Don has FOUR tap handles...who isn't jealous of that? Some bars don't have that.

BUILDING A Kegerator

words & photos: Don Osborn

WHO DOESN'T LOVE DRAFT BEER, WITH ITS SUPPLE CARBONATION, GLORIOUS COLOR AND THE INDISTINGUISHABLE QUALITIES THAT MAKE IT DIFFERENT THAN BEER FROM A BOTTLE? Sometimes, though, you don't feel like trekking to a bar. Sauntering to the basement or garage, however: you can do that.

Having draft beer available day or night is perhaps one of the more respectable achievements of modern man. I should know; I've had a setup for almost six years. Homebrewers are perhaps more likely to have draft beer at home because it means they only have to bottle one big container instead of 50 smaller ones. But beer lovers who like to buy in bulk and love draft beer also have an interest in building a kegerator.

IT TAKES A BEER FRIDGE TO MAKE A KEGERATOR

It all starts with the fridge. This can be a normal freezer-on-top model, a smaller dorm-size fridge or even a chest freezer, provided you buy a temperature controller to allow it to run warmer than designed. Maybe you convince your wife that she needs a new fridge. You tell her you will "take care" of the old one. Voila, a kegerator is born.

Another option is to find a free or cheap used fridge on Craigslist or another local-area trading Web site. I have obtained two free fridges this way. One consideration you might have using an older, less-efficient fridge is that it will cost more to run. Some people run the numbers and decide it is worth it in the long run to buy a new one, but it is hard to say "no" to your uncle's free fridge that still runs well.

Your freezer-on-top fridge may be made more useful by building a platform for the inside bottom of the fridge. When you remove the drawers you will see a slanted part in the back, which cuts down on your usable square footage. It doesn't have to be fancy, but something that will allow you to use the full square footage of the bottom of the fridge while yet allowing enough height for your kegs and tubing can be useful (see pic).

A platform allows you to fit more kegs and bottles in your fridge.

YOU WANTED THE REST, YOU GOT THE REST

There is a lot of choice in how you assemble the rest of the needed parts. You can spend a lot and get the best equipment and options, or you can cobble together a cheaper system by shopping around, buying used, looking for deals and doing it yourself. You can also buy kits that include most of what you will need in one easy purchase. However you do it, many components are required. We recommend shopping at www.midwestsupplies.com.

Use caution when drilling through the side of the fridge. You can leave the carbon dioxide tank inside if space is not a concern.

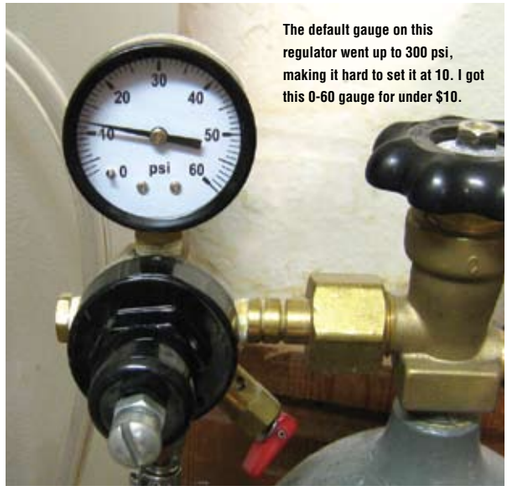
Putting the CO2 tank outside leaves more room for kegs inside.

A 2 line system is about $275! One line is like $200!!!

CO2 TANK AND DRILLING THROUGH FRIDGE • For most people a 5 lb. tank will be sufficient. Shop around welding supply or homebrew stores for the best deal. If you are going to have more than one keg you will need a CO2 distributor to split one line of CO2 into one line for each keg. The placement of the CO2 tank is up to you. You have more room for kegs and beer bottles if you have it outside the fridge. Having it outside also means you can monitor and adjust the pressure without having to open the door. However, it means you will have to drill a hole through the side.

Before drilling, do some research on your fridge to locate the cooling coils, because they may be on the side. If you drill into one of them, set your drill down and say hello to your brand new, fridge-shaped paper weight, because that is all it will be good for. Some people try to drill from the inside out first so they can break through the inner plastic and then use another sharp object to carefully poke through insulation to make sure there is no cooling coil there before drilling out through the outside metal.

After drilling, file the metal edge of the hole slightly so it won't cut the plastic tubing. Caulk around the hole once the tubing is in place to minimize cooling loss.



The default gauge on this regulator went up to 300 psi, making it hard to set it at 10. I got this 0-60 gauge for under $10.

CO2 REGULATOR • This allows you to control the pounds per square inch (psi) pressure your tank will use. Depending on the regulator you might end up replacing the gauge but that is pretty cheap. For most of us a single economy regulator is enough, but you can get other regulators that allow for different psi settings for different kegs. You can get a regulator that purports to tell you how much CO2 you have left, but these cost more and I have been told are not very accurate.

Measure and mark the holes for the faucets. Make sure they can go into a good place (shelf, butter tray, etc

Get a friend with a hole saw to come over and drill holes for the shanks.

You might want to use a board to give the shanks a sturdier backing than the plastic of the fridge door.

FAUCETS • You have a lot of options when it comes to dispensing your beer. Picnic party taps (aka cobra taps) are cheap and easy, but you will have to open the fridge door each time you want a beer. Door-mounted faucets are cooler, easier, and more fun, but they cost more. Chrome, plastic, brass and stainless steel are some of the options to consider, varying in price and durability. Some of the faucets now are "forward sealing," which helps minimize sticking from leftover beer drying up.

If you are using a smaller dorm-size fridge you could get a tower faucet that mounts on top.

A nitro faucet is yet another option for pouring creamy stouts, but in addition to a different faucet you will also need a tank of beer gas (nitro/CO2 mix).

Tap handles can make your kegerator uniquely your own and give it personality. You can often purchase the same eye-catching tap handles you see in the bar, but the cheap and simple black plastic ones ultimately work just as well (and are easier to manage).


Stainless steel forward-sealing faucets, shanks, clamps and black plastic tap handles.

SHANKS • If you have door-mounted faucets you will need shanks. A shank goes through the fridge door and is what the faucet screws on to. It is also what the beer tubing connects to in order to send the beer from the keg to the faucet. They can be purchased in different lengths depending on your situation.


A CO2 splitter to split one line into multiple lines for multiple kegs.

TUBING AND CONNECTIONS • Whether you have Cornelius ("corny") kegs or more common commercial Sanke kegs, you will need tubing for the CO2 (gas line) and for the beer (beverage line). You will also need keg connectors (quick disconnects, couplers, etc.). Most likely these can be purchased from the same retailer where you purchase the other components.

DRIP TRAY (OPTIONAL) – It might complete the look of your kegerator to have a drip tray. Depending on your fridge and setup, you might want one. If your kegerator is in the garage on a cement floor, you might not care. But if you have one with nice faucets in your basement it might be more impressive and keep some beer off the carpet.

KEGS • Cornelius kegs are the silver, tall, slender soda pop kegs. They are popular with homebrewers because they are easy to set up and maintain. They can be cheap and were easy to find but are slightly less so now. They should still be around, maybe from a brewer getting out of the hobby or with a few to spare. Or try eBay,Craigslist or other homebrew retailers. For more on setting up these kegs see Beer issue #11 July/Aug 2009.

You might consider corny kegs even if you are not a homebrewer. Some local breweries are willing to fill your corny keg! If interested, do some searching and calling for breweries/brewpubs in your area willing to do this. State laws and brewery policies vary but in some places this is possible.

Otherwise you will be buying kegs of beer from a liquor store, putting down a deposit, and going from there. The size of the keg depends on space and how much you plan to drink…

ALL-IN-ONE KITS • You can buy just about everything you will need (except for the keg of beer) in one easy purchase. These kits can come with the tubing, coupler, tap, shank, even a CO2 tank and regulator. This might be the easiest way to get started, but perhaps not the cheapest. Midwest Supplies has kits designed to work with both so check them out www.midwestsupplies.com

MAINTENANCE.

If you do not buy forward-sealing faucets and you experience sticky taps, you might have to keep them clean after each use. Tap lines need to be cleaned and possibly sanitized between kegs of beer. If you are re-using kegs as opposed to returning empty ones to the liquor store, you will need to have the equipment to disassemble, clean and sanitize your kegs.

Other than that though, there is not much to it. Once you have a leak-free CO2 tank/keg/faucet system, there is not much to maintain on a daily basis. Well, other than keeping a fine beer glass—any size will do—clean and ready to be filled with wonderful draft beer. A trip to the garage or basement was never so well rewarded.

Check to see if other handles fit BEFORE you have beer flowing…

…Ask Derek he spilled a lot of beer screwing it on and finding out it turned the tap on!