's all the way in the back. Don't hesitate to install additional shelves and hooks as needed. There are even over-the-door storage solutions.

Step Five: Replace Food – Return food to your pantry according to the groups you created when you sorted. Put less often used items up high, heavy beverages down low. Place your most frequently used foods at eye level. Consider a “kid shelf” if you've got small children. Leave room for a stepstool. Don't pack it too tightly. Remember, you are in and out of the pantry all day. It needs to function as well as it looks, which means shelves can't be over-stuffed.

Step Six: Make Allowances - If there's leftover space, make room for a few non-food zones. Recycling bins can sit on the floor, paper towels on the top shelf, and cookbooks are fine if you have the room.

Step Seven: Final Touches – Label your shelves, baskets, bins and containers. Your organization might seem obvious to you, but labels help the whole family know where to look for things and where to replace them.

The pantry can't possibly do everything we want it to. But it is the most accessed space in the house, and as such, it deserves some serious respect. It should be well stocked and well organized and routinely tidied. A spiffy pantry will make your grocery shopping and meal planning a breeze. It will cut down on waste, too. Now if only it could make dinner!