

HOMEFRONT

How...

To Master the Flea Markets

Whether you're a collector of vintage tablecloths, looking for a small antique table or just hankering for some charming tchotchkes, this is your time of year. Flea and farmers markets abound, offering the fun of hunting, gathering and transforming a cheap find into a treasure. But before you go:

Do your research. If you're in need of a particular item, first check stores, antique shops and the Internet to get an idea, more or less, of what it's selling for.

Go prepared. Take the proper tools with you — a tape measure, fabric swatches and paint chips you want to match, dimensions of your space, window measurements, and a magnifying glass or jeweler's loupe.

Bring small bills. You will be better able to bargain if you don't need to change large bills, especially in the early hours.

Early birding. Plan on arriving at the markets as soon as they open, if not a little before. Most dealers, decorators and collectors will be there before opening, scoping out the best and most valuable items. "Generally, the really good finds will go in the first hour or two," says Michael Sussman, founder of the Georgetown Flea Market. However, he says, if you're looking for a true bargain, the best time to haggle is at the end of the day. "Sellers would rather sell for cheap than load the pieces back into their trucks."

Don't be afraid to bargain. Sellers expect some haggling, so ask them if the asking price is their best. Often they will consider a lower offer.

To buy or not to buy. If you're feeling ambivalent about a prospective purchase, walk away. See if you have pangs about passing it by and then decide. Of course, by taking time to think about a purchase, you risk returning to find it sold. If it's something you absolutely love, grab it.

Flea Flash: After years of eviction threats, the Georgetown Flea Market leaves Washington after April 30 for the Arlington County Court House Metro parking lot, 2100 Wilson Blvd. Sundays, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. 202-775-3532 or www.georgetownfleamarket.com.

Terri Sapienza and Annie Groer

