



Chic and cheap

Alison Cork is the self-proclaimed Queen of Bargains – she passes on her wisdom to the nation in columns for national newspapers and through her online sites. She reveals her bargain-hunting secrets in time for Christmas shopping. By Gabrielle Fagan

Alison Cork is not the sort of person you want to meet at the sales. She seeks out home bargains like a heat-seeking missile and nothing, repeat nothing, gets in her way.

Similarly, rogue tradespeople should shiver in their shoes - she can scent a dodgy builder at 100 paces.

Luckily, feisty, forthright Alison also sees no reason why the rest of us should pay over the odds for goods for our homes, or put up with patchy plumbers and their ilk.

She's the guru behind websites such as www.homesandbargains.co.uk, which is a comprehensive guide to quality or luxury buys at discounted prices and problemsolved.co.uk, a database of over 60,000 vetted and recommended tradespeople.

Alison, property expert and presenter on ITV's *Homes & Property*, explains that she was first inspired seven years ago to set up a register of tradespeople to trust.

"I'd heard from so many friends about their terrible experiences with builders who never finished a job, or did it so badly it cost a fortune to get it put right. I thought if everyone could pool their knowledge of reliable skilled people – the ones who are 'gold dust' – those terrible experiences could be avoided."

Horror stories she heard included a woman paying an astonishing £90,000 upfront to an unreliable builder and a man dependent on a life support machine, struggling with an erratic power supply due to an inadequate electrician.

But it was her personal experience of doing up a home on a budget that sparked homesandbargains.co.uk. Alison, 44, said: "I was brought up to have an eye for a bargain and still get a thrill out of getting one. My

mother was incredibly creative and taught me how to make the best of things by transforming them imaginatively for pennies, and instilled in me that wasting anything was virtually a sin.

"When I was young and doing up my first home in Wales I hired a van and went to Brussels and bought cheap – but brilliant – furniture and furnishings at the markets."

That home proved so inspiring that it led to her first TV series in the late 90s, *Home In The Country*, where Alison invited viewers 'into her cottage' and gave her original hints and tips on stylish living from cooking to furnishing.

She's also presented other shows – including *60-Minute Makeover* and *Don't Move, Improve* – but she's convinced her current advice on paying the least for the most is particularly timely in the present economic climate.

"We're heading for a recession. There's no doubt about that. So budgets are going to shrink. A recent survey we organised revealed that nearly one in eight people are going to borrow money in order to pay for Christmas."

"I hope sites like mine can help people pay less for the beautiful things they want, and avoid unnecessary debt. It's a sign of the times that already it's becoming a social badge of honour to boast about NOT paying full price for something."

Although, formidably organised and motivated to a high degree - she sets goals each year and "has targets for every day so I don't waste a minute of my life" – love took Alison by surprise.

A wrongly dialled telephone number answered by a stranger changed her life. She says: "We chatted and got on so well we agreed to speak again and after three weeks of



The kitchen of the former home of TV Presenter and journalist Alison Cork – the 'Queen of Bargains'

regular calls he insisted we meet.

"I dreaded it as I thought seeing him might be such a disappointment if his looks didn't live up to his voice, and also I knew that he was younger than me by seven years. But it turned out he was perfect and after three dates he asked me to marry him which I did nine years ago."

Since then she and Efi, a financier, have had two sons aged three and six, and ridden the property rollercoaster together.

"We've moved virtually every year since we married as we decided the best way to move up the property ladder was by buying up homes, renovating them, and selling them on. It's demanding but incredibly satisfying and eventually we hope we'll end up with the home of our dreams."

"At the moment we're renting and waiting for the right moment to buy again."

Here, she offers her tips and advice on saving money and finding bargains this winter.

ALISON'S TIPS FOR BARGAIN HUNTING

■ SHOP 'OFF PISTE'

Alison says "Don't just rely on seasonal sales." Seek out designer outlets, and deal direct with manufacturers and wholesalers so you get to the goods before the high street stores have time to add their mark up.

Many top-end homeware retailers have a factory shop stocking cancellations, clearance stock and discontinued lines. Also try to buy seasonal goods out of season eg: garden furniture in winter, fires in summer.

■ JOIN THE HAGGLE BRIGADE

Never be afraid to ask for a discount, as often retailers won't risk losing a sale for the sale of knocking a percentage off the price. "It's a shopper's responsibility to try to get more for their money, so just be pleasant and courteous but persistent in your request," she advises.

■ BE CYBER SAVVY

Don't click on the first apparent bargain. Take time to shop around, and to watch out for add-ons like delivery charges and VAT. She advises: "While the choice on the internet can be overwhelming, it can save the emotional and physical energy of trudging around shops. "Of course, an image on a site can never be a

substitute for trying out a sofa or bed but you use the web to make a shortlist of destinations. Also many sites now are so user-friendly they're like virtual reality shops."

■ BUY WISELY

Investing in quality flooring or worktops may pay off because they'll wear and last longer than a cheap equivalent, but going OTT on free-standing furniture which wears and dates may be a poorer choice.

■ FAKING IT

Don't ignore reproduction or imitation finishes – quality veneers, fake stone – which are often so good they can be almost indistinguishable from the real thing at a fraction of the cost.

■ ASK THE GOVERNMENT

Tap into a monthly newsletter, *Government Auction News*, a mine of information on auctions selling goods reclaimed from failing companies.

For example, Customs & Excise, who've seized goods because of VAT non-payment, sell them at auction for no reserve price.

The publication, from *Wentworth Publishing*, costs £39.50 annually. Call 020 8597 0181.

ALISON'S BARGAIN CHOICES

■ Homes should be snug retreats over the winter, and sheepskin cushions, faux fur throws, and stylish beanbags and drum seats for extra visitors could be ideal finishing touches.

Wallace Sacks has all these in its homeware and furniture range. Some of its cord, fleece and faux fur throws are already discounted and they are offering a 20 per cent discount on all products bought online. Just enter XMAS7 at wallacesacks.com before November 30 2007.

■ Christmas cooks welcome new gadgets or china and Richmond Cookshop has a huge range of branded kitchen equipment.

One bargain, a 60-piece cutlery set from top German manufacturer BSE, is reduced from £315 to £99. Call 01202 749428 or visit richmondcookshop.co.uk

■ Draughty, ill-fitted windows can add up to £1,000 a year in wasted heating over winter months.

The Sash Window Workshop makes new craftsmen-built hardwood double glazed windows, and can also upgrade existing windows.

The Sash Window Workshop is offering up to 12.5 per cent discount on all orders placed before 15 January 2008. Just quote 12.5 per cent reader offer. Call 0800 597 2598/ sashwindow.com

■ Get the family sitting comfortably around a new dining table this Christmas by sourcing a bargain at newly launched FurnitureXL.co.uk. Its extending Balmoral six-person dining set, crafted from solid oak and oak veneers, features an integral leaf to extend the table length from 15 to 18 metres. Six ladderback oak chairs with black leather seats are also included.

It usually costs £1,200 but is currently reduced to £799, including delivery. Readers can also buy the four-person Balmoral set for £699 instead of the usual £1,000, and get other reductions across the Balmoral range. To claim the offer, click on 'Balmoral Offer' at furniturexl.co.uk or call customer services on 0870 770 7631. Offer ends December 15 in time for pre-Christmas delivery.



Beanbags, cushions and rugs from Wallace Sacks (wallacesacks.com)