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HEADLINE: STEPS TO SAVINGS

Shoo-in: Shoe trees are footwear saviors

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BODY:

Have you ever loved a pair of shoes so much that you bought them twice?

Experts say you shouldn't have to.

A pair of good leather shoes, treated correctly, should last for years, decades even. But many of us don't know the first thing about shoe care, so we end up ruining that perfectly good pair of pumps -- and having to buy a new pair.

"Shoes are like a car," says Anthony Brown, manager of Marmi shoe store at SouthPark mall in Charlotte, N.C. "You've got to keep them tuned up or they'll fall apart."

The Charlotte Observer talked to Brown and other experts to find out how to make your shoes look their best and, more important, how to make them last. Their tips range from the best way to store your shoes to how to polish them.

But there was one thing they all stressed: When you're not wearing your shoes, use cedar shoe trees.

The trees absorb moisture and odor and help shoes retain their shape. "I don't know why more people don't use them," says Shannon Freeman, assistant manager at the Clarks store in Northlake Mall. "They give you 30 percent more usage in your shoe."

You can get the trees at shoe stores, shoe-repair shops or department stores.

THE BASICS

*Give shoes a rest. Don't wear the same pair every day. Shoes need time to dry out between uses; if you wear them constantly, perspiration will eventually break down the leather.

*Try shoe inserts. Especially if you love to go sockless, odor-resistant inserts can keep foot perspiration and odor at bay.

*Shoe horn, anyone? Cramming your feet into shoes will break down the back of a shoe over time. Try a shoe horn, and be careful when putting shoes on and taking them off. (Kicking them off is not a good idea. Use your hands instead.)

*Restore worn parts. Replace the heel when one-fourth of it is missing. Heels are tougher to repair if you let them wear down to the nail. "If you've got a favorite pair of shoes and you start to get a hole in the bottom, get them half-soleed," says Brown, of Marmi. "A cobbler or shoe-repair shop can take off the existing sole and put on a new sole. That can make those shoes last another year."

FIRST THINGS FIRST

*Water is the enemy. Waterproof every pair before you wear them, then at least once a year. A number of products are available -- including mink oil, waxes, creams and silicone sprays -- depending on the shoe's material. Never wear good shoes in the rain.

*Repair before wear: If you have a pair of shoes you particularly love, bring them to a shoe repairman before you wear them and have him add rubber tips to the heels and the front of the sole. "When most women walk with a pointy-toe shoe, they dig the tip into the ground, and that can eat the hole in the leather," says Deshia Leonhirth, a market manager for Nine West. "A shoe repairman can put a tip on it for \$7."

POLISH LIKE A PRO

*Cream or wax? Wax is most effective at covering scuffs, but cream or paste polish is better at keeping leather moist and flexible. Avoid liquid polish because it can dry and crack the leather. Clean and condition. If shoes are dirty, clean them first with saddle soap or a leather cleaner. Use a shoe conditioner (available at many shoe stores) on frequently worn leather shoes to replace oils and help the leather retain its suppleness. Wait for the conditioner to dry before you polish.

*Three easy steps. Apply a thin layer of polish with a small rag or horsehair brush. Wait until it hazes. Use a horsehair buffing brush to even out the wax. Then buff in a circular motion with a soft, clean rag or buffing flannel.

WHEN THEY'RE OFF YOUR FEET

*Box them up. Store shoes you don't wear often in their original box or another container to keep them from getting crushed and collecting dust. Some stores, including Johnston & Murphy, sell cedar shoe racks for pairs you wear most.

*Avoid hot spots. Wet shoes should dry at room temperature, not in the dryer or by the fireplace. Heat causes leather to dry out and crack.

*Travel with care. Put shoes in a flannel shoe bag and use shoe trees to keep them from getting crushed and scuffed in your suitcase.

CONTACT: SOURCES: Don Stevens of Johnston & Murphy; Anthony Brown of Marmi; Shannon Freeman of Clarks, Deshia Leonhirth of Nine West and Pamela Perret of Nordstrom

GRAPHIC: PHOTO: Using a shoe tree extends the life of a pair of shoes by 30 percent.
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