

# Design the Perfect Pantry

Hard-working kitchen storage takes less space than you think

BY PAUL DeGROOT

Ask your neighbors what they dislike about their pantries, and you'll likely get an earful: "It's too small" or "I can't find anything in it." I hear these complaints on cue from clients. Clearly, the way we store our soup and cereal warrants careful planning.

Whether you are building a new kitchen or remodeling what you have, you need to consider what makes a pantry work and which kind is best for your situation. Here, I'll describe the three main types of pantries: cabinets, reach-ins, and walk-ins. I'll also offer a suggestion for a hybrid pantry/mudroom that the homeowners walk through as they enter the house. The drawings are meant to illustrate the basics; the photos show some of my actual projects.

Just keep two things in mind as you read and plan your pantry: Good design means keeping things simple, and the right location often trumps size. Sometimes, a hard-working cabinet is all you need for convenient access to all your kitchen goods.

## The basics: location and lighting

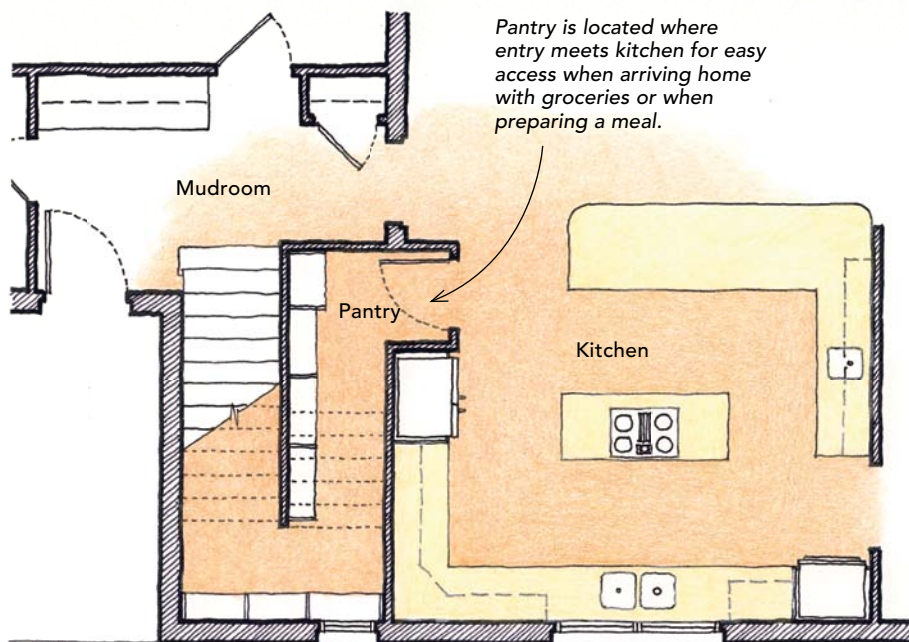
Convenience and visibility are the essential attributes of a great pantry. Regardless of size, the pantry should be in a handy location, positioned in the kitchen or immediately next to it. A modest pantry cabinet placed within the kitchen footprint will be more convenient for regular use than an oversize walk-in down the hall. Plus, every pantry's utility will be improved with counter space for sorting and unloading groceries.

Pantries also must have proper lighting so that you can see the contents well. Ceiling-mounted linear fluorescents work well for walk-in pantries. Install the fixtures parallel to the longest shelving runs for best light. Due to the extra cost, most of the cabinet pantries I design don't have internal lighting, so I make sure that





## Pantry in a big kitchen



## LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

An efficient smaller kitchen has the pantry on one side of the stove, separated by about 4 ft. of counter, and the refrigerator on the other side of the stove, separated by a similar stretch of counter. Both sides of the stove are convenient prep zones. In larger kitchens, the pantry also should be near a working counter or an island and preferably near the doorway where groceries enter the home.

there is adequate kitchen lighting directly outside the cabinet. Often, this means that I will locate one or two recessed fixtures about 16 in. from the face of the cabinet. A reach-in closet pantry will benefit from a low-profile fluorescent light mounted inside, especially when a tall header blocks ambient light from the high shelves. I specify slim, no-frills fluorescents with rounded acrylic diffusers for these above-door applications.

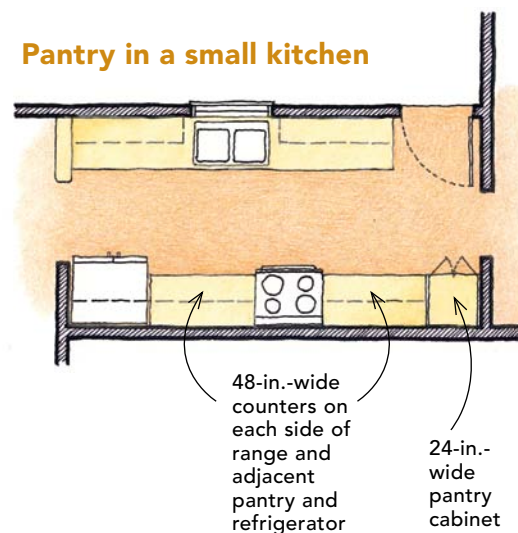
Electrical codes are strict about the types and the locations of lights installed in closets. Treat pantry lighting with similar caution. If you must use incandescent fixtures, be sure to place them well away from any open shelves that might be packed with paper goods and combustibles.

### A better pantry may not be bigger

Cabinet pantries are space efficient, typically occupying just 4 sq. ft. to 8 sq. ft. of floor area. For big families and others who buy in bulk, I sometimes supplement the in-kitchen pantry cabinet with a larger pantry elsewhere.

Reach-in closet pantries range in size from 6 sq. ft. to 12 sq. ft., assuming a 24-in. depth and a width from 3 ft. to 6 ft. There are occasions where a 24-in. depth is not possible. In these cases, a 12-in. depth is the minimum, but 16 in. or more would allow some storage flexibility. It's difficult to see and access

## Pantry in a small kitchen



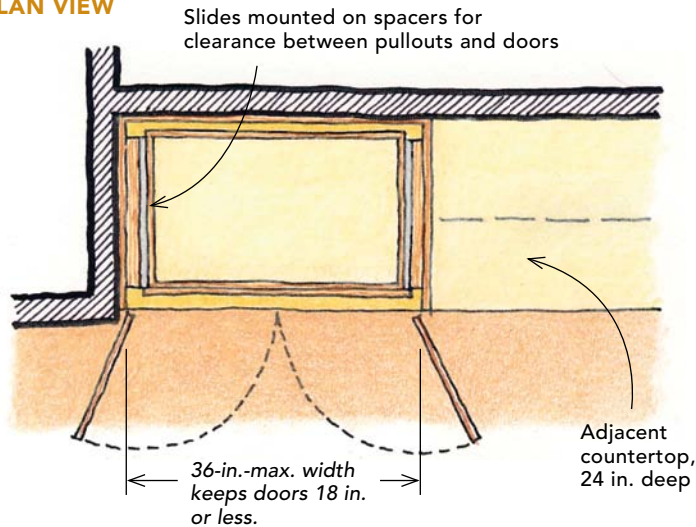
items at the extreme sides of a wide reach-in closet pantry with a narrow doorway. Except on the smallest of reach-ins, I use pairs of doors with the sidewalls of the closet no more than 6 in. from each door jamb.

Surrounded by 2x4 stud walls, pantry closets waste a fair amount of volume with studs and drywall. A simple remodeling strategy is to substitute a tall cabinet pantry in the same location as an old closet. Trading a 4½-in.-thick wall for a ¾-in. plywood end panel nets inches of extra shelf width. The result is a user-friendly pantry in a com-

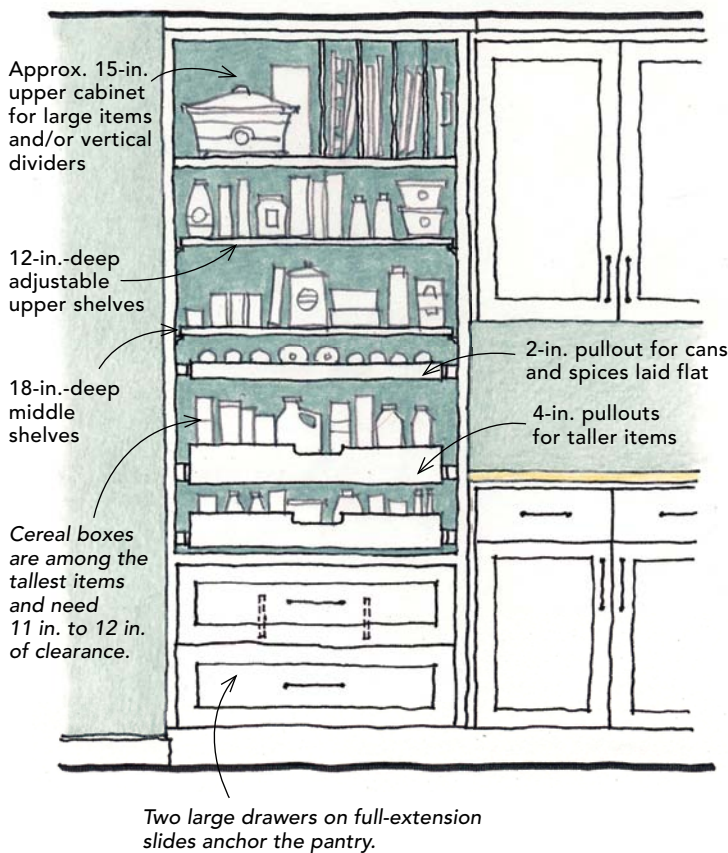
## CABINET PANTRY

This type of pantry requires the smallest footprint, but it can still pack a lot of storage. Cabinet pantries can be stock items ordered from national cabinet shops, or they can be custom-built from designers' plans. The author prefers the arrangement shown here: a full-height, cabinet-depth pantry with fully extending drawers below a series of pullouts and stationary shelves. Depending on the width of the pantry, it may have a single door or a pair of doors no wider than 18 in. each.

### PLAN VIEW



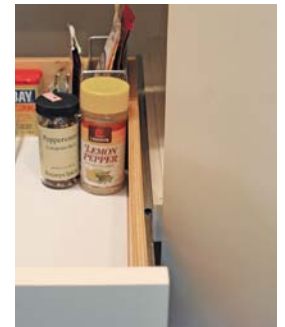
### ELEVATION



**Hard-working doors.** Using the back side of a cabinet-pantry door for storage takes away from the potential depth of shelves, but it offers an area where commonly used goods won't get lost in the clutter.



**Light you don't have to think about.** Good lighting allows you to see clearly. A fixture should be placed inside the pantry or on the ceiling directly outside it. A door-operated switch means you don't have to turn the light on manually or remember to turn it off.

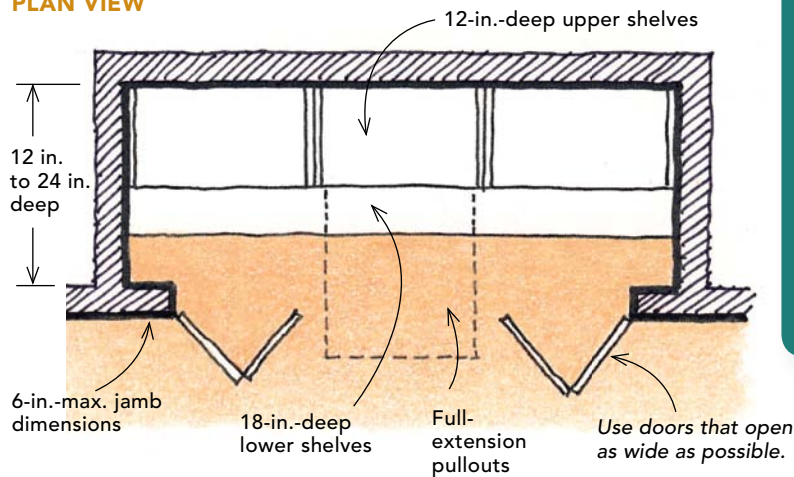


**Blocking for clearance.** The drawback of sliding shelves behind doors is that the inside of the doors tends to get scratched. The farther you can fur out the shelves from the inside of the cabinet, the better the chance of keeping the doors in good shape.

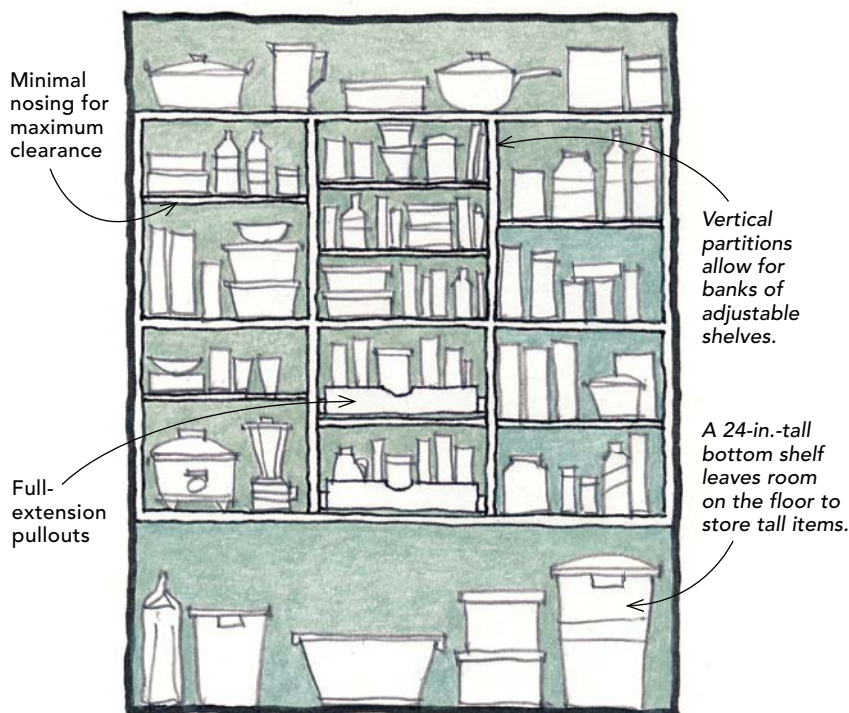
compact package that can match the rest of the kitchen cabinets.

A compact walk-in can be made with an interior footprint of about 4 ft. by 4 ft. and an L-shaped arrangement of shelves on two walls. While the length of the room is variable, the width depends on the shelving arrangement and the walking aisle. I consider 44 in. to be a minimum width, affording a 28-in. aisle and 16-in. shelves on one wall only. A long, narrow room like this will still feel tight. Widening such a pantry allows for more comfortable browsing space, wider shelves, and/or shelves on two parallel walls. Note that a room wider than 8 ft. will likely have wasted floor space in the middle.

## PLAN VIEW



## ELEVATION



## REACH-IN PANTRY

Enclosed by stud walls, this pantry is a small closet. Reach-in closet pantries tend to be affordable and easy to build. Some have pairs of doors concealing 4 ft. to 7 ft. of shelving across the back wall. Better reach-ins have the widest doors possible for good visibility of the contents. Considering that wide doors take up substantial wall space, this pantry is best located just off the kitchen proper so that the kitchen walls can be loaded with cabinets, appliances, windows, and other essentials.



**Reach in, once in a while.** Commonly used goods are stored in the cabinet pantry seen inside the kitchen. Nearby, a secondary reach-in pantry holds the bulk and is used for restocking.

A typical walk-in pantry might take up 30 sq. ft., at 6 ft. wide by 5 ft. deep. A large walk-in could easily double that area, especially if a client wants room for a counter, a step stool, and a spare refrigerator.

### It's all about storage

While deep shelves can hold more stuff, it's a frustrated cook who can't find the rice hidden behind a train wreck of juice boxes and pasta. For better visibility, I like to stagger the depth of shelves.

A simple pantry with fixed wooden shelving is quick and easy to build. If your budget dictates this approach, consider mounting 16-in.-deep to 18-in.-deep shelves starting

about 24 in. above the floor so that you can keep taller items on the floor below. At eye level, switch to 12-in.-deep shelves. Bulkier items on the lower shelves may be taller than 12 in., a common vertical shelf spacing, so allow extra height there—if not all the way across a wall then at least across a portion of it. However, it is common to experience a trial-and-error fitting when first loading a new pantry, so adjustable shelves rate highly on the convenience meter. They also readily accommodate an additional shelf.

For full-height cabinet pantries, I position two big full-extension drawers nearest the floor, enabling items stored in the back to be found easily. Above these drawers, I usually

spec a pair of tall doors concealing a combination of pullouts and fixed shelves. This way, users can see the entire pantry at once. I sometimes add a second pair of shorter doors at the top of the cabinet. This space is good for oversize items that are used infrequently. It also can be outfitted with vertical dividers for cookie sheets and the like.

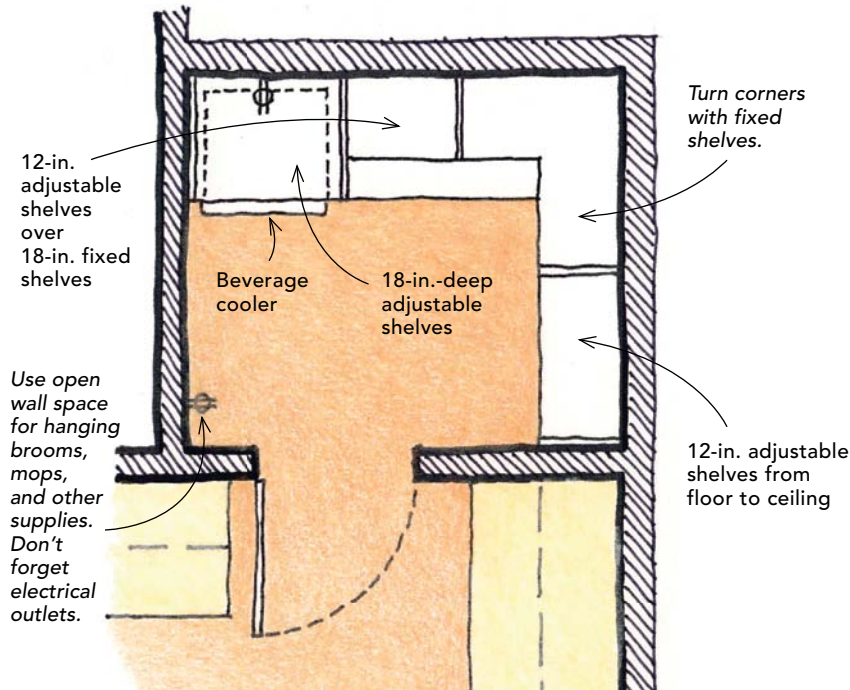
User preferences and heights dictate modifications to my basic cabinet-pantry template. Tall folks may want an additional pullout inside the main compartment. Some like spice racks or small shelves mounted on the inside of the cabinet doors.

Narrow spaces in a base-cabinet arrangement also can be used for pullout pantry

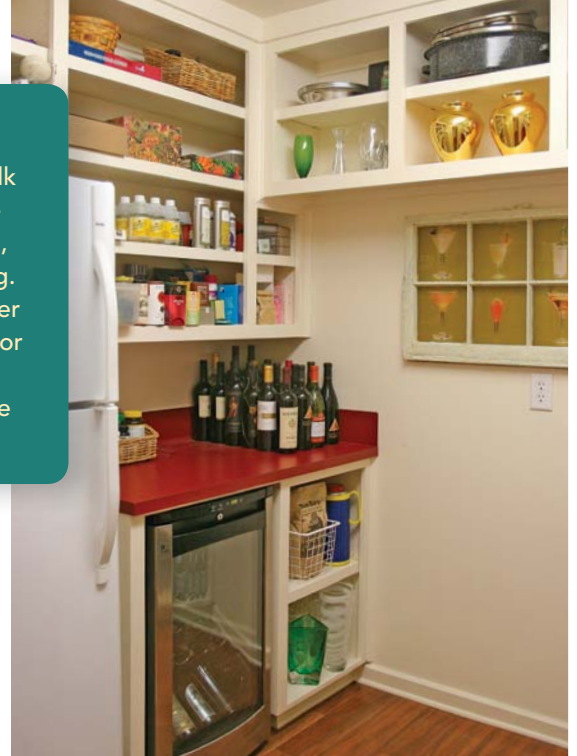
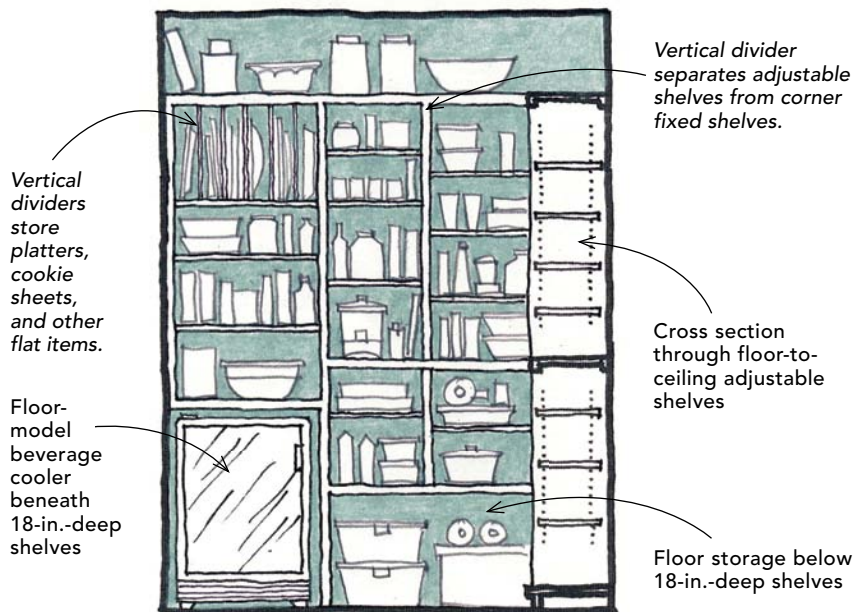
## WALK-IN PANTRY

Usually the biggest of the lot, a walk-in pantry is ideal for those who buy in bulk and/or live far from the grocery store. Roomy walk-ins are large enough to use three or four walls for storing items such as dry goods, paper towels, pet food, appliances, and brooms. Smaller walk-ins usually have just two walls of shelving. A popular and affordable option for a small walk-in pantry is to put it in a corner of the kitchen, with the door set on a 45° angle between adjoining counters. For those wanting fewer cabinets and an open, minimalistic look in their kitchen, a walk-in pantry just outside the room can be a solution that doesn't compromise the kitchen aesthetic.

### PLAN VIEW



### ELEVATION



**Walk in to convenience.** For a family that buys in bulk, a large walk-in pantry not only hides groceries, but it also offers a place for a second fridge and freezer as well as a beverage cooler.

units, where the entire assembly extends out from the cabinet frame. Either custom-built or ordered from a catalog, these units have front panels hiding multiple shelves behind, with access gained from both sides when the units slide out. Häfele, Rev-A-Shelf, and others sell cabinet-pantry hardware narrow enough to squeeze into a 4-in.-wide space.

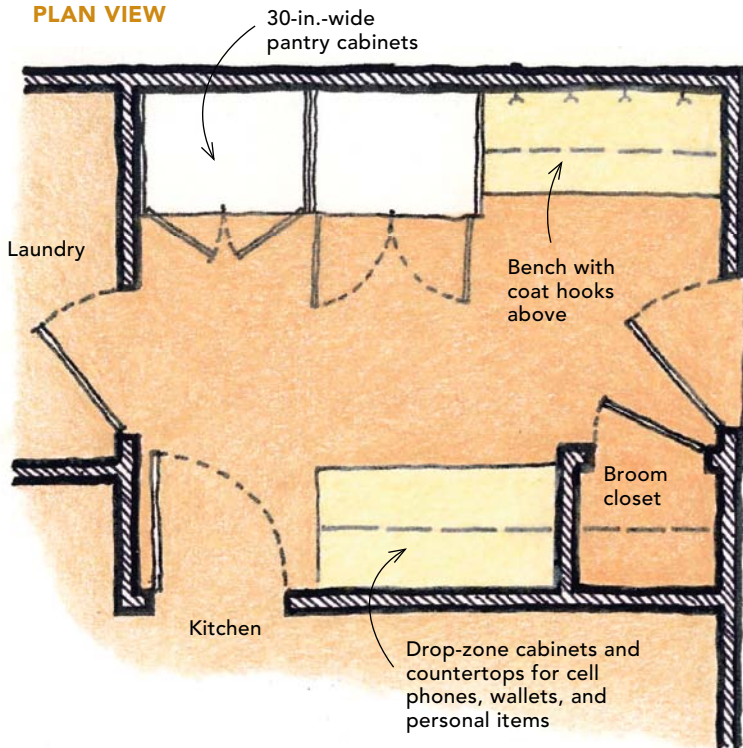
Don't forget that wall space inside a walk-in pantry is useful for hanging a mop and brooms, so don't put shelves everywhere.

Give some thought to keeping small appliances in the pantry, plugged in and ready to use. A deep pantry shelf or counter is a possible location for a seldom-used microwave oven. I have a client who keeps a toaster and coffeemaker in her walk-in pantry to reduce the clutter on her counters. Built-in beverage centers take up valuable kitchen real estate. I saved money by putting a freestanding model in our pantry below the staircase.

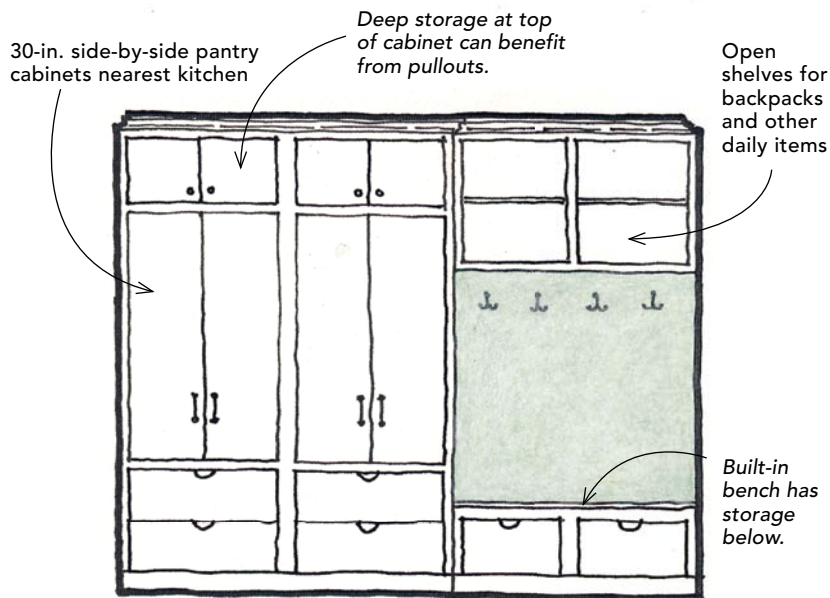
### Doors shouldn't get in the way

While I almost always use standard 24-in.-deep units for cabinet pantries, the width depends on the design specifics of the kitchen. Maintaining a width of 36 in. or less allows me a pair of cabinet doors, each less than 18 in. across. Wider doors can be heavy and unwieldy to open. When I have more than 36 in. of width for a built-in pantry, I

## PLAN VIEW



## ELEVATION



## WALK-THROUGH PANTRY

Sometimes the pantry is part of a mudroom or utility room next to the kitchen. It's often a walk-through room instead of a walk-in. A good example is a pantry/mudroom you pass through from the garage or back porch to the kitchen. This arrangement provides a handy place to wipe your feet and put away items. Storage can be out of view behind doors, or it can be open shelving and bins lining the walls. As a mudroom, it needs space for stowing backpacks, feeding the dog, charging a smart phone, or washing dirty hands. Some might allocate space for an extra freezer or refrigerator.



**Put it away on the way in.** A hybrid pantry/mudroom located between the garage and the kitchen is convenient when you arrive home with groceries and when you are preparing dinner. Counter space near the pantry is always a good idea.

place two separate cabinets side-by-side, with three or four doors across the front.

Have you ever had a closet with cheap bifold doors? Used daily, the light-duty hardware gives out; the doors stop gliding and eventually derail. It doesn't have to be so. Outfitted with commercial-grade hardware, bifold door panels are good options for wider reach-in pantry closets. The beauty of these doors is their ability to provide wide openings while being unobtrusive when open. I like to use a pocket door when it is likely to

remain open quite a bit or when a swinging door is going to be in the way.

For a single door to a walk-in pantry, I never use less than a 24 in. width, but most folks will appreciate the extra passage of a 30-in. door. You will need a 32-in.-wide door if a big appliance has to get through it, but don't forget that swinging doors take up space. A wide pantry door that opens against a counter will block access. With outswing pantry doors, I keep the doorknob nearest the counter for best functionality. When an

outswinger won't work, I fit a pocket door into the blueprint or arrange an inswinger to park against an unused interior wall.

Finally, an automatic light switch that is activated by the door is a nice touch for a pantry because you're likely to be coming or going with your hands full. □

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