



Denise Shannon is one handy grand.

Nailing it

A talented grand builds a dream playhouse

BY MARCIA MOSTON

IT'S NOT THAT SHE DOESN'T bake great chocolate chip cookies or make a mean Key lime pie. The reason grandmother Denise Shannon's apron isn't dusty with flour is that it is stuffed with a hammer and a fistful of nails.

When husband Randy's job required a move from their cozy Vermont home to Plant City, on Florida's sunny west coast, Denise knew she wouldn't be looking for a home on a golf course.

This creative former first-grade teacher set out to do what she loved—fix up an old house. She was undaunted by the fact that the project she chose was the “haunted Halloween house” in the historic district. Nor was she deterred by the termite-eaten floorboards or the hole in the roof. The house had character, a great yard, lots of potential. Denise was confident of both her vision and her skills. So was Randy, who had

long ago learned to appreciate her hammer-wielding talents.

And then, her two granddaughters, Heavyn and Neese, moved to Plant City so their parents could reap the benefits of grandparents as after-school and vacation caretakers.

On a very ordinary, sunny afternoon stroll around the neighborhood, Denise and the girls came upon a tidy home with a gingerbread playhouse in the backyard. Denise watched as the girls pushed their cheeks against the wrought iron fence and lapsed into a wistful reverie. She looked at the girls; she looked at the playhouse; she went home and Googled “How to build a shed.” (Although she'd experienced remodeling houses, she had never built one.)

For the next few months, determined Denise mined the Internet for every article she could find on building small structures. As she broke down the various steps of the construction, she realized she could do most of them.

“I was confident I could build a wall. The thing that stumped me was how to put a roof on.”

Then one night, she stumbled on an article that “read like an idiot's guide” to building roof trusses. The playhouse on paper was about to become a reality in the backyard.

Energized by the possibility of surprising her granddaughters with their own playhouse, Denise headed out to the local building supply store. She had already discovered that with a bit of ingenuity and a lot of

determination she could squeeze fifty-five 2x4x8's in her PT Cruiser!

This time, she stuffed her car with cement blocks for the foundation. She spent two days leveling the blocks in beds of sand, then laid the plywood floor and built the roof trusses.

“Grandma's building a shed,” she told her curious granddaughters.

Two of her neighbors—both single men—had viewed her with skepticism when she first moved in and set up her table saw. One told her that women and power tools made him nervous; the other thought she was slightly eccentric. But after seeing how she had transformed her house, both now had a healthy respect



Heavyn and Neese inside their playhouse

for her carpentry skills and readily volunteered to help carry the sheets of 3/4-inch plywood and hoist the trusses into place.

Other neighbors entered into the playhouse conspiracy. One found a large ceramic puppy at a yard sale and knew it would make the perfect front porch pooch. When Denise, with granddaughters at her side, stared blankly at the proffered gift, her neighbor adamantly reiterated in a conspiratorial tone, “You need it



TOOLBOX BASICS

If you can bake or sew or read a map, you can build, fix and repair. As the writer Pat Westfall learned when she moved to a decrepit farm, plumbing is much like sewing: The pieces fit together with strength and logic. Paul Holstein, from Cable Organizer ➔, talked with GRAND about where to begin:

Metal toolbox: Even if other people in your household have tools and toolboxes, you need to have your own—and nothing makes it your own like setting up the toolbox. Our pick for a good starter box is the \$35 Excel 20-inch two-drawer. It only comes in red, but a jar of Mod Podge and those photographs of your roses should do the trick.

Hammer: The most important hand tool of all, a hammer is used for everything from hanging pictures to installing decorative molding. A smart option is the claw hammer: a steel head on one side and a claw—the crowbarlike nail-pulling lever—on the other.

Tape measure: What's that those guys are always saying on *Design on a Dime*? Measure twice, cut once. Incorrect measurements waste time, money and what's left of our mental health.

Level: Wondering if that picture you're hanging or chair rail you're affixing is straight? We can opt for the high-tech laser levels with the cool red lines on the wall, but standard "torpedo" levels with the air bubbles in three clear, liquid-filled vials that give visible proof of a surface's level feel like real, salt-of-the-earth tools.

Screwdrivers: A screw's "drive type" is defined by the shape or design stamped into its head, which a screwdriver blade fits into in order to drive or extract the screw. Multi-bit screwdrivers with a full set of interchangeable blade bits that can be instantly switched to suit any project are hot, but we keep the old-fashioned kind in several sizes (from watch screws to the truly immense) and five or six sizes of the Phillips bit as well.

Pliers and wrenches: Both pliers and wrenches provide extra grip and leverage, and we need one of each. They're not interchangeable. Pliers are the best for pulling out nails and bending and cutting wire. Grab a wrench when you need grip combined with extra torque for tightening and loosening pipes or turning nuts and bolts.

Utility knife: A utility knife—also called a box cutter, razor knife or carpet knife—is made up of a hollow plastic or metal handle that houses a retractable razor blade. Utility knives are incredibly useful tools for any DIY-er, regardless of skill level: they make quick work of slicing through cardboard, drywall, carpet, thin plastics and even linoleum.



for your *shed*."

At first it was easy to keep the shed idea going, but after the porch went up and Grandma's tool storage took on a decidedly playful look, Denise had to drape a large tarp over the front of the building. To further complicate matters, Christmas vacation began, and the girls stayed with her each day from 7:30 a.m. until 5:00 p.m.

"Those last couple of days I was out there in the dark with a drop light putting polyurethane on the floor at 6:00 a.m. before they arrived."

With tops of spice jars as knobs for the stove and an old cabinet as a cupboard, the playhouse was completed. Denise hung a wreath on the door, stuck poinsettias in the flower boxes and wrapped the mailbox in Christmas paper with a note inside telling the girls to go out to Grandma's shed. On Christmas Day, squeals of delight echoed up and down the street.

A few days later, Denise overheard one of her granddaughters tell her little friend who was admiring the playhouse: "Go ask your grandma; she'll build you one." 📧

GRAND BUILDERS!

Send us your photographs of the playhouses, tree houses and doll houses you've built for your grandkids. If your project is selected to appear in GRAND, we'll have a readers' choice, and the winner will receive the revolutionary Autolader Classic Multi-Bit Screwdriver → from Cable Organizer →.

Deadline for submission (jpg attachments only; 300 dpi high-resolution photos) is September 1, 2009.