



Spring home & Garden

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Improve soil quality for a better lawn

A lush, green lawn can vastly improve a home's curb appeal. Thick, healthy grass indicates that homeowners care enough about their properties to invest the time, effort and money to make them beautiful.

According to the landscaping tool company Troy-Bilt, soil fertility is the foundation of healthy lawns. In fact, the quality of the soil is essential whether one is growing acres of grass, potted plants or vegetable garden beds. No matter which type of soil a homeowner is working with, there are various ways to make it better.

REMOVE THATCH

Thatch is a tightly knotted layer of leaves, grass roots, stems, and other debris that accumulates between the grass blades and the soil. Too much thatch can hinder the movement of water, air and nutrients into the soil. According to organic fertilizer company Organo-Lawn, thatch often occurs if the production of dead organic material in the lawn exceeds the ability of the microorganisms in the soil to break down that organic matter. A half-inch of thatch is normal. If thatch gets too thick, it will need to be removed. The home improvement resource DIY Network says dethatching can take place in the summer, fall and winter using a thatching rake.

AERATE

A lawn aerator will create holes in the soil. This can improve drainage and encourage worms and helpful microorganisms that require oxygen to thrive in the soil. The Briggs & Stratton Company says the best time to aerate a lawn is during the growing season when the grass can heal and fill in any holes, such as spring and fall. Aeration can help develop deeper grass roots for a healthier lawn.

TEST AND AMEND SOIL

A great lawn has loamy soil, which has a key ratio of clay, silt and sand. Silt is a granular material of a size between sand and clay that originates from quartz and feldspar. It is the most fertile of the three types of soil components. Sand does not retain water, but it helps to create spaces in the soil that permit air to circulate. Clay

particles are small and bind together tightly, but clay is naturally nutrient-rich. The home improvement site BobVila.com says loamy soil should have equal parts sand and silt and half as much clay.

If the lawn is not yet established, loamy soil can be created and then the grass seeds planted. For established soil, after removing thatch and aerating, top-dressing the lawn can help. This involves adding a thin layer of soil over the lawn. It can improve the soil without killing the existing turf. Ideally, it should be done in early fall or spring, as this gives the grass time to grow through three to four more mowings before severe heat or cold sets in.

Healthy soil is vital to a lush lawn. It takes a little work, but improving soil can create vibrant, healthy, green grass.



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Tips for planting blueberries

A trip to the produce aisle at a local grocery store can unveil a host of healthy additions to anyone's diet. Such a jaunt also can raise eyebrows, as produce, particularly organic fruits and vegetables, can be very expensive. Consumers may feel helpless to corral the cost of healthy foods like fruits and vegetables, but all hope should not be lost. That's especially so for people willing to give gardening a try.

Blueberries are one of the healthiest foods people can eat. The USDA National Nutrient Database notes that blueberries, which are low in calories and high in fiber, are great sources of the vitamins C, K and B6. However, organic blueberries can be among the most expensive foods in the produce aisle. Various factors, including where blueberries come from and whether or not they're organic, dictate their cost. But it's not uncommon to pay roughly \$4 for a six-ounce package of organic blueberries. For some, such costs are prohibitive.

Growing blueberries in a home garden can save blueberry lovers substantial amounts of money while ensuring they reap all of the benefits of this highly nutritious and edible berry. The following are some tips novices can employ as they plant

their first batch of blueberries.

- **Consult a local garden center.** The U.S. Highbush Blueberry Council recommends consulting a local garden center before planting blueberries. The professionals at such centers can recommend the best variety of blueberry to plant. That's an important first step, as the USHBC notes that farmers cultivate dozens of varieties of highbush blueberries across North America. Lowbush varieties also may be a gardener's best option depending on where he or she lives. A local garden center can help you determine which variety best suits

your local climate.

- **Plant where there is ample sun and well-drained soil.** The roots of blueberry plants should remain moist throughout the growing season, so choose an area where the soil drains well. If that's hard to find, consider planting in raised beds or patio containers. In addition, the University of Minnesota Extension notes that blueberries require full sun, so plant in a spot where the blueberries will not be denied daily sunlight.

- **Prepare the soil.** Blueberries require acidic soil, so running a soil test prior to planting is a good idea. Speak with a local garden center about soil adjustments if the soil

is unlikely to promote growth.

- **Fertilize carefully.** The USHBC notes that established blueberry plants will respond well to acid fertilizers. However, it's important not to overdo it, as blueberries are sensitive to overfertilization. Follow fertilization instructions and speak with local garden center professionals for advice.

- **Be patient.** The UME notes that plants won't bear much fruit in their first two to three years, and that harvests are bigger after five years. So patience is a virtue blueberry planters must embrace.

Planting blueberries can be a rewarding hobby that also can save gardeners money at the grocery store.



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Decor ideas to give homes a fresh look this spring

Spring is a season of rejuvenation, and that spirit of renewal can take hold inside a home.

Warm weather and longer hours of daylight make spring a perfect time to imagine a home's interior design in a new light. The following are a handful of decor ideas that may inspire homeowners to give their homes an entirely new look this spring.

- **Wallpaper:** Wallpaper fell out of favor years ago, but new styles that aren't so heavily patterned can make for wonderful additions to any room. Large-scale prints can give a room a whole new feel without giving homeowners or their guests the impression that they have stepped back in time. A simple, mural-style floral wallpaper on the walls surrounding a table in a breakfast nook can bring nature inside.

- **Pastel colors:** Nothing embodies the spring quite like pastel colors. If colorful, bright flowers dot the garden in the backyard, homeowners can bring those uplifting pastels inside by painting an accent wall or even adding some brightly colored accent

furniture to rooms that could use a lift.

- **Declutter:** Clutter is often conquered during spring cleaning sessions, but homeowners who want to create more free-flowing interior spaces can downsize their furniture and/or look for multipurpose features that make it hard for clutter to take over a room. Create more open space in entertaining areas by mounting the television and getting rid of a bulky entertainment center. Create even more space by replacing rarely used end tables with a storage ottoman where books and magazines can be stored to give a room a fresh, clean look.

- **Accent features:** Sometimes the smallest changes to an interior space make the biggest impression. Replace dated accents like vases and table lamps with newer items that reflect the latest styles and trends. Such adjustments won't break the bank, and they can give rooms a whole new feel.

Spring is a great time to reconsider home interiors. This spring homeowners can embrace various strategies, both big and small, to give their homes a whole new feel.

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What to expect during a bathroom remodel

There are many reasons to renovate a home. Some homeowners purchase fixer-uppers and commit to making major renovations before they even move in, while others may renovate their homes with an eye on resale value. But many homeowners also take on renovation projects to make the homes more livable for themselves.

Bathroom renovations are popular projects. In fact, a 2018 survey from the National Association of Home Builders found that bathroom remodels are the most popular remodeling projects. But just because bathroom remodeling projects are popular doesn't mean they're easy to endure. Knowing what to expect during a bathroom remodel can help homeowners get through the renovation process.

COST

Bathroom remodeling projects can be expensive. According to Remodeling magazine's

"Cost vs. Value 2019" report, a mid-range bathroom remodeling project cost an average of \$20,420 in 2019, while an upscale remodel cost just under \$64,000. Homeowners should develop budgets for their bathroom renovation projects to determine which type of project they can afford. In addition, setting aside a little extra money for overruns is a wise move that can help homeowners handle any unforeseen expenses that arise during the project.

NOISE

Few home renovation projects can be undertaken quietly, and bathroom renovations tend to generate a lot of noise. The noise can be difficult to overcome for professionals who work from home full-time, and it also can be hard on parents of young children who still nap and don't yet go to school. Parents of young children may find it best to delay bathroom renovation projects until their children are school-aged and out of the house for most of the day on weekdays.

MESS

The debris generated by bathroom renovation projects is another thing homeowners must prepare for. In addition to preparing for the waste generated by the project, first-time renovators must realize that dust might be a big issue once the project begins. Dust can pose a threat to residents' overall health, particularly the health of youngsters whose bodies haven't yet fully developed. As a result, parents of young children may want to schedule renovations during family vacations so their children are exposed to as little dust as possible.

CHANGES

Few renovations go off without a hitch. Once a project begins, contractors often uncover issues that weren't noticeable to the naked eye. These issues may increase the cost of completing a project or force homeowners to change their plans to make the project stay as close to their budgets as possible. Recognizing that these decisions may have to be made on the fly can help homeowners feel more prepared when unexpected issues arise.

Bathroom renovation projects are worthwhile investments. Knowing what to expect during a bathroom renovation project can help homeowners handle all the twists and turns that may arise.



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Container gardening tips

Gardening is beneficial in various ways. The AARP states that some of the health perks associated with gardening include improved mood, increased vitamin D levels (which benefits bones and immune system) and reduced risk of dementia. In addition, if gardening efforts include growing herbs, fruits and vegetables, it can be a cost-effective way to eat healthy.

For gardeners without sufficient space or for those with mobility issues, container gardening can be an ideal way to grow everything from flowers to vegetables. Better Homes & Gardens says most plants are not fussy about the containers in which they grow so long as some of their basic needs are met. This means watering correctly for the type of plant, and ensuring sufficient drainage.

The following are some other ways container gardening efforts can prove successful.

- **Watch water.** Planet Natural Research Center says plants with thin leaves typically need ample water, and plants with thick leaves need less. Use this as a guideline to gauge water needs.

- **Size correctly.** Plants should be sized to the container. Consider dwarf varieties of certain plants if your containers are small.

- **Choose the right soil.** Fill containers with a commercial potting soil rather than soil from the garden. Garden soil can dry into a solid mass, while commercial mixtures have amendments

like peat moss, vermiculite, compost, and other ingredients to help with soil texture and moisture retention.



- **Mix it up.** When planting containers of flowers and other greenery, Good Housekeeping says to include “a thriller, a spiller and a filler” as a good rule of thumb. The thriller is the focal point, the spiller a trailing plant, and a filler has smaller leaves or flowers to add bulk and color.

- **Poke holes.** Drainage holes are essential so that soil will not become waterlogged. Holes don’t need to be large, but there should be enough of them so

that excess water can drain out readily.

- **Select the right container material.** Container materials may be affected by gardeners’ budgets, personal taste and other factors. For those who live in hot climates, selecting a light-colored container can help prevent further soil heat absorption.

Container gardening is a healthy and enjoyable activity that can pay dividends in various ways.



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Energy-Efficient Ideas to Upgrade Your Home

Energy bills are likely among the largest expenses for homeowners, but you can take action to lower those costs. During a remodel, a certified contractor can help you make smart decisions when it comes to selecting appliances, windows and insulation for your projects.

Though upgrades made with efficiency in mind can vary depending on the climate you live in, the biggest energy users are typically the heating, ventilation and air-conditioning systems and water heater, all of which make up about 60% of a typical home's energy budget.

Learn how you can reduce your home's energy reliance and environmental impact with these tips from the experts at the National Association of the Remodeling Industry:

HEATING AND COOLING

Climate control is one of the largest home energy users. A programmable thermostat is a simple starting point and can save up to one-third of heating and cooling costs. Cutting-edge models can even learn your family's behaviors and tweak usage for maximum savings. Additional ways to save energy include sealing leaky ducts, cleaning or changing air filters regularly and replacing your furnace or air conditioner with an energy-efficient model, particularly if your heating and cooling systems are more than 15 years old.

INSULATION

Studies show that only 20% of homes built before 1980 were well-insulated. Depending on when your home was built, adding insulation in the attic and walls can be one of the fastest and most cost-effective ways to reduce energy waste. Not only does better insulation reduce energy loss and improve comfort, it's an upgrade that generally adds to the value of your home with an estimated 95% return on your investment.

WINDOWS

High-performance windows not only lower heating and cooling bills, they also reduce heat gain during warmer months and add a layer of insulation when you need to keep the heat inside. Triple-pane, Low-E insulated frame windows can save 33% of the heating cost for a typical home in cooler climates, and in hotter environments, double-pane, low solar-gain windows can reduce cooling costs by up to 32%.

LIGHTING

The average house dedicates 5-10% of its energy budget to lighting. To cut your use, switch to LED lights, turn off unneeded lights and, where possible, use natural light. Other

measures, like relying on task lights and installing motion detectors, can help further limit your lighting-related energy usage.

APPLIANCES

The refrigerator is a major energy drain, accounting for up to 15% of the energy bill in some homes, particularly models that are 15 years old or older. Design plays a major role in a refrigerator's efficiency; it needs adequate air flow for optimal function. Be realistic about your needs and only buy as big a unit as you require. Be aware that icemakers and dispensers not only add to the up-front cost, they're also less efficient. As with any appliance, shop for a model that offers as many energy-saving features as you can afford.

LANDSCAPING

Trees positioned to reduce summer sun and winter wind can reduce a household's energy use by 25% or more. In summer, trees can lower air temperature as much as 9 F through shading and evapotranspiration. In winter, a well-designed landscape can cut heating bills by about one-third.



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How to Create a More Functional Laundry Room

A laundry room may be one of the spaces that you use the most, but cramped quarters and clutter can hinder your productivity. Eliminate the excuses and get your laundry room under control with these tips to add function to your washing routine.

Use space wisely. Your laundry room may not have a big footprint, but you probably have more usable space than you realize. Install shelves or storage units on the walls and consider the ceiling as a spot to hang a floating drying rack. Don't overlook the back of the door, where you can mount a storage system or use an over-the-door alternative.

Maximize storage. Many laundry rooms suffer from a lack of storage, which hinders space to fold and manage laundry while making the room less pleasant overall. A durable, attractive organization system like Dimensions by ClosetMaid can add instant organization and style to your laundry room. The system provides numerous design options, convenient accessories and configurations of cabinets and drawers, accommodating virtually any space.

Resist wrinkles. Prevent unsightly wrinkles by hanging garments straight out of the dryer. A hanging rod is easy to install and lets you take advantage of vertical space

in smaller rooms. Be sure to also stock up on hangers of various styles so you always have an ample supply ready when the buzzer sounds that another load is ready for your attention.

Promote ventilation. Another common issue in laundry rooms is limited ventilation, which can promote mold, affect air quality and hinder air drying for special garments. A clever way to enhance ventilation while increasing your storage space is ventilated shelving that helps keep air flow moving. For example, ClosetMaid's Premium Wood Kits feature sturdy slatted shelves to stash your laundry essentials and can include accessories like hanging rods.

Create a folding station. One of the biggest laundry pitfalls is folding and putting away clean clothes. A clear, clean space in the laundry room can help nudge you toward completing the task more efficiently. If you have front-loading machines, it may be as simple as adding a counter or sturdy shelf above them. If you use top-loaders, you may need to get more creative. If there's room, a laundry sorter with a flat top is a good solution. Or if floor space is at a premium, you might consider a shelf that mounts to the wall and folds down when you need it.

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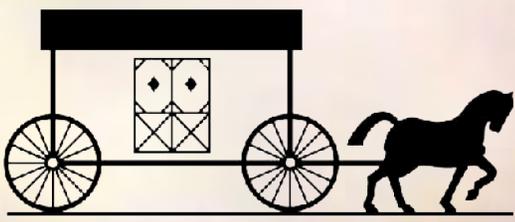




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Improve storage at home

Homes are getting bigger, but it seems like people are still lamenting a lack of storage space.

National Public Radio says the average American home has nearly tripled in size during the last 50 years. Despite that, 10 percent of Americans still need to rent off-site storage, according to a report in the New York Times Magazine. Self-storage facilities are one of the fastest-growing commercial real estate segments, and the Self Storage Association says there are more than 50,000 storage facilities in the U.S. alone. The commercial real estate company CBRE, Ltd., says there are roughly 3,000 self-storage facilities across Canada, and 65 to 85 percent of self-storage tenants are residential users.

Improving storage at home can be a cost-effective alternative to renting storage space. With these easy tips, homeowners can maximize space immediately.

UTILIZE TRACK STORAGE SYSTEMS

Closets may be plentiful, but if not efficiently utilized, space may still seem lacking. Track closet storage systems often make greater use of closet space than traditional shelf and hanging rod systems. Customizing closets using track systems or other modifications can improve utility of all closets in the house.

INVEST IN STORAGE BEDS

Storage beds typically feature cubbies or drawers within a platform-style bed frame. It's a practical home storage solution, and does not require any building.

THINK VERTICALLY

Maximize spaces by looking up and down for storage possibilities. Items that are not used frequently, such as seasonal decorations or travel suitcases, can be stored in high spaces. Shelving on walls can go as high as necessary and be put to use in awkward wall areas, such as in corners or under eaves.

INVEST IN STORAGE BENCHES/OTTOMANS

A stopping area inside the front door replete with a storage bench can house shoes, umbrellas, hats, backpacks, and other items, keeping them tidy and out of sight. In living rooms, look for chests or ottomans that are decorative and functional. Store throw blankets or board games inside.

RECESS DRAWERS OR SHELVES

Gain more storage by recessing a chest of drawers into what is called the "knee wall" of homes that have sloped ceilings in attics and upstairs bedrooms. Utilize these short walls in an efficient manner by sinking drawers or shelves into them, without taking up floor space.

RAFTER SHELVING

While in the attic (or a garage), add hanging shelves to rafters or exposed beams to create off-the-floor storage as well.

These are just a few of the handy ways to improve the interior storage space in a home.



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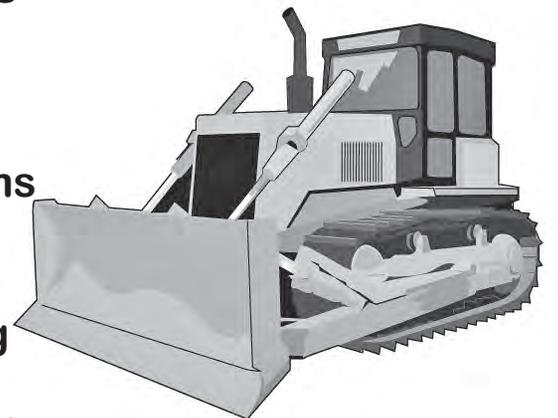
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Items to get you started on creating your smart home

Technology has changed the way people live in the 21st century. Once ubiquitous, land lines anchored to kitchen walls have now given way to smartphones that can be taken anywhere. Bulky television sets that required at least two people to move have been replaced with high-definition offerings so light and thin they can be mounted on living room walls.

It's no great surprise that technology also is changing the physical places we call home. Smart homes are a rapidly growing trend. In a typical smart home, devices such as the thermostat, television and even the refrigerator can be controlled remotely through the internet.

Converting an existing home into a smart home can seem intimidating, especially for people who don't consider themselves tech savvy. But today's user-friendly technology makes it relatively easy for anyone to turn his or her home into a smarter one.

Before you get started, recognize that there are certain must-have items to turn a home into a smart home.

HUB

The hub refers to software or hardware that connects all of your devices and gets them to work together. Think of the various devices you have and then think of their manufacturers. Chances are strong you have devices manufactured by various companies, and enabling those to work together might seem impossible. A hub does that work for you. And because they can be connected to your smartphone, hubs also make it possible to control devices while you're away from home.

WIFI ROUTER

Some people rent their routers from their internet/cable providers, while others buy their own routers. Regardless of which category you fall into, you're going to need a good WiFi router to get your smart home up and running. Determine which type of WiFi your home currently has and then find a router that's compatible with that WiFi. Request a list of routers that are compatible with your WiFi from your service provider, as not all routers will necessarily work with your internet connection. If possible, upgrade to the fastest WiFi your internet provider offers, as that will make your smart home that much more enjoyable and frustration-free.

DEVICES

You won't necessarily need to upgrade your devices to get a smart home. In fact, if you control or can control any device in your home with a smartphone, you are already on your way to having a smart home. Upgrading to a programmable thermostat that's compatible with your smartphone might be a great idea if your current thermostat is old and not internet-compatible. With a programmable

thermostat, you can control the temperature in your home remotely. That ensures the home is a comfortable temperature when you arrive home and allows you to turn off costly heating and cooling units when no one is home.

Smart homes may seem futuristic. But chances are strong your home only needs some simple, inexpensive upgrades to join the smart home revolution.



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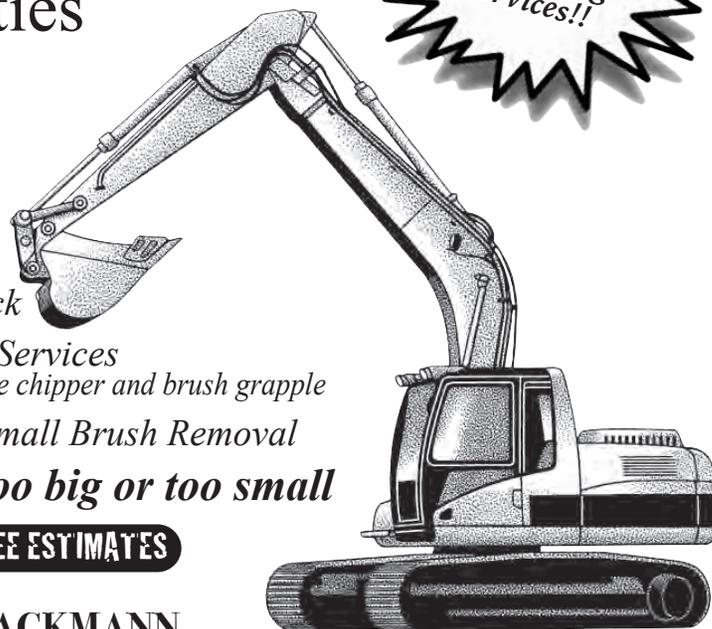
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Eight garden tools for beginners

The right tool for the job is essential to working safely and efficiently. This is as true in the workplace as it is in the garden.

Novice gardeners may not know where to begin in regards to which tools they need. The following are eight items that can serve as a solid foundation for beginning gardeners.

1. Gloves: Your hands will be working hard, so it pays to protect them from calluses, blisters, splinters, insects, and dirt. Look for water-resistant gloves that are also breathable.

2. Hand pruners: Hand pruners are essential for cutting branches, cleaning up shrubs, dead-heading flowers, and various other tasks. Choose ergonomic, no-slip handles that will make work easier. Rust-resistant, nonstick blades also are handy.

3. Wheelbarrow: A wheelbarrow can transport gear to garden beds or tote dirt, leaves,

rocks, and other materials around the landscape. A good wheelbarrow is strong but light enough to maneuver when full.

4. Loppers: Long-handled loppers will fit the bill for thick branches. The long handles provide leverage to cut through branches an inch or more in diameter.

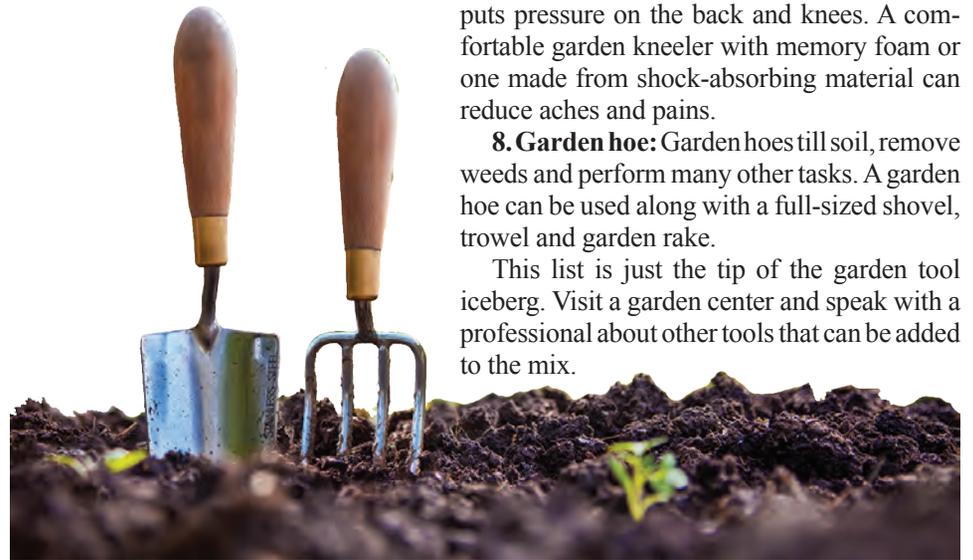
5. Hand trowel: A hand trowel is a handy tool that lets you dig holes or unearth weeds. While shopping for a trowel, consider getting a hand-held garden fork, which can aerate soil and cut through roots.

6. Hose/watering can: Keeping gardens hydrated is part of ensuring their health. That makes a hose and a watering can two invaluable tools to have around. Invest in a lightweight, expandable hose if storage space is at a premium. An adjustable nozzle will enable you to customize the water flow as needed. A watering can is an easy way to tote water to hard-to-reach pots and containers.

7. Garden kneeler: Gardeners often bend and kneel while working in the soil. That puts pressure on the back and knees. A comfortable garden kneeler with memory foam or one made from shock-absorbing material can reduce aches and pains.

8. Garden hoe: Garden hoes till soil, remove weeds and perform many other tasks. A garden hoe can be used along with a full-sized shovel, trowel and garden rake.

This list is just the tip of the garden tool iceberg. Visit a garden center and speak with a professional about other tools that can be added to the mix.





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How to banish pet odors from a home

Dogs, cats, birds, and lizards have evolved from wild animals and outdoor companions to become beloved, largely domesticated members of the family. The number of pets in homes across the country continues to grow. According to Statista, as of March 2017, 94.2 million cats and 89.7 million dogs were estimated to live in the United States as pets. Canada's Pet Wellness report estimates that there are approximately 7.9 million cats and 5.9 million dogs in Canada.

Over time, pet owners grow accustomed to their pets' antics, messes and even their odors. Dealing with smells is par for the course for pet owners, and many become desensitized to certain common smells. But when company is on the way or people are thinking about selling their homes, pet odors must be addressed. Even though it will take effort, homeowners can freshen their homes and eliminate unpleasant pet-related smells.

• **Find ways to ventilate.** Odors can build up inside closed environments and prove overpowering. Opening windows when applicable, using exhaust fans and encouraging cross-breezes can air certain odors from the home.

• **Clean frequently.** Cats and dogs can leave behind fur, dander, food messes, and more. Eliminating the debris that pets create can reduce odors. Sweeping, vacuuming and mopping floors can help as well. Don't forget to vacuum draperies and furniture, and consider purchasing cleaning appliances specifically designed for homes with pets.

• **Keep on top of accidents and litter boxes.** Puppies and even adult dogs may have their share of accidents. Cats may avoid litter boxes if they are not cleaned frequently and then soil around the house. Be sure to clean up pet waste messes promptly. Baking soda and vinegar solutions are all-natural ways to clean up and can help remove urine odors more readily. Also, look for safe deodorizing cleaning products that can be used on carpeting, flooring and upholstery.

• **Purchase an air purifier.** Air purifiers can help remove odors and allergens from the air. They're relatively inexpensive and can be placed in rooms that pets frequent.

• **Wash pet blankets and beds.** Launder pet beds, cloth toys, blankets, and any

other items that pets lounge on. Sweat, saliva and dander can cause these fabrics to become stinky, and, in turn, make the house smell worse.

• **Keep pets clean.** Most pets are very good at self-grooming, but can benefit from a spa treatment once in awhile. Dogs that spend ample time outdoors or frequently get wet and dirty may need routine baths. Ask a professional groomer what he or she recommends to address potent pet odors.

Neutralizing pet odors takes effort, but it can make for a more pleasant-smelling home environment.



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BIG NEWS coming for Osage County!

Storage/display opportunities:

In furniture, along walls and in hidden places

Finding more space to store and display all the “stuff” used for day-to-day living, as well as life’s pleasures, can be an adventure that ends with everything in its perfect place. Woodcraft can help you with a few ideas to kick-start your space hunt and then suggestions for tools and supplies to make your storage projects successful.

Small tables with enclosed storage underneath, chests and trunks that provide seating, benches with built-in storage, beds with built-in space underneath or in the headboard, and kitchen islands with concealed nooks are all options to manage “stuff.”

In the kitchen, add drawers to the space (toe-kick) beneath lower cabinets to store rarely used items. Shelving and bookcases, either built-in or freestanding/open or enclosed, will transform unused wall areas or sections of large closets into instant storage for a wide range of items. Nooks cut out of the wall and covered by pictures offer one of many concealed storage options that also include nooks or drawers in the sides of enclosed staircases.

The ideas for storage and display projects are endless and can be found through Internet searches and on Woodcraft.com in books like “Stanley Built-Ins & Storage” by David Schiff, in the Woodcraft blog, and in free videos and articles.



PLAN FOR PAINTING UP FRONT

“When choosing where to develop storage and display space, you have the opportunity to rethink the colors in rooms where changes will be made,” Woodcraft Public Relations Manager and blogger Lori Harper said. “By using paint in building, buying or repurposing storage pieces, you can change or supplement an existing color palette.”

Woodcraft stocks a wide selection of finishing and paint products, including the versatile General Finishes Milk Paint, General Finishes Flat Out Flat Topcoat, Black Dog Salvage Furniture Paint, and Black Dog Salvage Guard Dog and Show Dog Topcoats.

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Pocket-hole joinery is a quick, easy way to join wood pieces for building projects. Kreg makes it simple with a pocket-hole jig for every application to create very strong joints. Check out Festool’s CXS Compact Drill Driver Set for drilling pocket holes and adding pocket screws, as well as handling other day-to-day drilling and driving challenges with comfort. Tight spaces, dark spots, and corners are no match for it.

For projects that require using nearly

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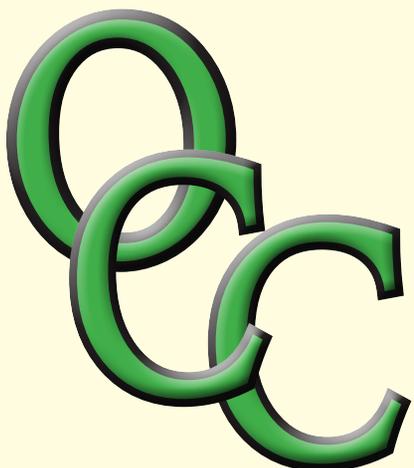
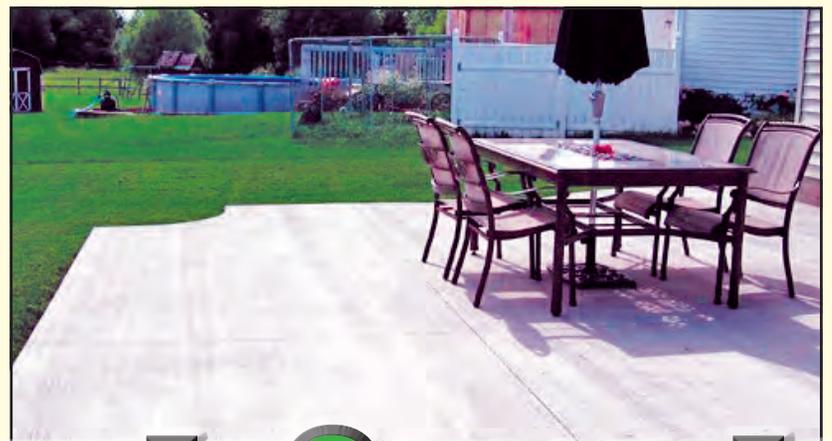


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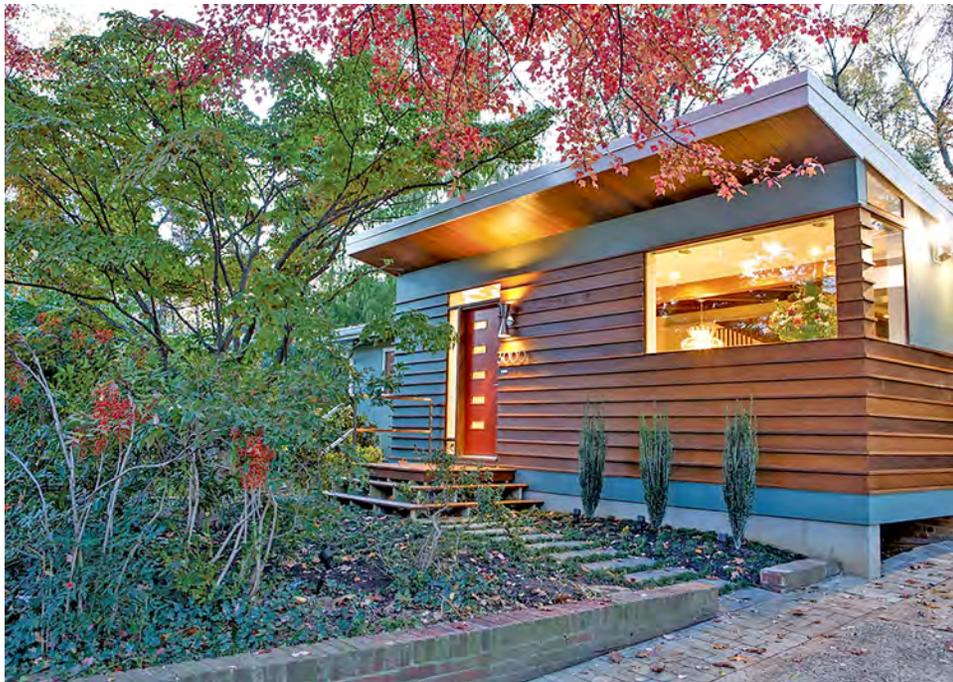
Starting a Home Remodeling Project

7 tips for choosing a qualified contractor

Outside of the home itself, remodeling is typically one of the largest investments you can make as a homeowner. While some projects can be tempting to tackle yourself, many larger-scale projects may require hiring a qualified professional.

Because remodeling your home is a big undertaking, it's important to take steps to ensure the professional you hire to perform the work is qualified to complete it to the highest standards of quality and integrity.

Consider these tips from the experts at the National Association of the Remodeling Industry to help you make an informed decision when hiring a remodeling contractor.



GET RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the best ways to find qualified, professional help is through word-of-mouth referrals. Ask your relatives, friends, neighbors or co-workers – particularly if they've recently renovated their own homes – if they have any previous experience with companies they would recommend. Also consider searching online for reviews of companies in your area.

STAY LOCAL

It's often best to consider established local remodeling companies first, as they are typically more compelled to perform high-quality work, which allows their businesses to thrive and remain in the community. Local professionals are also likely to know permit requirements and building codes in your city or county, which can change from year to year.

FOLLOW YOUR DESIGN AESTHETIC

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continued on page 21B

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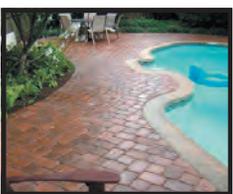
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Upgrade Your Outdoor Living Space

Home improvement projects aren't limited to indoors. In fact, not only can upgrades to areas outside the house expand your livable space, they can also increase your home's value.

Outdoor living projects account for almost one-third of renovation projects, according to a survey conducted by the National Association of the Remodeling Industry. The findings echo trends reported by the National Kitchen and Bath Association, which found 43% of respondents said they designed outdoor kitchens in the past year and 41% expected an increase in outdoor projects in the coming year.

"Our clients are asking for entertaining areas, which can be anything from a fully engineered cabana or a new paver patio with a pergola," said Dave Garcia, owner of DPG Pavers and Design. "We love being creative with materials in our designs and installations. One of my personal favorites is an outdoor kitchen we wrapped in hardwood with a granite countertop. It has clean lines and a unique custom look."

Custom-built and prefabricated kitchens are also in high demand, Garcia said, along with recreation features like putting greens, bocce ball and basketball courts. Hardscape features that add function and ambiance top many homeowners' lists,

as well. Examples include fire pits and fire tables, as well as water features like fountains, waterfalls, basalt columns and bubbling urns.

UNDERSTANDING LANDSCAPING ELEMENTS

Creating the ideal outdoor living space requires thoughtful planning and a holistic approach to landscaping. Typically, when people consider landscaping, they think of plants and flowers. However, landscaping includes a wide range of elements in an outdoor design that can generally be grouped into two main categories: hardscape and softscape.

Understanding the components and options within each category can help you create a cohesive design for maximum enjoyment.

The hardscape encompasses the man-made elements that bring function and aesthetic appeal to the design. Examples include concrete pavers, natural stone features, seating and retaining walls, wood and composite decks, pergolas, fencing and synthetic lawns.

Softscape elements are the living components that add beauty and character to your outdoor space. These include the grass, shrubs, trees, flowers and plants. Your softscape may also include enhancements like mulch and an irrigation system

to help care for the vegetation.

Although the hardscape and softscape elements are distinct, an effective land-

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Storage/ Display Opportunities

continued from page 13B

invisible fasteners, the industrial strength Grex 23-gauge Headless Pinner leaves only the tiniest of entry holes, making it ideally suited for finishing work, detailed wood-working, light wood assembly, decorative trim, dowel and joint pinning, and picture frame assembly. To provide air pressure for the pinner, Rolair's JC10PLUS Compressor is a good choice. The oilless machine features a 1 HP, single-stage, two-cylinder motor/pump and a stainless steel reed valve

that runs on low RPM for optimum quiet operation.

Building drawers is easy with the Kreg Drawer Slide Jig that supports drawer boxes while mounting slides to the drawer. The jig works with ball-bearing, epoxy-coated, and undermount slides for perfect positioning every time. Whether you're boring shelf pin holes in a new entertainment center or adding adjustable shelving in an existing cabinet, the Kreg Shelf Pin Jig will help you get the job done quickly and accurately. The Kreg Cabinet Hardware Jig makes it easy to install knobs and pulls on drawers and doors.

SHORTCUTS & SAFETY

To save time when building drawers, check out the Ready-to-Use Prefinished Birch Drawer Sides at Woodcraft.

For some really made-to-order storage units, use WoodRiver Cubby Cube Connectors. Available in three configurations — cross-brackets, T-brackets or L-brackets — these handy connectors allow for quick and easy construction of multiple cube storage using 3/4"-thick material in any size you need.

Protect your ears while using power tools with ISOTunes Professional Noise Isolating Earbuds — OSHA-approved hearing protection and Bluetooth technology so you can connect to a smartphone and listen to music. If protection is all you need, consider the Pyramex BP 3000 Banded Earplugs.

To learn more about these and other products, visit your local Woodcraft store, call (800) 535-4482 or visit www.Woodcraft.com.

How to create an eye-catching gallery wall

Gallery walls, also called moment walls, are one of today's hottest home decor trends. Gallery walls enable homeowners to create visually appealing groupings of photos, frames, wall art, and much more to dress up any room in the house.

Gallery walls can make a statement in the living room, add finesse to an entryway or showcase special items along a staircase. One need only do a quick internet search or browse through lifestyle magazines to see examples of gallery walls for inspiration.

Anyone with a little determination can design a gallery wall.

- Find your muse. The first step to creating a gallery wall is to choose a theme. If floral prints are your thing or you love abstract art, build your gallery around these elements. You can even use color or frame style as the coordinating factor.

- Take your time. Some people rush into creating gallery walls, and that can be a mistake. Spend time picking out pieces and trying different combinations before you take out the hammer and hardware. The mix should be captivating and look like it was a curated collection. Some pieces can be high-end, while others may be picked up at flea markets or even be your own artwork or photography.

- Experiment with dimensions and levels. Gallery walls need not be restricted to flat photos on a wall. Texture and depth can be used in wall designs. Intersperse shelving, sconces, wooden letters, clocks, and more to make the gallery even more eclectic. Feel free to build the gallery around items that are in the house, such as windows or televisions. This can help electronics blend into the design.

- Establish your focal point. Pottery Barn suggests making the center of the display at eye level, roughly 66 inches off the ground. Then build the gallery out from around that focal point. There are many patterns that can be built into the gallery, from "spiral" to "centered" to "reflection" designs.

- Create a template. Lay the gallery design on the floor and cut newspapers or other paper to the size of each piece. Use masking tape to position these guides on the wall, trying a few arrangements until you are happy with the finished product. Then replace the paper with the artwork.

- Hang items with precision. Don't skimp on technique. Use a ruler, level and the right tools. This ensures pieces are straight and in line with others.

Gone are the days when large pieces of artwork fill empty walls. Gallery designs add statements and can balance rooms in creative ways.



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How to Find the Right Mower for You

Whether you're a first-time homeowner or looking for an upgrade, deciding what lawn mower to purchase deserves careful consideration. Similar to day-to-day life, new technology over the last five years, specifically in the gas mower industry, is making it easier to maintain your lawn.

If you're in the market for a new mower, consider these tips to find the perfect tool to match your needs.

YARD SIZE

Looking at the size of your yard is the first step in determining the best mower for your needs. Walk-behind mowers work well for yards that are 1/2 acre or less, but for yards 1-3-acres or larger, a zero-turn rider (ZTR) or riding mower may be appropriate.

TERRAIN

A small, flat yard may only require a walk-behind mower. If your yard is sloped or hilly, you may prefer a self-propelled mower rather than one you have to push. A walk-behind mower with big back wheels is easier to maneuver across rough terrain. Riding mowers and ZTRs can handle varied terrain, although some handle better on slopes than others.

ENGINE

Engines are one of the most important factors affecting a mower's performance, so purchasing one with a quality engine is essential. For example, Briggs & Stratton

engines can be found on several brands of lawn mowers, including eight of the top 10 walk-behind brands. As a global leader in gasoline engines for outdoor power equipment, these engines power mowers ranging from small walk-behinds to large ZTRs and riding mowers.

SPECIAL FEATURES

While certain features may add to the cost of lawn mowers, many provide functions worth considering. One popular option is a mulching blade, which returns finely cut grass pieces to the lawn as a natural fertilizer. Another common choice is a bagging attachment, which is a grass-catching bag that can be affixed to the side or back of the mower to collect grass clippings.

TECHNOLOGY TO GET THE JOB DONE

Explore high-tech features that make

mowing more manageable with these insights from professional home improvement contractor Jason Cameron, host of DIY Network's "Desperate Landscapes."

Avoid disturbing the neighbors. If finding

time to mow means you might be inconveniencing your neighbors, a mower designed to operate quietly may be what you need.

continued on page 23B



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How to control common spring pests

Just when winter thaws out and people are anxious to enjoy the blooming flowers and luscious lawns of spring, pesky pests can appear and impact comfort levels and safety.

Many pests resume their levels of activity as spring draws closer and temperatures warm up. The presence of these insects and rodents may cause problems in and around a home, which makes it essential to recognize them and avoid issues. The following are some of the more common spring pests and how to remedy infestations.

PAVEMENT ANTS

Pavement ants are some of the most common pests residents encounter inside and outside of their homes. These ants are light brown to black with appendages that are lighter than the rest of their bodies. Small in stature, pavement ants have parallel lines on their heads and thorax, according to pest extermination company Orkin.

Although pavement ants nest outdoors, they can enter homes through small crevices in search of food scraps. Their large colonies may not disappear until treatment is introduced. Keep foods in tightly sealed containers, clear counters and floors of crumbs, and address water sources, such as leaks. Pesticides may

be needed in extreme conditions.

FLEAS

Fleas are tiny, jumping, biting pests that must find a host upon which to live. As ectoparasites, they feed on blood while living on the body of living hosts. Pets can bring fleas inside the yard and home in warm weather. According to the University of California Statewide Integrated Pest Management Program, flea larvae develop more quickly at higher temperatures. At normal room temperatures, the entire life cycle of a flea is about 18 days.

Several flea control products are available to control fleas on cats and dogs. There also may be powders and sprays to alleviate flea infestations in the home. Vacuuming is also very effective in killing larvae in the carpet and at picking up adults.

WASPS

An errant wasp, hornet or yellow jacket may have survived winter and ridden out the colder temperatures within a home. Once the weather warms, queens will begin to look for places to lay eggs and establish colonies. Treating areas where wasps are seen entering and leaving the home is key. Seal holes as soon as possible.

Although wasps help control other insect



populations, their painful stings and potentially aggressive nature can make them challenging to have around a home. If a nest is found, hire a professional to remove it.

SPIDERS

Many spiders are not harmful enough to humans and pets to be much of a problem. In fact, spiders can be helpful to have around to control the populations of other insects. Still, many homeowners would prefer these

web-slinging friends remain outdoors. Therefore, sealing cracks in a home's foundation and repairing small openings around windows and doors can help keep spiders out. Also, alleviating moisture issues in basements, garages or attics may keep out other bugs that would be prey to spiders.

Homeowners can take the steps necessary to cut down on pests in and around their homes.



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A guide to buying and setting up a bird bath

Warm weather means more opportunities to spend time outdoors while at home. Whether your favorite form of outdoor recreation includes sitting on the patio reading or digging in the garden, there's a good chance that you will be sharing the space with local wildlife. Optimizing opportunities to view and interact with backyard wildlife can make the great outdoors even more enjoyable.

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology indicates that there are around 2,059 bird species on the continent of North America. Red-winged blackbirds, yellow-rumped warblers, American robins, and chipping sparrows are among the most commonly seen birds in North America.

Making a backyard hospitable to birds can increase the chances for sightings and hearing their sweet songs. Installing a bird bath can be a step in the right direction.

Bird baths can make yards more attractive to birds.

Birds require a supply of fresh, clean water for drinking and bathing. By setting up a bath, homeowners can attract not only seed-loving birds, but those that don't eat seeds and wouldn't normally congregate around feeders, indicates All About Birds. Experts surmise that birds may bathe to maintain their feathers.

Not all bird baths are constructed the in the same fashion. Many bird baths sold in stores are better suited for decoration than for serving as functional baths. There are four general types of bird bath: standing pedestal, hanging bath, deck-mounted, and ground-level. In general, the lower a bird bath is to the ground, the more likely birds are to use it. Most natural sources of water birds use are on or near the ground. Therefore, ground-level bird baths may be the best investments.

It is important to keep the water in a bird bath shallow (around two inches of water or less). This enables birds to splash around safely and wade in.

Birds do not want to slide around, so a material that is coated and

slippery, like glazed ceramic or glass, may not be too popular. Rough stone or a bird bath modified with pea gravel or rocks can give birds steady footing.

Place the bird bath in the shade if possible to ensure the water is cool and fresh. Locate it by a tree so the birds can hop up to a branch and preen afterwards. All About Birds also says that a bird bath is more attractive if it has a dripping or moving water feature, as this is often irresistible to birds.

Another way to ensure the bath will be used is to keep it clean and maintained. Change the water every day or two. Rinse off the bath to remove droppings, bugs and other debris.

Once birds learn there is a comfortable bath nearby, they may be more apt to visit a yard and may even become frequent guests.





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Home Remodeling Project

continued from page 14B

style, it's critical to choose a remodeler who is knowledgeable in the construction and design of the style of your home. Additionally, a company that specializes in remodeling kitchens may not be suited for a bathroom or bedroom project.

ASK FOR LICENSES AND INSURANCE

Many states, but not all, require contractors to be licensed, bonded and insured. Ask for copies of licenses and insurance certificates for any remodelers you're considering to make sure they're current. Most states also require contractors to carry worker's compensation, property damage and personal liability insurance for their crews. Contact your state or local licensing agencies to ensure the contractor meets the minimum requirements.

CHECK REFERENCES

Once you've narrowed your list of potential contractors, ask for a list of references you can contact and a portfolio of work. A typical reference list includes 10 or more jobs with dates as well as the customer's name, address and phone number, and a portfolio should also contain at least 10 projects with photos of the space before work began, during the project and after completion. If possible, also consider visiting a current job site to see first-hand how the contractor operates.

SEARCH FOR VIOLATIONS OR COMPLAINTS

Because you can't always rely on a portfolio or references, it's

important to also check with your local consumer affairs office or the Better Business Bureau to ensure there are no complaints on record for the contractors you're considering, which may help further narrow your list.

COMPARE APPLES TO APPLES

While a number of different factors goes into every remodeling project, be sure all contractors you solicit bids from are using the same scope and quality of work requirements. Discuss any significant variations in price or timelines and be wary of any substantially lower estimates.



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What is sweating a pipe?

Copper plumbing long has been a standard in home construction. Anyone who has a home with copper pipes should have an understanding of how to make repairs in the case of a leak or if modifications need to be made. “Sweating pipes” is one term homeowners may hear when maintaining their pipes.

Sweating a pipe refers to soldering a pipe or the joint. Sweating seals a new joint or mends a fault. When sweating a pipe, it is important to do the job correctly so that a soldered pipe can last for years and years.

PlanItDIY, a source for how-to advice, says that sweating pipes involves some key steps.

- Cut the pipes to the right length using a copper tube cutter or hacksaw.
- Use a file or wire brush to remove burs and smooth down the ends.
- Clean the end of the copper pipe with a cleaning brush until the surface is bright all around. In addition, clean the inside of all fittings.
- Brush plumbing flux on the brushed surfaces and assemble the joint. The how-to resource Hunker says flux is an acidic paste applied to all of the pieces of copper that you want to connect together. The flux paste will draw in the solder after the pipe is heated using a blow torch. The acid in the flux attracts the solder into the seam between the two copper pieces and fills the gap while creating a semi-permanent bond between the pieces.
- To create the seal, move the flame around the joint to heat it evenly. The copper will get shiny, and the flux will melt. When the pipe begins to dull and the flux sizzles and smokes, it is time to apply solder. Touch lead-free plumbing solder to the joint and apply more heat.

The sweating process is finished when the solder bubbles out of the end of the seam. Let cool and the joint should now be water-tight.

Sweating pipes gets easier with practice. DIYers who are nervous about plumbing projects that involve sweating can be reassured there are connection products available that are used in lieu of flux and solder. These push-to-connect fittings seal joints as well.

Individuals can speak with experts at hardware and home improvement stores to find the best products for their needs and skill levels.

Surviving a home renovation

Homeowners invest large sums into improving their homes to make them more comfortable living spaces or to increase their odds of selling quickly. The Remodeling Futures Program at the Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University predicted U.S. spending on home renovations and repairs to peak at \$327 billion in 2017.

Whether one is doing a large renovation or a small remodel, life may be turned upside down during the project. Furniture may be moved out of the room, walls may be demolished, water or electricity may be turned off, and appliances may be missing or not hooked up. Home improvements often drum up dust and disarray. Such projects can try the patience of any homeowner, and things may get worse before they get better.

Even though remodeling can be taxing, the end result is often worth it. Here’s how to look forward to the silver lining and come out unscathed.

DISCUSS THE PROJECT BEFORE IT STARTS.

All family members should be in agreement before the first hammer is swung. Decide on as many details as you can ahead of time and have a firm plan in place. Establish back-up choices for tiles or color schemes in case the items you want are out of stock. Trying to make decisions under duress may result in bad choices.

DO ONE PROJECT AT A TIME.

It’s tempting to want to improve as much as possible at once to maximize motivation and renovation materials. However, having no place

in which to escape the mess can elevate stress levels. Do not think about renovating kitchens and bathrooms all at once, or you will not have any working fixtures for tasks like washing up.

HAVE EVERYTHING IN PLACE ...

Before demolition even begins, have building materials bought and stored, contractors and subcontractors lined up, and see what you can do to minimize the time workers need to spend in your home.

... BUT EXPECT DELAYS.

In a world where things move at lightning speeds, renovations have not gotten the memo. Home projects take lots of time and will likely take longer if you are doing the work yourself

in your free time. Build lots of extra time into the project so you are not disappointed when delays happen — even when you’ve done your best to avoid them.

PLAN AN ESCAPE ZONE

Construction environments can be messy, loud, smelly, and a host of other unsavory adjectives. The chaos that ensues when life is turned upside down can be overwhelming, particularly for the person who spends the most time in the home while work is being done. Build escape moments into the plan and make sure everyone else at home is on board. During the real grind of the project, a night or two at a hotel may be a welcome respite.

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Benefits to open concept floor plans

The way a home is designed can say a lot of things about it. In fact, many real estate professionals and contractors can determine when a home was built based on the design of its interior. For example, homes with sunken living rooms were likely built sometime in the 1960s and 1970s.

Open concept living rooms are one trend that might one day make people nostalgic for the early 21st century. Many of today's home buyers want homes with open concept floor plans, which can give homes a more spacious feel, perhaps even creating the illusion that a home is bigger than it really is.

Home buyers who have never before enjoyed open concept floor plans can consider these benefits to these wildly popular layouts.

ENTERTAINMENT-

Many people who live in homes with open concept floor plans cite their convenience when entertaining as one of their biggest assets. In an open concept home, guests don't have to be corralled into a single room in the home. Instead, hosts and their guests can roam freely from room to room because there are no walls dividing common areas. This can make gatherings feel less cramped than in homes with more traditional floor plans.

SAFETY

The safety of open concept floor plans may be most applicable to parents of young children. Open concept floor plans allow parents to keep an eye on their children while cooking dinner, working from home or tending to other chores around the house. Since there are no walls to divide rooms in open concept homes, parents don't have to wonder what their curious kids are up to because they can see them at all times.

FLEXIBILITY

Open concept floor plans give homeowners more flexibility. For example, homes with more traditional floor plans may have designated spaces for dining areas. These spaces don't leave much room to work with and may not be valued by homeowners who don't often host dinners at home. As a result, such rooms may just be wasted square footage. With an open concept floor plan, homeowners have the flexibility to make dining areas as big or small as they see fit and can even adjust the rooms on the fly on those occasions when people are coming over.

Open concept floor plans continue to be popular among home buyers and might prove to be the most lasting home design trend of the early 21st century.

Finding the Right Mower for You

continued from page 18B

To take advantage of weekend mornings without bothering others, look into modern models, some of which even feature technology to make the mower quieter than the average gas mower.

Skip oil changes. Seasonal maintenance can help keep your mower in top condition, and new innovations allow you to skip the messiest part: oil changes. Some mowers, specifically those with Briggs & Stratton's

No Oil Changes technology, are built with the intent that you never have to change the oil; you can simply check the level at the beginning of the season and add what you need.

Get an assist starting the engine. You can forget the days when starting a mower was a hassle; many of today's gas-powered mowers feature the starting reliability of lithium-ion battery technology, so you can unleash the power of gas with the push of a button.

Save space in the garage. If storage is a challenge in your garage, look for a compact model with Briggs & Stratton's Mow N' Stow technology, which makes storage easy. This patented design allows owners to fold the mower and store it upright without fuel or oil leaks, saving you up to 70% of the storage space in your garage or shed.

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Repair bare spots in the lawn

Caring for a lawn to keep it lush and green can require equal measures of patience and hard work. Various invaders can attack grass or contribute to its demise. One problem many



The dangers of mowing too low

Spring marks the return of many things. Trees and flowers begin to bloom again in spring, while warmer temperatures are welcomed back with open arms. Grass also begins to grow again in the spring. That means it's not too long before homeowners have to dust off their lawn mowers and get to work. Those who don't necessarily enjoy mowing the lawn may be tempted to cut their grass very low, as doing so can mean longer intervals between mowing sessions. However, mowing grass too low can have a very adverse effect on a lawn.

Cutting too low can injure the grass

Cutting grass too low can injure the grass, creating what's essentially a domino effect of problems to come. Injured grass will focus on its recovery efforts, thereby making it vulnerable to other issues.

Cutting too low promotes weed growth

Injured grass is vulnerable to invaders, including weeds and insects. Weeds and insects can attack grass as it recovers from injury, and before homeowners know it, their lawns are overcome with a host of problems.

Cutting too low allows crabgrass to thrive.

Crabgrass needs ample sunlight to grow. By cutting grass too low, homeowners may unknowingly be promoting crabgrass growth. Crabgrass is unsightly and can rob surrounding grass of the moisture it needs to grow. So lawns cut too low may not only lose their lush appeal thanks to the unattractive appearance of crabgrass, but also because areas surrounding the crabgrass patches might turn brown due to lack of water.

Cutting too low can stress the grass

Cutting too low also makes lawns vulnerable to summer heat. Without blades tall enough to block some of the summer sun, grass can quickly succumb to summer heat, leading to dried out, discolored lawns.

homeowners face is bare spots.

Bare spots can occur for various reasons. Heavy foot traffic, grubs or other pests, fungi, pet urine, or too much or too little water can contribute to bare spots. The how-to resource The Spruce says that correcting the source of bare spots can prevent new issues, particularly if grubs or other pests are damaging the grass. Then homeowners can address existing bare areas.

It is unlikely that bare spots will just fill back in on their own. Reseeding spots or using sod to fill in bare areas can help lawns look lush.

- Begin by raking and removing any dead grass and other debris from the lawn. Check to make sure that grubs or insects are not attacking the lawn. If they are, use targeted treatment options for those pests.

- Break up and aerate any soil that is compacted in the bare spot.

- Amend the soil in the bare area with loamy soil or compost to improve on the nutritional makeup and texture so that it is amenable to grass-growing. If you notice that the entire lawn is looking a little sparse, top-dressing the rest of the lawn at this point also can help improve its vitality.

- Sprinkle seeds in the bare spot (disperse seeds over the rest of the lawn if you want to over-seed and improve the thickness of the lawn). If you prefer sod, cut a portion of

the sod to fit the bare area and place on the amended soil.

- The Scotts company says to lightly water newly seeded or sodded areas daily for at least two weeks to keep the top inch of soil consistently moist but not soggy. Gradually water more as the seedlings develop and the grass begins to fill in. Deep water at least once or twice a week after the new grass reaches mowing height.

- The grass should grow slightly longer than the rest of the lawn, and wait until the color of the patched area begins to blend in with the rest of the lawn before mowing. This could take a few weeks, and

the area should be avoided until then.

Eventually, and with treatment, bare spots can be remedied and become indistinguishable from other areas of the lawn.



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Outdoor Living Space

continued from page 16B

scape design integrates both to create the look and feel you want for your outdoor living space.

GETTING STARTED

Once you've considered the landscaping features necessary to bring your vision to life, it's time to get your project in motion.

Set a budget and consider whether you will need professional support to make your design ideas a reality. A remodeling expert can guide you on how to achieve the look you desire with your home's unique characteristics in mind, while helping manage your timeline and expenses.

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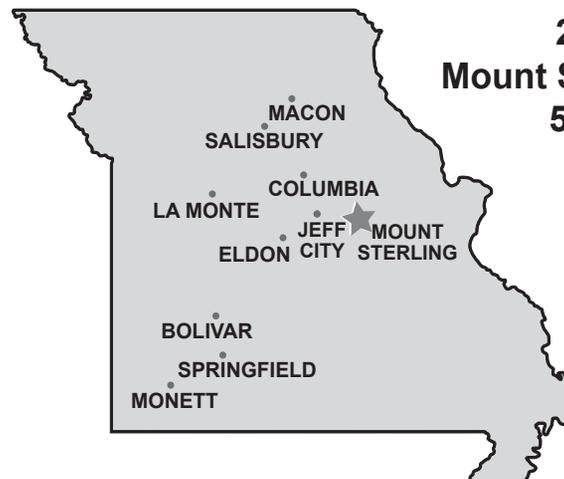
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Key to keeping cool is AC maintenance



Few things beat summer heat better than walking into a comfortably chilled air conditioned home. Air conditioning is often taken for granted, but sorely missed when

it is not working. The key to keeping cool all summer long is to ensure that air conditioning systems are functioning properly.

Maintaining an AC unit can save money

and protect homeowners' investments. Without regular attention, an AC unit will lose its efficiency, needlessly wasting both energy and money as a result. Poor maintenance also can lead to system failure just when it is needed most. According to the U.S. Department of Energy, the average lifespan of an air conditioning unit is about 15 to 20 years. Home Advisor says homeowners can pay between \$500 and \$4,000 for central air conditioning, with the final cost depending on the unit, additional installation items, such as ductwork, and installation charges. With regular maintenance, homeowners can keep their units humming properly and avoid premature replacement costs.

So what can homeowners expect as it pertains to air conditioner maintenance? The following are some oft-needed checks and fixes.

- **Keep it clean.** Vacuum the fins and coils of the AC unit on the external compressor/condenser fan with a soft-bristled brush, advise the experts at Family Handyman. This may require unscrewing the metal box surrounding the unit to access the fins. Remove any accumulated debris that may be impeding air flow. Afterward, go inside and change the filter that is installed with the evaporator that's located in a central duct near the furnace. Inspect the filter periodically to see if it is soiled and needs

replacement. Timing can vary depending various factors, such as the time of year, the accumulation of dust and whether or not pets live in the home.

- **Straighten coil fins.** The fins on the condenser are easily bent and that can affect the flow of air through the coils. If you cannot easily straighten them, then consult with an HVAC professional to do so.

- **Check the thermostat.** Ensure that the thermostat is still working properly. You also may want to upgrade an old thermostat to a programmable or smart thermostat that enables you to remotely set and adjust the temperature.

- **Consider an in-line duct booster.** HVAC professionals can guide you through the advantages of an in-line duct booster for forced-air cooling. This can increase the flow of cool air into a room that always seems hotter than the rest. Another option is a vent or register booster fan that sits on top or replaces a traditional floor or wall register.

- **Deal with condensation.** Condensation from air conditioning coils can puddle around the furnace if the condensate drain tube is clogged. Clearing it out will help prevent puddling and the formation of bacteria-laden water in the system.

Periodic maintenance is necessary to ensure uninterrupted service on a home AC unit.

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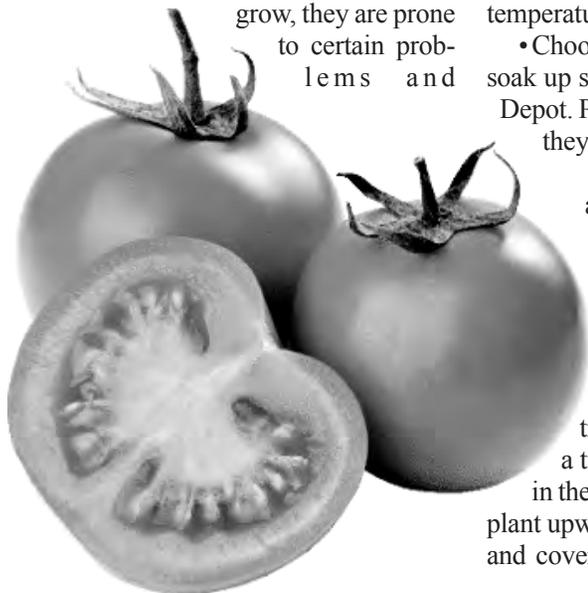
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Tips to successfully grow tomatoes

Slicing into the first tomato of the season is a much anticipated moment for gardeners. Tomatoes are among the most popular fruit or vegetable plants grown in home gardens. Much of that popularity may be credited to the fact that red, ripe tomatoes have a delicious, juicy flavor that serves as the basis for all sorts of recipes. And since tomatoes can just as easily be grown in a full backyard garden or in a container on a patio or balcony, tomatoes appeal to gardeners regardless of their living situations.

While tomatoes are relatively easy to grow, they are prone to certain problems and



pests. Knowledge of what to expect when planting tomatoes and how to start off on the right footing can help produce a season's worth of delicious bounty.

- Wait until after the last average frost date. Tomatoes can be grown from seeds outdoors in warm areas, but tomato gardeners often find success starting seeds indoors six to eight weeks before the last frost date. Gradually introduce seedlings to the elements for a few hours each day, increasing the duration of time outside. Then they can be transplanted outdoors when temperatures are consistently over 60 F.

- Choose a sunny spot. Tomatoes love to soak up sunlight, according to The Home Depot. Place the plants in a sunny spot so they can thrive.

- Space out plants. The experts at Better Homes and Gardens say to leave anywhere from 24 to 48 inches between plants to accommodate for growth and ensure the plants will not get stunted.

- Plant deeply. Tomatoes tend to root along their stems. If transplants are long and lean, dig a trench and lay the stem sideways in the dirt, and then bend the top of the plant upward. Snip off the lower branches and cover with soil up to the first set of

leaves. This will produce extra root growth and stronger, more vital plants.

- Give the plants support. Tomato cages or stakes can help keep the leaves and fruit from touching the ground, which can cause rot and, eventually, death to the tomato plant.

- Lay down a layer of mulch. Tomatoes grow best when the soil is consistently moist. Mulch can help retain moisture from watering and rain. Mulch also will help prevent soil and soilborne diseases from splashing

on the leaves and plants when it rains. While you amend the soil, make sure that it drains well and is slightly acidic.

- Prune away suckers. Tomatoes produce "suckers," which are leaves that shoot out from the main stem. Removing these leaves promotes air circulation and keeps the plant's energy focused on growing fruit.

Tomatoes are a rich addition to any garden. A few simple tricks can help even novice gardeners grow delicious tomatoes.

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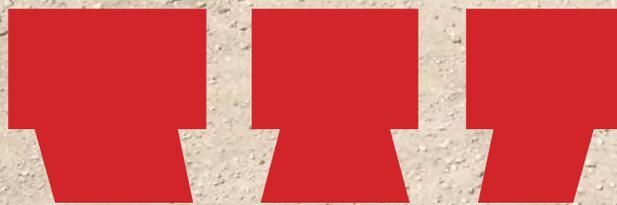
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