

## O U T O F O R D E R



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## The Man's World of Backyard Sheds

By ROGER MUMMERT

**D**URING the shopping phase of my purchase of a backyard shed, my wife was notably guarded.

"Don't go hog-wild with this thing," she said, tossing aside the glossy shed catalog I had shown her. "I want to look out and see our yard and not some Taj Mahal."

Once the shed was delivered and I proudly held a family tour, her attitude shifted 180 degrees.

"Why so small?" she asked, eyeballing the auxiliary shelving I had opted for. "You're not going to fit much stuff in here at all."

The words "fit much stuff" were the first indication I had of the gender-based perception gap that exists with backyard sheds. Wives tend to see these structures as repositories for garage and basement clutter. Husbands, on the other hand, view these pine-scented shacks as a personal refuge from the clamor and chaos of family life. To us, sheds are a man's domain.

One doesn't have to look far for corroboration. A leading Long Island shed retailer is appropriately named Man Products. Its logo: a club-wielding caveman. Sheds are so male they really should come with a free "Men Only!" sign from the "He Man Woman Hater's Club" of "Little Rascals" fame.

The French, who assign gender to words, are in lockstep with us on the masculinity issue. I reached for my college-era *Petit Larousse* and found that shed or *hangar* is a *nom masculin*. Same with *entrepôt* (warehouse), *toit* (garret) and *appentis* (outhouse). All masculine! All indicating places where men are more comfortable spending time than are women, primarily because of the lack of comforts found there.

When I shared my etymological research with my wife, she was little impressed.

"Fine, fine, word boy," she said, pointing to a teetering pile of junk in the garage that defines the word cantilevered. "Just start loading this stuff in *Le Shed* so I can get my car in here."

Ruffled, I retreated to the solace of

### A personal refuge from the chaos of family life.

said shed, where I breathed in its piney essence, ran my hands along its nubby wooden walls and contem-

plated its purpose. At that moment — with afternoon sunlight streaming into the tawny-colored enclosure — I had a crystalline vision of what I wanted my shed to look like.

I envisioned its shelves happily lined with rusty Horn & Hardart coffee cans, out of which spring thickets of paintbrushes, screwdrivers and odd tools with obscure purposes. The floor is covered with lawn mowers (the one that works, the one that doesn't) and associated edgers, clippers and a can of gasoline to provide an olfactory counterpart to the scent of wood. I even contemplated hanging up a girlie calendar promoting a transmission shop — then I double-clutched in a moment of political correctness and conscientious parenthood.

When I showed off my new shed to a male friend, he was satisfyingly congratulatory. "This sucker is solidly built!" he said, stomping on the floorboards. "Sprang for the window,

I see."

"Well, I figure I'm spending some time in here."

"You know if you ran electricity and got a DirecTV dish, you'd really have it going on!"

"Maybe a fridge. Some cold brewskis?"

"There ya go!"

We yukked it up with more guy talk, in a virtual back-slapping fest. Then came an unexpected comment.

"What the hell is this?" my friend asked, looking out the window.

He'd noticed. In a moment of whimsy — or perhaps in an unconscious nod toward the wife, two daughters and female dog that render me gender-exotic in our little family — I had opted for a window box. At present, the box stands unfilled.

"You planting some pink pansies in there?" said my friend, with a smirk.

"I was thinking about herbs or purple coleus."

"Or some lavender impatiens?"

I could see where all of this was headed. As my friend had recognized, the shed has an essence of its own. Sitting there in the sunlight and glowing its happy new-wood sheen, it displays a sensitive side. It even looks ... pretty. Though I couldn't admit it to my friend, some frilly girly flowers wouldn't look bad on it.

What was I thinking? Could those French linguists be wrong? Can a shed be feminine? Is that the reason why guys are attracted to sheds in the first place?

Nah! I still maintain that a shed is a man's domain, and until I figure out what manly aspect of horticulture provides harmony between all genders, genera and species, my shed's flower box will remain unfilled. There will be no pansies growing in this testosterone-rich environment. ■