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Under-Counter Appliances

by Jim Kregel

Under-counter appliances have been around for a long time — the dishwasher made its first appearance in the late 40s. Today, the category includes refrigerators, freezers, ice makers, wine coolers, ovens, warming drawers, and trash compactors, too. Many of these units are installed in state-of-the-art kitchens, and not just to save space. Under-counter appliances are also used in other rooms of the home. And even though we refer to these appliances as under-counter, there are many other appropriate, and in some cases far better, installation locations.

Dishwashers

We're accustomed to installing the dishwasher below the counter, and that's fine, but consider raising it off the floor. I usually recommend anywhere from 6 to 16 inches off the floor. It's easier to use for those with lower back problems, as well as those who don't *want* lower back problems

(see *Kitchen & Bath*, 8/00).

One manufacturer, Fisher & Paykel of New Zealand, has created the DishDrawer, a dishwasher in a drawer. Nice idea — it eliminates the dual action of first opening the door, then sliding the rack forward. The drawers are available in double and single models, allowing the installation of one drawer near the sink and another unit closer to the dining table, still essentially adding up to one complete dishwasher (see Figure 1). Of course, convenience costs more — you could easily buy two standard dishwashers for the price of one double-drawer unit.

Refrigerators

My favorite under-counter appliance is the refrigerator or refrigerator-freezer combination. These come in a host of widths, from 12 to 48 inches. Manufactured by a long list of companies, each offers a different configuration (Figure 2). Using these

units allows me to place refrigeration wherever I like without the intrusion of a full-size appliance. After all, the average American refrigerator is roughly 32 inches deep, a full 8 inches deeper than the surrounding cabinets. Under-counter units are generally designed to fit flush with the cabinets and to accept a matching cabinet front. With such units, I'm free to install one near the sink, another near the food preparation area, and a support unit near the dining table. Instead of one central location, satellite locations make refrigeration more user friendly. For example, the unit near the table is where I'll store the milk, butter, orange juice, and salad dressings — all items that are used and consumed at the table. No one's fond of bending over to access these units — in fact, it takes away from their value — so, as with the dishwasher, I frequently raise them to whatever height works best in each location.



Figure 1. Available in single- or double-drawer configurations, Fisher & Paykel's premium-priced dishwasher can be installed near the stove, dining table, or just about anywhere the plumbing will allow.



Figure 2. Pull-out freezer storage offers ease of use and is a handy companion to a dedicated under-counter refrigerator.

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Unlike a standard dishwasher with roll-out racks, an under-counter refrigerator can be comfortably used at countertop height.

It's important to remember that a raised appliance may not work in just any location. Aesthetics play an important role in placement. Generally, it's best if the raised appliance is located at the end of a run of cabinets, or next to a unit that's taller than the one being raised.

Under-counter refrigerators are excellent in family entertainment centers next to the TV and sound system, in a family room, and — an increasingly popular location — the master bedroom, where they're a key component of the so-called morning kitchen. Many families find it efficient to have juice, cereal, and coffee handy while they're getting dressed for work or school, rather than running up and down hallways or stairs (Figure 3).

Wine chillers. I can't leave the topic of under-counter refrigerators without discussing wine chillers. While some units are as large as a standard refrigerator, there are also, of course, smaller, under-counter units. Like the dishwasher and under-counter refrigerators, these are best installed in a raised location (Figure 4). Below the counter, the showcase effect of the glass doors is diminished. Raising the unit allows it to be seen by all — the glass doors are there as much to show off the collection as to make selecting a wine easier.

Warming Drawers

The warming drawer, an old favorite, is making a huge comeback in the marketplace. In the 70s, we installed many of these in upscale kitchens, and, if my memory serves me correctly, the sole manufacturer at the time was Thermador. Warming drawers almost disappeared in the interim, until recently, when busy lifestyles created new demand for keeping food at serving temperature (Figure 5). Warming drawers are now



Figure 3. Under-counter refrigerators are showing up in today's "morning — and late-night — kitchen," the master bedroom.



Figure 4. A pair of wine chillers show to best advantage at an accessible height.



Figure 5. Warming drawers are increasingly popular with chronic late-for-dinner arrivals, and can be installed below a wall oven, raised dishwasher, or cooktop or in a conventional drawer cabinet.

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available from many manufacturers in a variety of styles, including the upscale “professional series.” They’re terrific for the family that hopes to eat the evening meal together but frequently can’t make it happen. Whereas the microwave often changes the texture and tenderness of food, the warming drawer does neither. It simply keeps food at serving temperature for approximately 3 to 4 hours, and can keep it either moist or dry. Meals can be kept warm on the plate or in the serving vessel. Most of these units are 24 inches wide by approximately 10 inches deep and fit nicely right below the counter. They’re also frequently installed directly below a wall oven in a tall cabinet. Or you can raise the dishwasher 16 inches and install the warming drawer in the base.

Ovens

I try to avoid under-counter ovens, or, more precisely, under-counter installations. Such units were originally developed for those who wanted to combine an electric self-cleaning oven with a gas cooktop in kitchens without the space for a tall wall oven. But, for maximum convenience, an oven ought to open at waist height (Figure 6). Under-counter ovens tend to open near floor level. Basting a turkey or tending the broiler at that level is difficult for most users and almost impossible for those in their later years. When designing a kitchen, I use a wall oven location or, barring that option, specify a good conventional cooktop oven. 

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Figure 6. An under-counter oven requires the user to stoop uncomfortably low for access. The author prefers a raised installation for true convenience.

Sources of Supply

Dacor

Diamond Bar, Calif.
800/793-0093
www.dacor.com

Fisher & Paykel Appliances

Irvine, Calif.
800/863-5394
www.usa.fisherpaykel.com

GE Appliances

800/626-2000
www.geappliances.com

KitchenAid

Benton Harbor, Mich.
800/253-3977
www.insideadvantage.com

Marvel Industries

Richmond, Ind.
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www.marvelindustries.com

Sub-Zero Freezer Company

Madison, Wisc.
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www.subzero.com

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