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Salvage a new look

Find shopping tips and five of our favorite stores.

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Pieces from the past

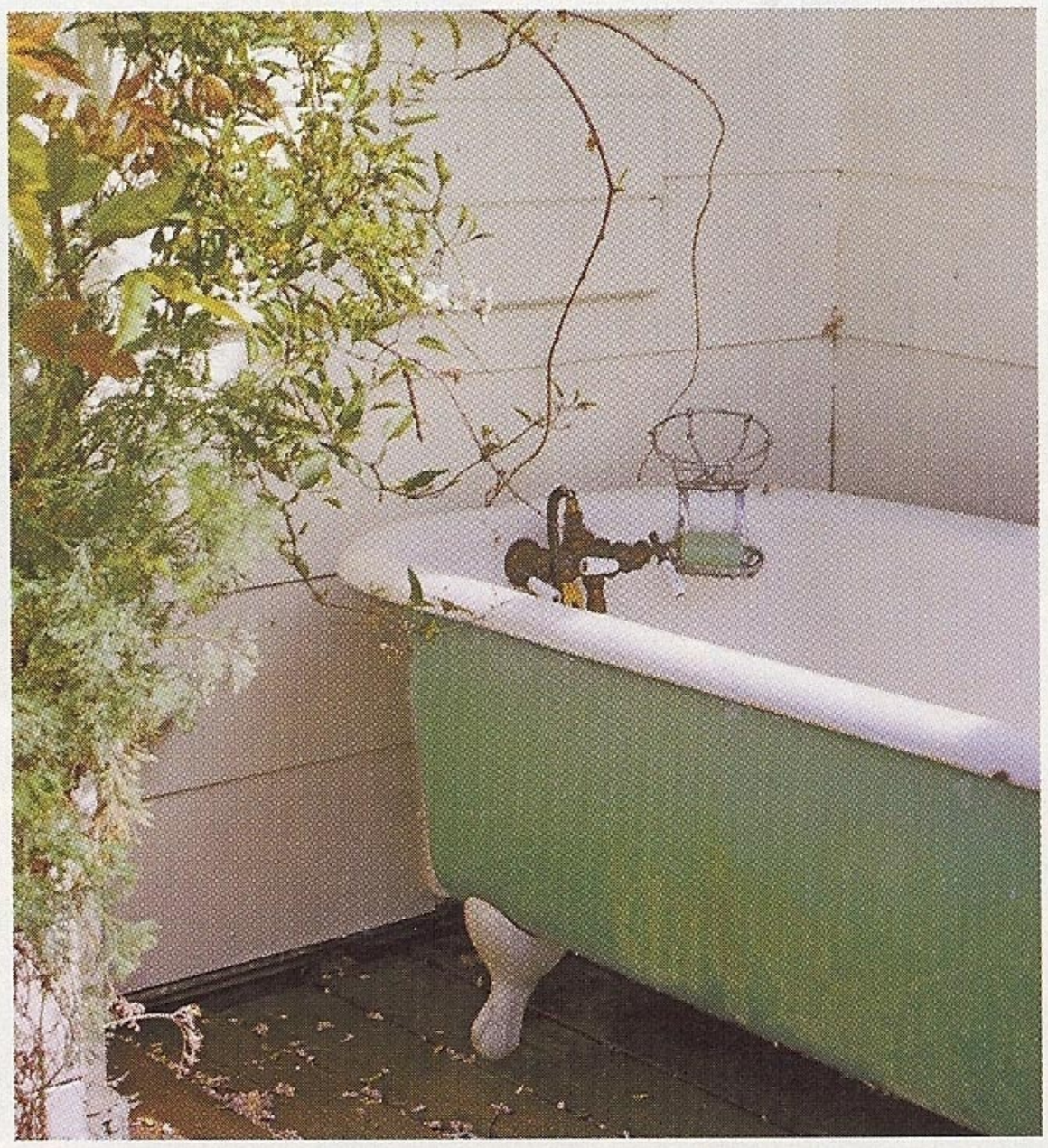
Using salvage materials is financially sound, environmentally savvy, and smartly stylish.

By Lynne Meredith Schreiber

SEARCHING SALVAGE AND building reclamation shops is a great way to find items, such as doors, mantels, or hardware, that will lend the charm of another era to your home without breaking your budget. Plus, by giving salvaged materials new life, you help prevent their disposal into landfills.

"Thirty to forty percent of all municipal waste in this country annually comes from construction renovation and demolition," says Brad Guy, Pittsburgh-based president of the Building Materials Reuse Association (BMRA) and coauthor of *Unbuilding: Salvaging the Architectural Treasures of Unwanted Houses*.

From lighting fixtures to furniture, possibilities wait to be reclaimed. All you need are time and creativity.



Nuts and bolts of salvage

People are often drawn to the quality and craftsmanship of vintage salvage offerings. "Architectural components created before World War II use materials such as old-growth wood and levels of craft that are prohibitively expensive to match now," Guy says. "It's a style and aesthetic that has a lot of character."

Salvage also offers a uniquely personal connection. "Homeowners are drawn to salvage because of the imagined history attached to an item," says interior designer Yvette Piaggio of Alexandria, Virginia. "When you pick up an old doorknob, it's like opening a door to the past."

Salvage items require more effort than simply buying new. This may come in the form of time spent visiting several shops and combing through inventory or in cleaning and restoring a find. For example, visitors to Minneapolis designer Alissa Luepke Pier's 1910 Victorian house tend to think the russet-colored oak sideboard in her dining room is a built-in original to the home. But the item was something she found hidden—and in 40 pieces—in a Des Moines salvage shop.

While the early 20th-century piece is more ornate than the existing woodwork in Pier's home, it fits the era. "The woodwork detailing isn't an exact match, but it calls subtle attention to the piece as a featured element."

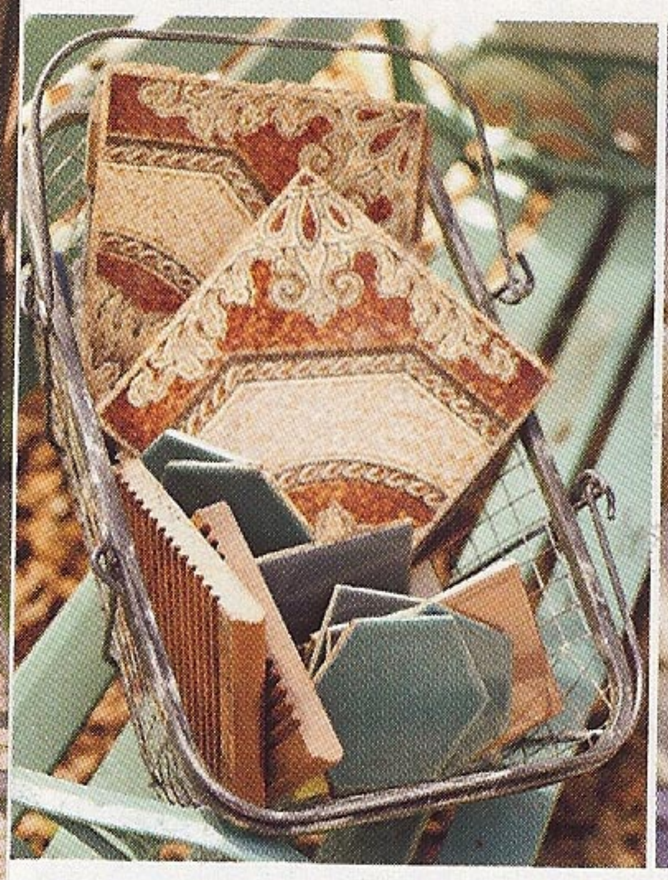
Like Pier, some homeowners use salvage items as they were intended, while others devise a whole new purpose, like pairing antique wrought-iron brackets with a plank of wood flooring to make a shelf.

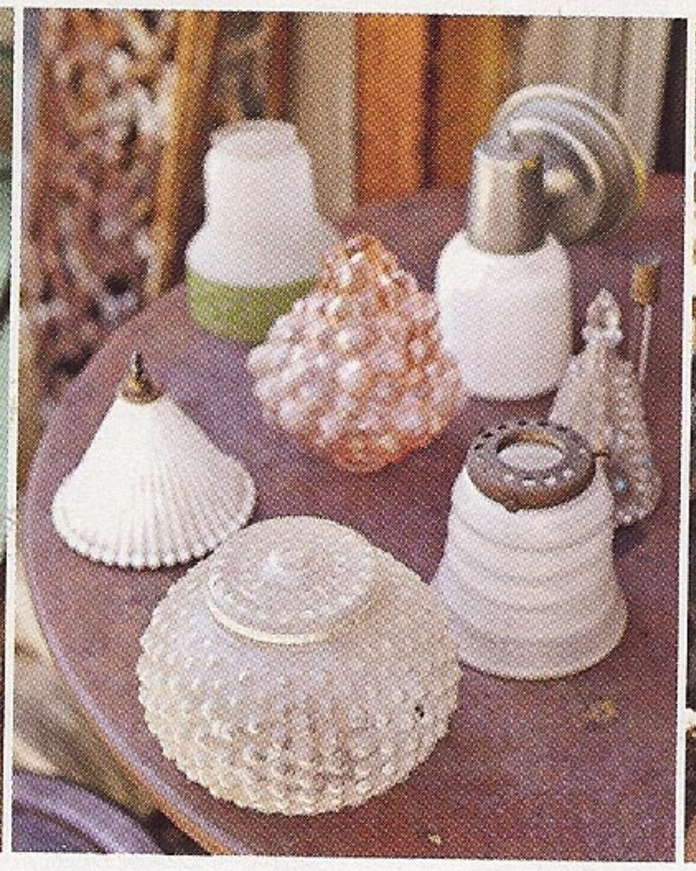
"Our customers are visionaries—they see the value beyond what the material is at face value," says Spenser Villwock, senior manager at ReSource Reclaimed Building Materials in Boulder, Colorado. Indeed, finding a new use for an old material is intriguing—and fun. "You can do amazing things with salvage: transforming single-pane windows into glass fronts for cabinets; making doors into tables; or using decorative brackets as wall sconces," Guy says.

Refinishing a salvaged item like a clawfoot tub may take time and effort, but you'll be rewarded with something uniquely yours.

Often, savings are significant. The $500 paid by Pier for her sideboard was a bargain. Even when she factors the $3,000 spent refurbishing and fitting it into her home, the numbers still are in her favor. New, a similar sideboard could cost $7,000 or more, she notes. And a new piece wouldn't have the same richness Pier's salvaged one possesses. "I love the almost human character it embodies," Pier says.

Last spring, when her house was part of a home tour, the 1940s residents of the house came through, carrying photos of what it looked like at that time. "Even though the buffet wasn't original to the house, its style fit in beautifully. They were glad someone cared enough about the house to put effort into enhancing it," Pier says.





Old items, new looks

Get started with the following guide to potential salvage finds.

Flooring

Look for: Wood without warping, rot, or bend. Maple, walnut, pine, and red or white oak were common in older homes. You'll find it in widths from one- to eight-inch planks. "One advantage of salvaged flooring is that it's solid (as opposed to a wood veneer) and is durable and long lasting," says Susan Fredman, ASID, the Chicago-based interior designer of the 2007 *Cooking Light* FitHouse.

Give it new life: "Patch areas of damage in existing flooring or where walls have been removed," says Minneapolis designer Amy Meller. If found in enough quantity, it can floor an entire room. However, before installation, most solid wood flooring will benefit from refinishing—a time-consuming and messy project often best left to residential contractors.

Lighting

Look for: Many salvaged fixtures are prized for small, intricate details. Arts and crafts, colonial revival, and schoolhouse-style fixtures are most common at salvage shops, but art deco and modern styles can be found, too.

Give it new life: After you've selected the fixture, have it professionally rewired so it meets electrical codes. Lighting stores and many salvage shops can rewire a fixture; expect to spend at least $50 to $100.

Windows

Look for: "Older glass [before 1959] is interesting because it has flaws, such a bubbles and waves, that lend character," Meller says. Look for sashes in good condition with solid—not soft—wood; rot is typically found at the bottom of the sash and up the jambs. Scrape and repaint, if needed. Since old putty and paint may contain lead, wear a mask, vacuum any dust or paint chips, and dispose of trash at a site that accepts hazardous materials. Or hire a residential contractor to revamp the windows for you, Meller says.

Give it new life: People often make mirrors out of old window frames or use the frames and glass as cabinet fronts. Also, consider stained-glass for cabinet fronts.

Miscellaneous items

Item: Doorknobs

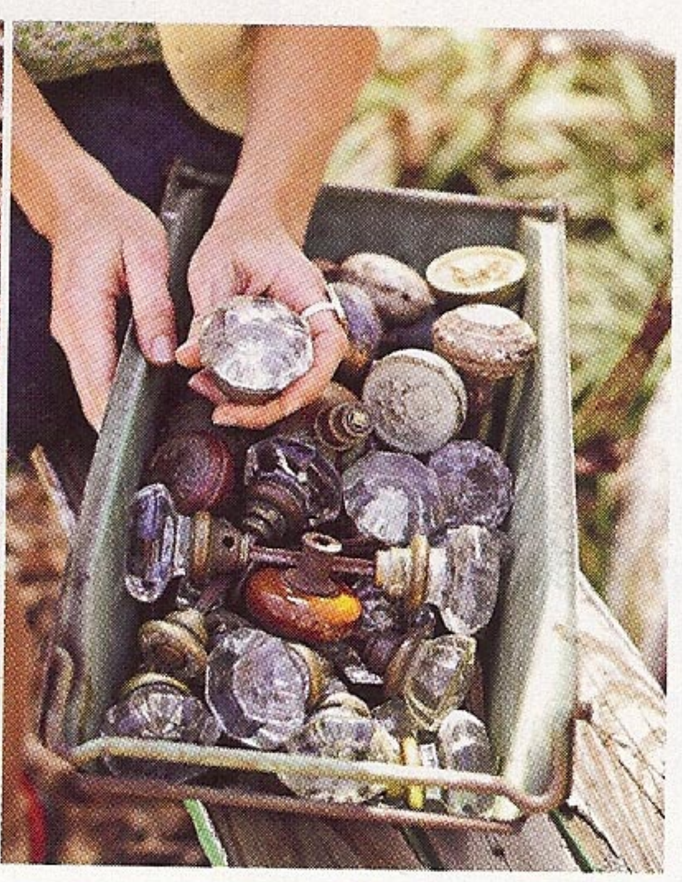
Give them new life: Mount them on a board for a coat rack, Guy says.

Item: Ironwork, such as wrought-iron gates or fence section

Give it new life: Use in the garden as a climbing trellis, combine to create a screen, or mount a gate as a headboard.

Item: Balusters

Give it new life: These make great lamp bases or supports for counters, bars, or tables. Look for posts of the same size.



Lynne Meredith Schreiber writes from Southfield, Michigan.