

A woman and a young girl are gardening in front of a house. The woman, wearing a red plaid shirt and blue jeans, is kneeling and using a blue trowel to work with purple petunias. She is wearing yellow gloves. The girl, wearing a pink long-sleeved shirt and blue jeans, is kneeling and watering the plants with a red watering can. The house in the background has a stone facade and a white door. The sky is blue with some light clouds.

Springtime
HOME
and Garden

April 24, 2024 | A SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT TO THE
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Unterrified Democrat

PAGES 1B-32B



Horticulture lessons in greenhouse setting translates into learning experiences at Chamois

BY ELISE BROCHU
UD STAFF WRITER
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CHAMOIS — Kate Kuschel has been teaching Greenhouse Management and Floriculture at Chamois High School for 16 years.

She currently has 15 students in her greenhouse class, as well as a greenhouse full of succulents, houseplants, and vegetable plants for their upcoming sale.

“We are growing, currently, tomatoes and peppers, and then we’ll have squash and cucumbers for the spring,” Kuschel said. “We also have a variety of houseplants — aloes, hanging baskets of Wandering Jew and spider (plants), the succulent baskets that they were making, that have aloes and hens and chicks and some cacti. We’ve got 15 of those currently that we’ll be selling. And the kids helped make all of it. We might (also) have some Boston ferns.”

Students learn the practical skills of

propagating plants through both division and cuttings, including ferns, aloes, cacti, and African violets.

“We have just a few (African violets) because our greenhouse went AWOL on us and we have to get a new climate brain,” said Kuschel said, explaining the computerized piece of equipment that measures and regulates temperature and humidity.

Students use propagated plants to create aesthetically pleasing, and therefore salable, mixed baskets and centerpieces.

“We made centerpieces at Christmas,” Kuschel explained. “And we came back from Christmas and talked about some more things, and they’re like, ‘We want to make boutonnieres and corsages. We had leftover carnations at Valentine’s Day, so we went through the basics of just making a very simple boutonniere. And they were like, ‘Can we make those for prom?’”

See **GREENHOUSE** on Page 3



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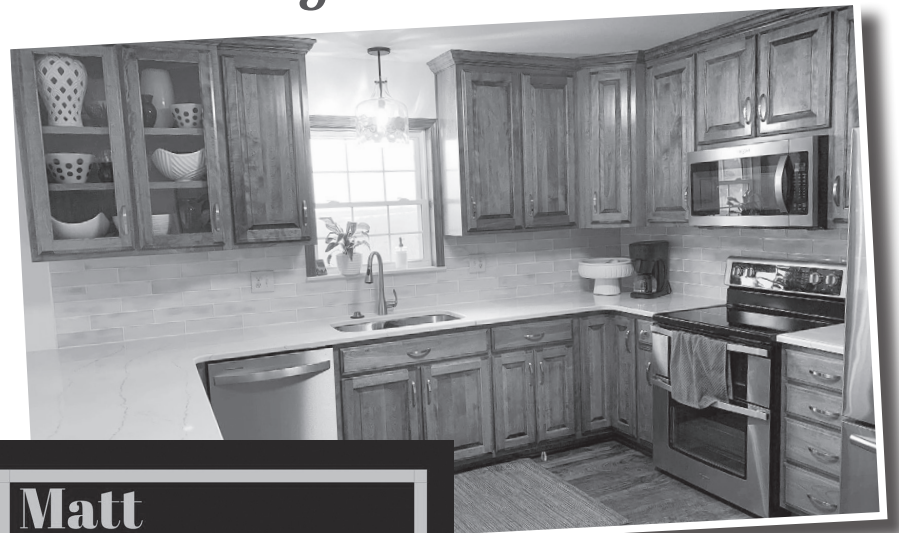


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Greenhouse • from page 2

Students chose to use fake flowers for their prom creations, as they're less expensive and longer lasting. They selected corsage bracelets, flowers, and colors, then students had two weeks to finish their creations, in addition to greenhouse instruction.

"I had enough knowledge with making corsages, boutonnières, and I did sprays" said Kuschel. "My aunt and I did all fake flowers for my wedding, and we made all my flowers, so we saved that much money just because I had that ability.

"And that's what I'm trying to show them. This is how you do this. This is how you make your own things. And it's teaching them what plants (they) can do that with."

The students' education isn't limited to just horticulture. After making their prom flowers, students will take the bill and determine price per flower, then add up the materials used for their corsage or boutonniere to determine what the retail cost would be.

"We (also) incorporate math in here to do pesticide (and) fertilizer formula ratios and things like that. I set the formula up on the board and they're like, 'Woah, that's math.' I said 'Yeah, it's math, but watch how it works through.'"

Kuschel then completes the formulas with students, using correct terminology to reinforce what they've learned in math classes.

Outside the greenhouse, the school has

12 tractor tires and three raised beds for vegetable gardening.

"They have onions and potatoes in them right now. And rhubarb, because we started some rhubarb plants," Kuschel said. "I planted those guys four or five years ago, and there (are) years where they look like they're absolutely dead and I have no idea what I did, but this year they're looking really good, so I might actually get to harvest something."

The school also has a compost pile, used for the disposal of plant matter and old soil.

"We (use) our compost to replenish our tires and our raised beds and put some of those nutrients back in," said Kuschel.

Students also use their plants and knowledge to compete in FFA.

"This year, we had a Floriculture team, which is flowers, Entomology, which is bugs, livestock judging, and forestry, so we were able to use the flowers in the greenhouse to help with our ID for our contests. Then they work on insect identification, if we have a pest problem, and how to treat it. They do all of the planting in the transplanting from seedlings to cell packs, and they experience all of that."

Kuschel also noted that she tries to move beneficial insects to the greenhouse when she can, so the students can learn about them.

Praying mantis egg sacs, she said, look

See **GREENHOUSE** on Page 4



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Greenhouse • from page 3

like a big, grey wad of old grape chewing gum.

“That’s what it looks like on a branch, and I pick them up every now and then when I see one. I did it a couple years ago, when (my daughter) Ruth was still pretty little, and I put it in the back of the car to bring it to school one day and I forgot for about a week and a half. I had thousands of (tiny) mantes. Ruth would not get in the car.

“We left the doors open. (My son) Boone and I were trying to scoop them out. But usually I try to get at least one in the greenhouse so (students) can see them, because they are a beneficial insect, in that they eat the bad things.”

Kuschel said people also occasionally bring her houseplants that aren’t doing well.

“And the kids and I make that a project to see — can we figure out what’s wrong with it? And we have questions that we can ask and work through. Is it a nutrient issue? Is it an environmental issue? Those kinds of things. And they enjoy seeing and trying to problem solve with a plant, too.”

Kuschel offered a tip for determining whether a plant needs to be watered.

“You stick your finger in, and if your finger comes out with soil attached, it’s wet enough. You need to go at least to the first knuckle, and I try to get them to go at least to the second knuckle. When it comes out and it’s got dirt clinging and it felt damp, you’re good. If it goes in and it’s all dusty and dry, you definitely need to get that thing some water.

“A lot of times, if you’re using potting soil, it’ll dry up and then it won’t reabsorb water, so if you put a pie plate or a pan underneath, and let that soak it back up into the soil, it allows the soil to re-wet.”

Greenhouse students also enjoy helping the elementary students transplant bean and marigold plants used for plant science in the second- and third-grades.

Plants will be on sale starting May 1. Kuschel can be reached via email, kuschelk@osager1.com, to schedule a time to view and purchase plants.

Gardening offers more than a day in the sun

Millions of people embrace opportunities to get back in their gardens each spring, and they might be reaping more rewards from that activity than they realize. According to the American Institute of Stress, gardening sparks a level of creativity among enthusiasts, and that can help to alleviate stress by lowering levels of the hormone cortisol. In addition, authors of a 2022 study published in the journal *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening* concluded that gardening during the COVID-19 pandemic helped people cope with coronavirus-related stress through outdoor activity.



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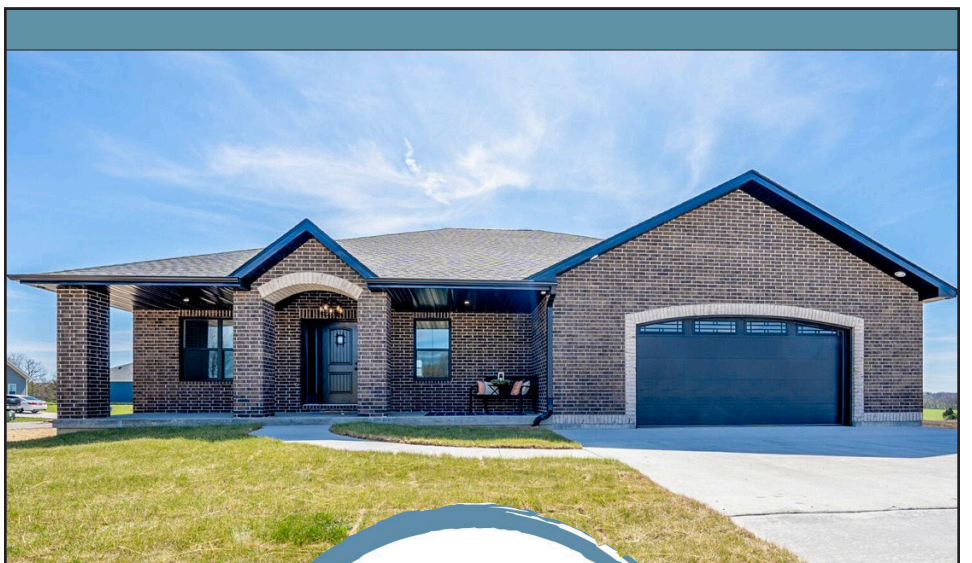
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What to know about reseeding or replanting your lawn

Spring marks the return of flowering plants and warm weather. And homeowners know that spring also ushers in the return of home renovation season.

Homeowners undoubtedly have an extensive list of projects on their to-do list this spring, and that may include helping their lawns and gardens recover after a long winter. Unpredictable weather, which can include drought and excessive rainfall and everything in between, can take its toll on a lawn. In certain instances, the best solution may be planting new grass. But homeowners can consider these tips before they begin the process of reseeding or replanting their lawns.

- Scarify the lawn. Scarifying a lawn can help to create a clean slate, but the timing must be right. Various lawn and garden experts, including those at BBC Gardeners' World Magazine, recommend scarifying in spring or early autumn. But don't jump the gun when scarifying in spring by scarifying before the lawn has started to grow after a dormant winter. Scarify when the soil is a little wet and the grass is once again actively growing. Scarifying can remove any lingering weeds from last season and also pull up any moss that might have taken hold over the winter. Without weeds and moss to contend with, freshly planted seeds are in better position to thrive.

- Work with a landscaping professional. Homeowners with manageable lawns can likely scarify their own lawns with a relatively inexpensive plug-in scarifier. However, scarifying can be a strenuous physical activity, particularly for homeowners with large lawns. In such instances, homeowners can benefit from working

with a qualified landscaping professional. Such a professional can scarify the lawn and subsequently reseed or replant new grass. The latter task is not so simple, as the lawn care experts at Scotts® note that choosing the correct seed is a vital part of reseeding or replanting a lawn. Choosing seed may sound simple, but it's a potentially complex decision that requires knowledge of the existing grass, including when to plant it. Certain grasses are best planted in spring or early fall, while others are best planted in summer. A qualified landscaping professional can identify the existing grass and plan the seeding or planting around this important detail.

- Prepare to water the lawn. Watering is vital to the long-term success and health of freshly planted grass seed. Scotts® urges homeowners to keep the top inch of soil consistently moist, but not soggy. That requires a daily commitment, and setting a multi-function hose nozzle or sprinkler to the mist setting once per day or more if it's hot outside can increase the chances grass will grow in thick and strong. Scotts® recommends keeping the top two inches of the soil moist until the new grass reaches a mowing height of roughly three inches. Once that benchmark has been reached, watering frequency can be cut back to about twice per week, but now the soil should be deeply soaked instead of misted. The soaking will help roots grow deep into the soil.

Spring is a great time for homeowners in various regions to reseed or replant their lawns. With the right approach, homeowners can enjoy a full and lush lawn throughout summer.

HOMEOWNERS CAN consider these tips before they begin the process of reseeding or replanting their lawns.

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Turn a backyard into your own relaxing respite

Backyards have long been places to unwind and enjoy some peace and quiet surrounded by nature.

Thanks in part to financial instability brought on by rising inflation and measures to tame it, homeowners may decide to forgo traditional vacations in favor of staying home this season. There's no better time to invest in a home, particularly outdoor spaces, to make them welcoming respites. The following are some ways to accomplish that goal.

Incorporate a water feature

The sound of trickling or bubbling water can make surroundings more serene. A low-maintenance water feature can help to create a calming ambiance. A fountain that does not require a collection pond will reduce the chance it becomes a breeding ground for mosquitoes. Locating the fountain out of the sun can keep algae growth at a minimum.

Add lights for ambiance

Outdoor lighting options include

professionally installed, hardwired lights on the home itself or accent lighting that draws attention to trees or architectural structures on the property. It also may include twinkling lights, which some consider a must-have for any outdoor retreat. Lights come in all types and price points. Hang them on porches, pergolas or cement posts inside decorative planters and then string lights between the posts. This way the lighting can be moved around as desired.

Lounging spots

A comfortable outdoor loveseat or chairs may be a focal point of the yard, but build in some additional cozy spots specifically for lounging around. Nestle a hammock in a quiet corner of the yard, or enhance a chaise lounge with throw pillows and a large umbrella for napping poolside.

Add lushness with plants

Plants can transform any space. Use a combination of planted varieties around the yard, then enhance certain areas with potted plants as needed.

Plants can make an area more warm and inviting, plus they give butterflies, bees and hummingbirds places to stop by and visit. Consider the help of a professional landscaper to bring a vision of a lush, plant-filled retreat to life.

Blend in the pool or spa

With some unique landscape architecture, the pool or hot tub can be built right into the landscape, making it a cohesive part of the design. This can make the yard seem even more like an oasis, especially when the pool is flanked by a waterfall or bubbling fountain.

Add some music

Thanks to wireless speakers that rely on Bluetooth technology, it's easy to have music piped right into the backyard. Set up a wireless speaker in an inconspicuous spot, such as inside a planter or in the rafters of a gazebo.

Turning a backyard into an oasis can provide the respite many people look for on their properties.

Did you know?

Home buyers must confront a host of variables in the best of times, but in recent years buyers have been forced to contend with a real estate market marked by a significant increase in home prices. According to the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, the median home sales price in the third quarter of 2023 was \$431,000. That marks a significant increase since the start of 2020, when the median sales price was \$329,000. That 31 percent increase in a little less than four full years can be traced to a host of variables, not the least of which is the global COVID-19 pandemic, which officially earned that designation in early March 2020. But the rise in home prices is not as recent a phenomenon as some may think. In fact, data from the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis indicates the median home sales price rose by 576 percent between 1980 and the third quarter of 2023.

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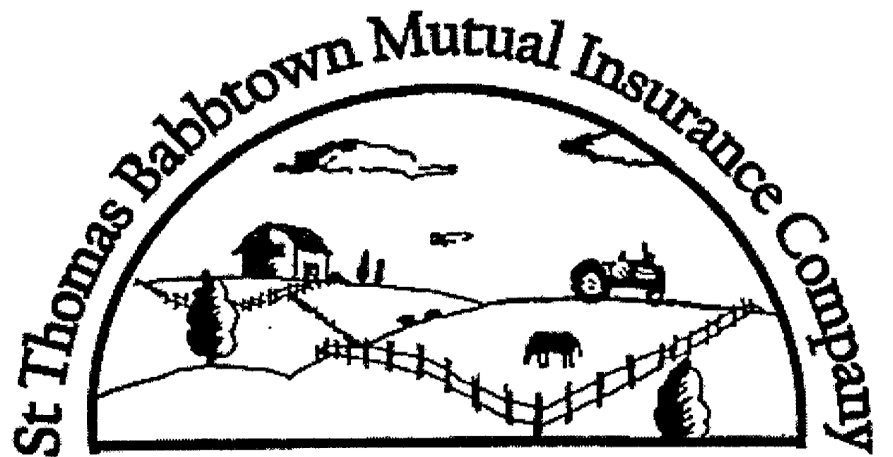
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Symptoms of plumbing problems

The drip of a faucet, the bang of pipes and the visible signs of a leak under the sink are some notable indicators of plumbing problems. Other, potentially serious issues may not be so evident. How can homeowners tell if they have potential plumbing problems? The following are some sights and sounds that indicate it is time to call in a plumber.

- **Banging or clanking:** Plumbers refer to these noises as water hammer. This is when a rush of water forces through the pipe and bumps into a closed valve, producing a metallic noise. Something is in the pipe that is restricting water flow. Over time, the flow of water meeting an obstacle could loosen pipe joints as the water tries to find an easier workaround.

- **Pipe discoloration:** If there is any sign of discoloration on pipes, particularly rust, it could be a symptom of a dripping sink or drain line that is slowly leaking. A slow leak can eventually turn into a big mess if left unattended.

- **Sewer smells:** Pipes need traps and vents. Traps are designed to prevent sewer gas from entering the home, while vents channel sewer odor up to the roof. If there are sewer smells, it could mean a trap has dried out or a vent line is cracked, says Family Handyman.

- **Low water pressure:** If you turn on the faucet and the water pressure is poor, it could be the result of a clog or a leak somewhere in the system. Pipes that are improperly sized for a home also can affect pressure.

- **Sluggish drains:** Clearing drains is perhaps the only plumbing problem that homeowners should address themselves. More often than not, drains that fail to drain quickly have a blockage such as hair or other debris. If attempts to clear the drain do not work, it is best to bring in a professional plumber.

- **Shaking sounds:** Water can cause occasional noises, but if the sounds are frequent, the pipes are not secured firmly enough. A plumber will need



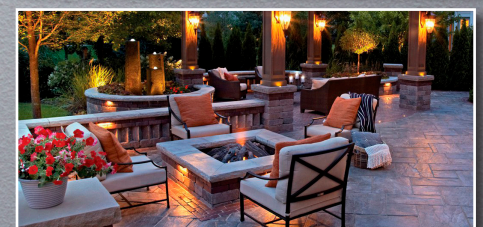
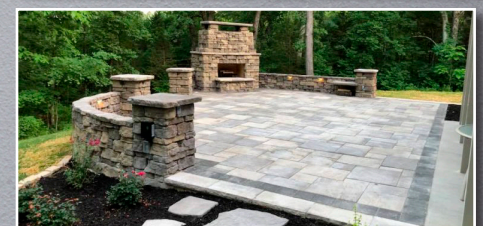
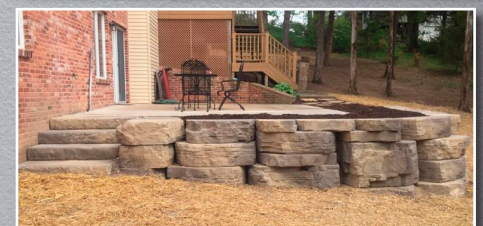
to tighten the mounting straps or even completely replace them.

Plumbing issues are nothing to take

lightly, as small problems can quickly escalate and cause thousands of dollars in damage.

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How to prepare landscapes for new plants

New plants can add much to a landscape. Whether they're replacing plants that are no longer thriving or being added to supplement an existing landscape, new plants are an affordable way to give a home's exterior a whole new look.

Much consideration is given to which plants to add to a landscape. That's understandable, as homeowners want to choose plants that will thrive and won't compromise the health of surrounding plants and trees. Before planting or even choosing plants, it's important to plan for new additions to a landscape. Preparing the landscape can inform homeowners about which plants to purchase and can ensure they thrive after planting.

• Document sunlight exposure. Plants have different needs, and one of the biggest differences between species is the amount of sunlight they need to thrive. According to Penn State Extension,

plants characterized as "full sun" require six or more hours of sunlight per day, while those considered "partial sun" need between four and six hours of sunlight per day. Plants designated as "partial shade" need two to four hours of sun per day, while "shade" plants need less than two hours of sunlight a day. Documenting sunlight exposure in advance gives homeowners an idea of which plants should be planted and where they should be planted. Jot down these observations in a journal over several weeks and then choose plants that will thrive in each area.

• Test the soil. A soil pH test is a simple and quick way to determine the acidity of soil. Soil pH levels will indicate how likely a plant is to thrive in a given spot. High levels won't necessarily mean an area should be avoided, as some

See **LANDSCAPES** on Page 11



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A guide to various types of home awnings

Homeowners recognize that upgrades can improve the functionality and comfort of their homes. Improving outdoor spaces has proven particularly popular of late. The National Association of Home Builders reports that outdoor living has been propelled to the top of homeowner wish lists. Plus, a recent survey conducted by the New Home Trends Institute found connection to the outdoors/nature and outdoor entertaining ranked high among desired home designs.

One way to make outdoor spaces more accommodating is through the installation of awnings. Many homeowners would like to enhance their homes with awnings but do not know where to begin. Learning about the various types of awnings can help homeowners determine which option best suits their needs.

Fixed awnings

Fixed awnings are stationary on a building's exterior. While the awnings are generally stable, they can be damaged by snow or wind. It's key to find an installation expert to make sure the awning is installed correctly so that it can withstand weather and other issues. It's also important to know that fixed awnings remain in the same position and orientation, so its best to know exactly where to place it beforehand.

Retractable awning

Retractable awnings are the most popular type of awnings because they can be extended when necessary to keep a space cool or protected, then rolled or folded up when not in use. These awnings are advantageous because they can be retracted when bad weather hits to prevent damage.

Motorized retractable awning

Motorized retractable awnings offer the utmost convenience.



LEARNING ABOUT the various types of awnings can help homeowners determine which option best suits their needs.

Standard retractable offerings require a handle or hand crank to manually extend or fold up the awning. Motorized awnings can be operated with a sensor, remote or even motion trigger. Even though they cost more, they're a favorite among homeowners.

Areas of use

Awnings can be installed in various locations. Patio awnings are much preferred because of their large coverage area, which typically spans entire patios. Door awnings are installed above the exterior door of an entryway to protect visitors and occupants from

precipitation and to improve the home's look. Window awnings can add additional shade and privacy. There also are side awnings, which are essentially wall-like structures that run across a patio, garden or balcony for wind or sun protection. They're also utilized to improve privacy.

Homeowners can choose from various types of awning materials, including fabric, metal, glass, and others. Working with a reputable awning company is the best way for homeowners to peruse possible products and find awnings that will suit their needs.

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Nine signs of pest infestation

Individuals want a home that is welcoming and comfortable. Unfortunately many conditions that people find appealing also appeal to pests. Pests may be more problematic at certain times of year, such as when weather is extreme and pests like rodents or even raccoons seek refuge in a home. During times of year when temperatures are mild, certain insects may begin to hatch or swarm, becoming problematic around the home.

Some signs of pests taking up residence may be readily apparent, while others may be less obvious. The following are nine signs of pest infestation in or around a home.

1. Droppings:

Small droppings may indicate that pests are nearby. Droppings will vary depending on the insect or rodent. It's good to familiarize yourself with the appearance of various droppings, from mice to termites to bed bugs.

2. Footprints:

Footprints are another sign of pest infestation. Footprints left in dirt around a home, or in dusty areas in the attic or basement, may show that pests are tracking in and out of the house.

3. Sawdust piles or trails:

Sawdust could be indicative of termites or ants. Insects like carpenter bees also may burrow into areas of wood and leave sawdust behind.

4. Shed wings, skins and casings:

Many insects molt and, during this process, will shed certain parts of their anatomy to grow larger. Roaches, bed bugs and beetles are some pests that might be scattering sheds or egg casings in a home. Termite wings are discarded once the swarms choose a new location for the colony.

5. Foul odors:

Musty or foul smells, particularly in hidden areas, may indicate pests are nesting nearby.

6. Unexplained noises:

Scratching or scurrying in walls or floors often indicates pests are present.

7. Bites:

Waking up in the morning with welts or red areas on the skin might indicate the presence of bed bugs or other biting insects.

8. Presence of nests:

Those who can see nests in corners



or undisturbed areas of the home likely have pests present. Rodents often use chewed cardboard, insulation, paper, and other scavenged items to create nests, according to exterminators.

9. Increased number of beneficial insects:

An influx of spiders and other predatory insects may indicate there are plenty of food sources in the home for them to feast on.

Pests can be problematic, but homeowners who recognize signs of infestation can take prompt action.

Landscapes • from page 9

plants thrive in acidic soils. Additional soil tests can determine other characteristics, such as the nutrient levels of soil and the amount of organic matter it contains. Each of these variables can help homeowners make the right choices as they introduce new plants to their properties.

- Consider local wildlife. If local wildlife makes its presence known on a property, homeowners may want to take proactive steps prior to planting anything new. A new fence might prevent animals like deer from getting in, but that likely won't do much to repel smaller animals like squirrels, rabbits or foxes. If wildlife is a concern, homeowners can seek advice at their local garden center about which plants certain animals are likely to ignore. Homeowners who want to attract wildlife can do the same in reverse, choosing plants wildlife will be drawn to. Homeowners who want to deter wildlife should erect fencing or other barriers prior to planting.

- Clear space if necessary. Plants grow up and out, and cramped quarters can make it hard for new plants to thrive. Some may thrive but only at the expense of other plants. If necessary, clear space prior to planting to ensure plants have ample space to grow.

Some pre-planting landscape preparation can ensure new plants thrive.

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A BACKYARD retreat can be even more enjoyable when homeowners find ways to keep mosquitoes at bay.

Three techniques to keep mosquitoes out of your backyard oasis

The value of a retreat-like backyard was never more apparent than in 2020. Over the last year-plus, much of the world has been forced to stay home as a global pandemic has claimed millions of lives while countless others have had to fight to survive in hospitals. It's no surprise people have looked for a respite from the harsh realities of living during a deadly pandemic, and many turned their attention to their own backyards to provide such an escape.

The online home remodeling platform Houzz reported a 58 percent annual increase in project leads for home professionals in June 2020. Contractors who specialize in outdoor spaces saw the biggest increase in demand. A revamped outdoor space can provide the perfect retreat for homeowners who want to get away from it all. But one winged, unwelcome guest can quickly transform an oasis into an uninviting space.

Mosquitoes make their presence felt in many areas each summer. These pesky, often hungry insects can carry disease, and their bites can be painful and itchy. Homeowners can try these three techniques to keep mosquitoes out of their backyards.

1. Remove standing water.

Standing water is a breeding ground for mosquitoes, who don't even need a lot of water to successfully breed. A daily walk around the property may uncover kids' toys, empty flower pots or other small receptacles that can collect water. Even clogged gutters can lead to the accumulation of a small amount of water, and that can be enough for mosquitoes to breed. Remove these potential breeding grounds when you find them, and do so each day, as mosquitoes mature from



eggs to nymphs in roughly four days.

2. Mow regularly.

Mowing the lawn so the grass never gets too high is another way to make a backyard less hospitable to mosquitoes. The pest experts at Terminix® note that mosquitoes seek tall grass to protect them from the elements, including wind and hot summer sun. Mowing enough so grass never gets too high in summer can make backyards less inviting to mosquitoes.

3. Plant with mosquitoes in mind.

The home remodeling experts at HGTV note that plants can be part of homeowners' strategy to repel mosquitoes. Various plants have mosquito-repellant qualities. For example, bee balm releases a fragrance as it grows, and mosquitoes don't like that fragrance. Homeowners can speak with a local lawn and garden professional for recommendations about plants that can thrive in their region and repel mosquitoes at the same time.

Mosquitoes can make it hard to enjoy a backyard oasis. But various strategies can help homeowners keep these unwanted guests out of their backyards.

How sellers can get top dollar for their homes

The process of buying and selling a home includes many movable parts. North America has experienced historic trends in the housing market in recent years. Most notably, record-high prices have dominated the real estate market over the last several years.

High prices are good news for sellers, who can probably anticipate receiving offers above listing price. In New Jersey, inventory is so low that 12.5 percent of homes in the Garden State sold above list price, according to data from RedFin. This is good news for sellers currently looking to make an excellent profit on their properties. Sellers who don't want to rely on the market alone to earn more for their homes can take various steps to get top dollar.

Stage your home

According to the 2023 Profile of Home Staging conducted by the National Association of Realtors®, 81 percent of buyers' agents said staging a home made it easier for the buyer to visualize the property as a future home. Focus your attention on the living room, owner's suite and kitchen. Hiring a staging professional can be an investment that turns a sizable profit.

Know your local market

A good way to price your home and gauge if it will sell quickly is to look at the average "days on the market" for similar homes nearby. If homes are selling faster than the average DOM, that suggests high demand, which can work in your favor.

Make added-value improvements

Focus renovation dollars on the types of projects that will reap the highest return on investment. Remodeling magazine annually reports the projects that offer the best ROI. In 2023, the project that reaped the highest ROI was an HVAC Conversion/Electrification, which involved converting a fossil-fuel-burning furnace into an electric heat pump. The cost recouped was 103.5 percent.

Sell at the right time

Fewer people are shopping for homes in the dead of winter or during the middle of the school year, so putting your home on the market in spring typically brings out the largest number of interested parties, according to Opendoor. But this isn't the only time-related factor to consider. To sell for the most money, you want to list your home when you have enough equity to pay off your current mortgage, the costs of selling, and the costs of moving, says Bankrate.

Give curb appeal a boost

Make sure that buyers see your home in a positive light from the first moment they pull up for a walk-through showing. According to Home & Garden, improving the landscaping can result in a value increase of up to 12 percent. Additional projects can include investing in a new front door and garage doors. Be sure that hedges are trimmed, there are fresh flowers growing, and that walkways and the driveway are clean and tidy.

A few simple strategies can help sellers get more money for their homes.



SELLERS WHO don't want to rely on the market alone to earn more for their homes can take various steps to get top dollar.

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Three modern kitchen features to consider

It's well documented that kitchens are the most popular rooms in many homes. Kitchens are where families tend to congregate during holiday celebrations, and many a child has tackled their homework as mom or dad prepares dinner just a few steps away.

With so much time spent in the kitchen, it's no wonder kitchen renovations are popular. In fact, data from the National Association of Home Builders indicates kitchens are the most popular room to remodel. Whether homeowners are planning a full scale remodel or a few tweaks to update the room, the following are three popular features of modern kitchens.

1. Kitchen island

A recent survey from the interior design experts at Houzz found that kitchen islands are popular for a variety of reasons. Fifty-eight percent of respondents indicated they enjoy eating at kitchen islands, while 49 percent reported they like islands for entertaining. Forty-five percent of respondents like socializing around kitchen islands. Islands provide a versatile functionality that comes in handy when preparing meals on typical weeknights and when hosting friends and family on special occasions like the holidays and birthdays. Islands come in a variety of shapes and sizes and can be customized to fit just about any space. Mobile islands can be utilized in small kitchens when homeowners want the extra prep space but think the kitchen would be too cramped if a permanent island were added.

2. Deep sink

The popularity of farmhouse style sinks is proof that large and deep sinks are sought-after among today's homeowners. Farmhouse sinks may be best suited to a particular aesthetic, but a 2021 study from the National Association of Home Builders found that



side-by-side double sinks and walk-in pantries were the most popular of 30 listed kitchen features. That study surveyed more than 3,200 recent and prospective home buyers. Deep sinks are especially useful for people who love to cook, making them a solid addition to any kitchen where home chefs ply their trade most nights of the week.

3. Storage

As the NAHB study indicated, kitchen storage space is sought after among modern homeowners. As home cooks expand their culinary horizons and cook more elaborate meals, they need extra places to store spe-

cialty pots and pans, ingredients and other materials. Homeowners looking to add more storage in the kitchen can consult with a local contractor about how to create such space. A walk-in pantry can do the trick, but homeowners with kitchens where space is more limited may need to get a little more creative. Sliding-door pantries and roll-out shelving in existing cabinets can add functional space in kitchens with close quarters.

Modern kitchens are visual marvels and highly functional spaces. A new island, a deep sink and some extra storage space can help homeowners transform their existing kitchens into spaces that cater to their every need.

How to recognize when it's time to replace your windows

Windows are a major component of a home. Window installation professionals will tell homeowners that the average life span of residential windows is between 15 and 30 years. Most well-maintained products can last 20 years, so homeowners who have windows approaching that age may want to schedule a window assessment and possible replacement.

Replacing windows is a job that requires advanced skill, and this is not a do-it-yourself project. There are many qualified professional window installation companies that will work with homeowners to measure, order and install windows that will fit with the style of a home and local weather, all while providing features the homeowner desires.

For those wondering when to replace windows, Pella and Renewal by Andersen, two of the premiere window manufacturers, offer these guidelines.

- Difficulty opening and closing windows. A window that does not operate as it should can aggravate homeowners. If windows are sticking shut or cannot be

securely closed, it's probably time for something new.

- There's apparent window damage. Accidents happen, and if a rock is kicked up from a lawnmower and cracks a window or if spring baseball practice has gone awry with an errant throw, windows may require replacement.

- Drafts in the window are common. If heating and cooling systems are working overtime, drafty, poorly insulated windows could be to blame. Various agencies can perform energy efficiency tests in a home. Windows that are determined to be the weak spots should be replaced.

- Dated windows are present in the home. Older windows may pose safety hazards, especially those in older homes. A larger window may be needed to comply with fire safety codes allowing for window egress. Dated windows also may simply look "old" and compromise the aesthetics of a home.

- Outdoor noises are noticed quite readily. Newer windows can help reduce noise transmission. So those leaf blowers, airplanes, barking dogs, and kids playing basketball up the street won't



REPLACING WINDOWS is a job that requires advanced skill, and this is not a do-it-yourself project.

disturb homeowners as they try to enjoy some peace and quiet indoors.

- Fading indoors is noted. Windows that do not feature low-emissivity (Low-E) glass coatings will not block UV rays. Those rays can cause fading to wood floors and furniture or pretty much

anything the sunlight touches. Replacing existing windows with Low-E coating alternatives can safeguard belongings and improve window efficiency.

Window replacement may be necessary when existing windows are showing signs of aging or damage.

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Top eight usage mistakes when using outdoor power equipment

As the weather warms and people are coaxed outside to their yards and managed landscapes, it's time for everyone to remember how to use their outdoor power equipment safely and properly.

"Think safety first," says Kris Kiser, President and CEO of the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute (OPEI), an international trade association representing outdoor power equipment, small engine, utility vehicle, golf car and personal transport vehicle manufacturers and suppliers. "I can't stress enough to review manufacturer's safety guidance before starting up any equipment—especially your lawn mower. Review your owner's manual and do maintenance on your equipment."

Also being aware of surroundings is key, he adds. "And be sure to keep kids and pets away from outdoor power equipment while it's in use."

OPEI urges homeowners and other equipment users to avoid these eight most common mistakes when using outdoor power equipment.

1. Thinking all mowers are the same. You need to know how to handle your specific equipment correctly, and do basic operations like turning it off or on and controlling speed. Review your owner's manual and how to use the equipment before use.

2. Not inspecting equipment before use. Always look over equipment before operating it. Check the

air filter, oil level and gasoline tank. Watch for loose belts and missing or damaged parts. Replace any parts needed or take your equipment to a qualified service representative.

3. Not walking through your yard or work area before starting to mow or using other outdoor power equipment. Always walk the area you intend to work in, and look for and remove objects, sticks and other items that could create a hazard.

4. Removing or not using safety guards on the equipment. Never alter or disable safety protection measures. If needed, take equipment to a qualified service representative for repairs and inspection.

5. Using fuels not designed for equipment. Loading up your outdoor power equipment with gasoline with more than 10% ethanol in it can cause running problems and damage the fuel line. Always use E10 or less.

6. Using batteries or chargers that are not specified by the manufacturer. While a host of batteries and chargers can be found for sale online, only use batteries and chargers specified by the equipment manufacturer.

7. Not storing fuel and batteries safely. Coffee cans, milk jugs and other non-approved containers should not be used to store fuel. Only store fuel in containers designed for it, and always use up fuel before it is 30 days old. Label fuel cans with the date

of purchase and ethanol content. When battery packs are not in use, keep them away from other metal objects, like paper clips, coins, keys, nails, screws or other small metal objects, that can make a connection from one terminal to another. Shorting the battery terminals together may cause burns or a fire.

8. Not cleaning or storing equipment well. Equipment will run more efficiently and last longer if it's cleaned. Always remove dirt, oil or grass before using and storing your equipment. Store equipment in a dry place, avoiding damp or wet environments.

For information on safe fueling, go to <https://www.opei.org/programs/ethanolwarning/>

For more safety information visit www.opei.org

"Flowers are restless to look at. They have neither emotions nor conflicts."

—Sigmund Freud



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Renovations that help sell homes

The adage “there’s a lid for every pot” suggests that, even in relation to the real estate market, there’s bound to be a buyer for every home on the market. Price is a significant variable in the minds of potential buyers, but there are additional factors that can affect the impression people get of a given home.

Certain home features can tip the scales in favor of sellers. In fact, various renovations can help sell homes more readily. And these renovations need not cost a fortune. Putting a home on the market can be stressful, but these renovations may help it sell fast.

- **A fresh coat of paint:** Although painting is relatively inexpensive and a job that some do-it-yourselfers can tackle, it’s not a task relished by many. Painting is messy, it takes time, and requires moving furniture. In fact, prepping a room for painting often is the toughest component of any painting job. But fresh coats of paint can create a strong first impression. Choose a neutral color and get painting. Jennie Norris, chairwoman for the International Association of Home Staging Professionals, says gray is a “safe” color that has been trending in recent years.

- **Minor bathroom remodel:** Remove dated wall coverings, replace fixtures, consider re-glazing or replacing an old tub, and swap old shower doors for fast fixes in a bathroom. If there’s more room in the budget, replacing a tub, tile surround, floor, toilet, sink, vanity, and fixtures can cost roughly \$10,500, says HGTV. You’ll recoup an average of \$10,700 at resale, making a minor bathroom remodel a potentially worthy in-

vestment.

- **Redone kitchen:** The kitchen tends to be the hub of a home. This room gets the most usage and attention of any space, and it’s a great place to focus your remodeling attention. The National Association of the Remodeling Industry estimates that homeowners can recover up to 52 percent of the cost of a kitchen upgrade upon selling a home. Buyers want a functional and updated kitchen. Trending features include drawer-style microwaves and dishwashers, commercial ranges, hidden outlets, and even wine refrigerators.

- **Updated heating and cooling system:** Better Homes and Gardens reports that homeowners may be able to recoup 85 percent of the cost of new HVAC systems when they sell their homes. Heating, cooling and ventilation components are vital to maintain. You don’t want buyers to be taken aback by an older system, and many millennial buyers are not willing to overlook old mechanical systems.

- **Fresh landscaping:** A home’s exterior is the first thing buyers will see. If they pull up to a home with eye-catching landscaping and outdoor areas that are attractive yet functional, they’re more likely to be intrigued. Often buyers will equate a home that features an impressive exterior with upkeep inside as well. The American Nursery Landscape Association says the average homeowner may spend \$3,500 for landscaping.

Improving a home’s chances to sell quickly and at a higher price often comes down to making smart improvements that catch the eyes of buyers.



PUTTING A home on the market can be stressful, but these renovations may help it sell fast.

“No single sort of garden suits everyone. Shut your eyes and dream of the garden you’d most love then open your eyes and start planting. Loved gardens flourish, boring ones are hard work.”

—Jackie French

Create your native plant garden

Gardening is a worthwhile endeavor that not only passes the time, but can be a form of exercise and relief from the daily grind. Gardens also provide ample opportunity to experiment, as individuals can produce everything from vegetables to bountiful blooms.

Recent years have witnessed a growing emphasis on eco-friendly gardening that aims to reduce reliance on chemical fertilizers and pesticides in an effort to protect the planet. One way to do so is to rely on native plants.

What are native plants?

Native plants are indigenous to particular regions. The National Wildlife Federation says native plants grow in habitats without human introduction or intervention. Native plants have formed symbiotic relationships with local wildlife over thousands of years, which the NWF notes makes them the most sustainable options. Native plants help the environment and thrive with little supplemental watering or chemical nutrients.

Natives vary by region

Native plants vary by region. In arid climates, certain succulents may be native because they don’t need much rainfall to thrive. In lush wetlands, succulents might be out of place.

Start native planting

The NWF offers native plants for 36 different states that can be shipped right to customers’ doors to help replenish native varieties. In addition, gardeners can visit local gardening centers to select native plants. Small and independently owned centers often feature knowledgeable local staff whose expertise can prove invaluable to individuals seeking native varieties.

It’s important to keep in mind that native varieties may look less cultivated than more exotic blooms and foliage designed to sell for their unique appearances. Wildflowers and native grasses may be the types of native plants found

See **NATIVE PLANTS** on Page 20

Tips to revitalize a garden this spring

Gardening is a rewarding hobby that pays a host of significant dividends. Many people love gardening because it allows them to spend time outdoors, and that simple pleasure is indeed a notable benefit of working in a garden. But the National Initiative for Consumer Horticulture notes that gardening provides a host of additional benefits, including helping people get sufficient levels of exercise, reduce stress and improve mood.

With so much to gain from gardening, it's no wonder people look forward to getting their hands dirty in the garden each spring. As the weather warms up, consider these tips to help bring a garden back to life.

• **Discard the dead weight.** Winter can take its toll on a garden, even in regions where the weather between December and early spring is not especially harsh. Discard dead plants that have lingered into spring and prune any perennials that need it. Branches that fell during winter storms also should be removed at this point if they have not previously been discarded.

• **Test the soil.** Soil testing kits can be purchased at local garden centers and home improvement retailers. Such

tests are inexpensive and can reveal if the soil needs to be amended to help plants thrive in the months to come.

• **Mulch garden beds.** Mulching benefits a garden by helping soil retain moisture and preventing the growth of weeds. Various garden experts note that mulching in spring can prevent weed seeds from germinating over the course of spring and summer. That means plants won't have to fight with weeds for water when the temperature warms up. It also means gardeners won't have to spend time pulling weeds this summer.

• **Inspect your irrigation system.** Homeowners with in-ground irrigation systems or above-ground systems that utilize a drip or soaker function can inspect the systems before plants begin to bloom. Damaged sprinkler heads or torn lines can deprive plants of water they will need to bloom and ultimately thrive once the weather warms up.

• **Tune up your tools.** Gardening tools have likely been sitting around gathering dust since fall. Serious gardeners know that tools can be expensive, so it pays to protect that investment by maintaining the tools.



Sharpened pruners help make plants less vulnerable to infestation and infection. Well-maintained tools like shovels and hoes also make more demanding gardening jobs a little bit easier, so don't forget to tune up your tools

before the weather warms up.

It's almost gardening season, which means gardeners can start on the necessary prep work to ensure their gardens grow in strong and beautiful this spring.

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Native plants

• from page 18

in abundance, which may grow up and out quickly. These other tips can help the process.

• Plan and prepare the site by removing weeds and turning over the soil. This will give seedlings an opportunity to take root without competition from weeds. Seedlings will give gardens a faster head-start than waiting around for seeds to germinate. However, gardeners can start seeds indoors and then move them outside once they are seedlings.

• Avoid planting native plants in rows, as that's not how they're likely to grow naturally. Vary the placement so the plants look like they sprouted up haphazardly.

• Gardeners can still exert some control over native gardens prone to growing a little wild. Borders and paths can better define the growing areas.

• Grow Native!, an initiative from the Missouri Prairie Foundation, suggests planting two to four species in broad sweeping masses or drifts. Mix grasses with flowering plants. The grasses produce dense, fibrous roots that can prevent weed growth.

Native plants should require minimal care. Keep an eye on them and supplement with water if conditions have been especially dry.

RECENT YEARS have witnessed a growing emphasis on eco-friendly gardening that aims to reduce reliance on chemical fertilizers and pesticides in an effort to protect the planet. One way to do so is to rely on native plants.



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What to do about moss in your lawn

A lush, green lawn is a point of pride for many homeowners. Eye-catching landscaping anchored by a healthy lawn is one of the key ways to improve the value and curb appeal of a home. In fact, the experts at HGTV say an attractive and well-maintained landscape can add as much as 10 percent to the value of a home.

Maintaining a thriving lawn takes effort, and that means recognizing when the green in the yard may not necessarily be coming from soft blades of grass. Invasive greenery, including moss, can infiltrate a lawn and that can be problematic if left unaddressed.

A mossy lawn is a sign that certain conditions are ripe for the moss, but not necessarily the grass, to grow. According to Lowe's, moss thrives in certain conditions, which should be addressed if homeowners hope to corral it.

- Moss does well in acidic soil, more so than traditional grasses. A soil test can confirm if the pH needs to be adjusted to make it more hospitable to grass and less friendly to moss.

- Compacted soil and excess thatch can make it easier for moss to take root. These conditions also can make the soil damp and restrict drainage, something that promotes moss growth.

- Moss can grow in shady conditions. If patches of the lawn have been overrun by moss, there could be too much shade in the area. Trimming back trees

or shrubbery may help; otherwise, homeowners may need to look into hardscape or plants that thrive in such conditions to remedy shady and damp areas on portions of their landscapes.

Moss typically can be removed the same way one would dethatch a lawn. It involves rigorously raking or agitating the lawn to loosen the moss. This can be done by hand with a rake, or in the case of a lot of moss or a large lawn, with a dethatching blade attachment for a lawn mower.

Aerating the soil will help keep moss that was removed from returning. In addition, amending the soil so that it has a more dense nutritional profile by adding compost, as well as improving drainage and adjusting the pH, are keys to keeping moss from returning.

For pesky moss, The Spruce suggests making a solution of one box of baking soda to two gallons of water and spraying this solution on the patches of moss. It is a natural alternative to using chemical products. Certain sources indicate a glyphosate herbicide could work on moss, but the World Health Organization considers glyphosate to be a probable human carcinogen and it is prohibited in certain areas.

Moss may be green, but it's often not the type of green homeowners desire in their lawns. Learning about moss can help when removing it and preventing it in the future.

How to create an outdoor living retreat

Al fresco entertaining has taken off in recent years. It's much more common today to find homeowners who want to extend living spaces to the outdoors in meaningful ways that go beyond a few lawn chairs and a stand-alone grill. Dream backyard living rooms mirror similar spaces indoors and contain features like cozy corners, lush furniture and televisions or movie projectors. Plus, they often abut additional outdoor luxuries like fully functional kitchens.

Homeowners have various options when designing outdoor living spaces. Above all else, spaces should be created with the goal of encouraging people to get together. Here are some ideas.

Poolside retreat

Homeowners with pools and other water features likely want this area to be the star of the entertaining space. Furniture will be more of the lounging variety, with comfortable chaises and spots to catch the sun. If a swim-up bar isn't possible, a rolling bar cart can be stocked with essentials for cocktails or mocktails for the kids. Furniture near the pool will be exposed to a lot of sun, so look for durable, sun-resistant fabrics.

Fireside nook

Gathering around an outdoor fireplace or fire pit is a treat when the weather cools down. Mirror the look of the same setup indoors by arranging outdoor sofas so they flank the fireplace. Add some ottomans or side tables for stowing mulled cider or hot chocolate. A mantel above the fireplace can hold pots of greenery or candles that add to the ambiance.

Consider a custom banquette

Unused corners on a patio or rooftop retreat can utilize a custom-made banquette that provides the functionality of a sofa sectional outdoors. Have a contractor design it to the exact specifications of the area, and add a rug to ground the space.

Vary the flooring

Depending on the entertaining space, a balance of soft grass, pavers or other hardscape will be necessary. Certain areas will need to be hard enough for chairs and other furniture, particularly for those who are including an outdoor dining table in the design.

Create some privacy

Some homeowners are lucky enough to have natural barriers that offer privacy in their entertaining spaces. When there isn't enough, tall shrubs, inexpensive bamboo fencing or trellis can provide a blind that makes an outdoor living area more cozy and private. Consider placing tall, potted plants on rolling casters to improve privacy as the need arises.

Outdoor living spaces are all the rage, and they can add value and functionality to most any home.



“Everything that slows us down and forces patience, everything that sets us back into the slow circles of nature, is a help. Gardening is an instrument of grace.”

—May Sarton



How to keep your lawn looking green

Homeowners' fascination with a lush, green lawn is something that has developed over time and is still "growing" strong. According to a 2019 survey conducted on behalf of the National Association of Landscape Professionals, 81 percent of all Americans had lawns and 79 percent said a lawn is an important feature when buying or renting a property.

Even though lush lawns are still coveted, due to drought, the financial climate and even invading insect populations, many people are taking inventory of their landscapes and deciding if a lawn is a priority, even going so far as to reinvent their spaces with lawn alternatives. Still, there are ways to keep properties green no matter which route is taken. Here's a look at some environmentally friendly

ways to address a landscape.

Irrigate from below

There are many ways to water landscapes, but homeowners may want to take their cues from the commercial farming industry. Drip irrigation systems utilize a network of valves, pipes and tubing close to the roots of plants or under the soil. Such systems are more efficient than surface irrigation options, helping to save water and nutrients in the soil.

Water early

Scotts Lawn Care suggests watering a lawn in the morning before 10 a.m. when it is cooler and winds tend to be calmer. This ensures water can be absorbed into the soil and grass roots before evaporation occurs. Watering midday may cause the water droplets on the lawn blades to heat up and actually scorch the lawn.

Plant a new grass type

Homeowners can experiment with eco-friendly grass seed blends that mix native grasses and may not require as much water nor ideal growing conditions.

Utilize green alternatives

Rather than focusing solely on grass, some homeowners are turning to alternatives like clover and even moss, particularly if their landscapes do not have the most pristine growing conditions. This may reduce the need for chemical fertilizers and herbicides. The result is still a green, inviting yard.

Watch the lawn height

Mowing too frequently or at too low a height may compromise the lawn's ability to thrive. Grass cut to the proper height develops a deep root system to better locate water and nutrients in the soil. That

means homeowners may not have to water as much or as frequently. Taller lawns also shade the soil and the roots, reducing some evaporation.

Compost

Leave the clippings on the lawn to break down and further feed nutrients to the lawn, helping it look greener and thrive. Furthermore, rely on supplementation with compost to reinforce the nutrient profile in the soil. The National Resources Defense Council says composting is the natural process of recycling organic matter, such as leaves and food scraps, into a valuable fertilizer. It doesn't take much to nurture compost in a yard.

Green landscapes are possible with a few tips that help conserve water and maximize natural resources.

"There is nothing that is comparable to it, as satisfactory or as thrilling as gathering vegetables one has grown."

—Alice B. Toklas



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Features to consider for a relaxation-themed bathroom remodel

Homeowners want to view their homes as a respite from all that goes on outside their doors. Indeed, turning a home into a residents-only retreat can ensure everyone looks forward to walking through the front door at the end of the day.

One of the more popular ways to turn a home into one's own personal retreat is to upgrade the bathroom. A renovated bathroom can completely transform how individuals feel about their homes. The following are some features to consider when remodeling a bathroom with relaxation in mind.

- **Open shower:** An open shower is a visually stunning addition to any bath-

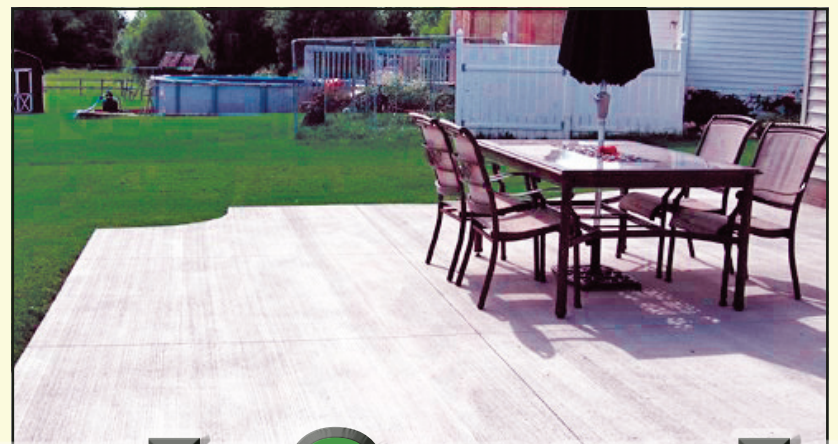
See **BATHROOM** on Page 25



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Bathroom • from page 24

room. Such showers give a bathroom a more open look, thanks in part to the fact that these modern features do not feature a door or require the use of a shower curtain. The result is a clean look that many people associate with a luxury hotel. When speaking with a contractor about an open shower install, homeowners can ask about a half-wall to safeguard against water splashing out of the shower. In addition, a heat lamp can help ensure residents stay warm until they're ready to leave the bathroom.

• **Heated features:** Additional features to keep everyone calm and warm can be considered when upgrading the bathroom. Radiant flooring can ensure everyone's toes remain toasty, and the installation of such a feature can eliminate the need for floor mats and bath mats that some homeowners may not like. Commit further to the heat theme with a heated towel rack, which is another feature associated with luxury hotels that can be just as enjoyable at home.

• **Soaking tub:** An open shower cre-

ates an instant feeling of luxury, but few things are more suggestive of relaxation than a soaking tub. A long day at school or the office or a day when winter winds are howling outside is made much better with a good a soak. The National Kitchen & Bath Association notes that luxury bathrooms featuring soaking tubs are wildly popular, and that vaunted status is undoubtedly due to the relaxing benefits of a good soak.

• **Skylight:** Even if the goal of a luxury bathroom is to leave the outside world outside, allowing some natural light in-

side is a great way to add a little extra calm to the room. Floor-to-ceiling windows may seem appealing in brochures or advertisements, but such features do not create the sense of privacy many people prefer in their bathrooms. One or two skylights can create that sense of privacy and still allow for natural light to enter the room, making this an option that provides the best of both worlds.

These features and more can help homeowners transform their bathrooms into luxurious, relaxing respites from the outside world.

Outdoor plants toxic to household pets

Pets bring many positive changes to households. Pets can make homes more lively, and the companionship of animals can reduce feelings of loneliness while offering additional health benefits to pet owners.

Individuals who are preparing to adopt or purchase pets need to be mindful that they may need to make changes at home to ensure residences are safe places for pets to reside. Much in the way new parents must assess the environs for potential hazards to babies, pet owners should conduct similar inspections. These safety checks should occur both inside and in the yard if pets will be spending time outdoors. Poisonous plants are a potentially hidden hazard prospective pet owners must address before bringing a new pet home.

People generally do not give much thought to the plants they include in their homes and yards beyond the care instructions and how they can add to the aesthetic appeal. Homeowners may know if a plant likes the sun or shade, but they may not realize its potential for toxicity. That's because adults in particular are not prone to ingesting the plants in their yard that are inedible, unlike curious pets that may sniff and nibble plants when exploring their environments. For those with dogs and cats that will spend time outdoors, it's best to be aware of these potentially toxic plants, courtesy of the ASPCA, Dr. Buzby's and Garden Design.

• **Autumn crocus:** There are various types of crocus plants, but the one most toxic to dogs is autumn crocus. The entire plant is toxic, but the highest concentration of toxic agent is found in the bulbs.

• **Sago palm:** People in warm climates may enjoy the look of palm trees on their properties. Despite its tropical and relaxing appearance, the Sago palm is extremely poisonous if ingested by pets, with the seeds being the most toxic part.

• **Lily:** Lilies are highly toxic to cats in particular. Even grooming pollen off of their fur or drinking water out of a vase where lilies are kept may cause kidney failure.

• **Tulips and hyacinth:** These early bloomers are beautiful flowers, but each contains a similar alkaloid toxin that is mild to moderately toxic to pets. Again, the highest concentration is found in the bulbs, which dogs or cats may dig up while exploring.

• **Aloe vera:** This soothing succulent may be part of an arid climate landscape. Aloe contains saponin, a tox-

See **PETS** on Page 26



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FOR THOSE with dogs and cats that will spend time outdoors, it's best to be aware of these potentially toxic plants.

Pets • from page 25

in with foaming properties that can harm pets if ingested and cause severe dehydration.

- **Begonia:** A popular outdoor and houseplant, begonia has decorative flowers and attractive leaves. However, the plant can be toxic to cats and dogs if ingested, particularly the underground tubers.

- **Azalea:** This flowering shrub produces flowers in many colors, so it's often present in household landscapes. It's important to note that azaleas can be toxic to dogs and cats.

- **Yew:** American, Canadian and Japanese yew may be found around properties. These shrubs produce small red berries with green centers (almost looking like the reverse of a Spanish olive with pimento). Yew is toxic to cats and dogs.

- **Dahlia:** Dahlia produce flowers in different colors, so they are common in flower beds. However, these plants also are mildly toxic to pets.

Many toxic plants can irritate the gastrointestinal system in pets, potentially resulting in vomiting, diarrhea or lethargy. Those who suspect a pet has ingested a poisonous plant should contact the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center at 888-426-4435 or their local veterinarian to learn about how to respond to possible exposure.

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Shopping for yard equipment: things to know

With the weather warming up, now is the time to think about how you want your yard to serve your family, pets and wildlife. Maybe you're aiming to have the best yard on the block, want to install an outdoor family room or outdoor office, or want to expand your space for entertaining. Perhaps your kids or pets could use a better space for play. Regardless of need, now is the time to get "backyard ready" for spring. What tools do you need?

"Completing big outdoor jobs is always easier with help from outdoor power equipment," said Kris Kiser, President and CEO of the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute (OPEI). "The right outdoor power equipment can help you get the work done faster and can help you safely maintain your yard." Here are some tips from Kiser to help you select the machinery you need to get the job done.

Plan your needs. Draw a sketch of your yard. Include any major features like trees, bushes, an herb or vegetable garden, flower beds, lawn furniture, play or sports equipment, an outdoor patio, or bird bath. Note where maintenance may be required. Will bushes need to be trimmed back from your home or garage? Do you want to put in some flowering bushes or a

tree? Are you planning to install a fence and more grass because for your pet? Now list the tools and equipment needed to take care of your yard, and what will make the job easier.

Consider equipment needed. Visit your garage or shed and find your lawn and garden tools. Wheel out your mower and get out other equipment. Look it over and make a list of what is needed or could be upgraded. Repair anything that needs attention or identify where a newer or other machine is required. If you have a large vegetable garden, you may need a cultivator or tiller. If you have a large lawn, an upgrade to a riding lawn mower might make mowing easier. A string trimmer might make caring for bushes or trimming grass near a fence line easier. A pole pruner can help trim back limbs that are too high to reach safely with a saw, and a leaf blower can clear leaves faster than a rake.

Research equipment online before you buy. Think about efficiencies of scale. The right equipment can mean more time for other activities, and make doing yard work more enjoyable, too. Doing online research in advance will help you pick the right equipment for the job. Outdoor power equipment can be gas, electric or battery pow-



ered, and technology is rapidly impacting product design. There are even robotic lawn mowers available today. Equipment may be sized to handle a smaller job or a massive one. Ultimately, your decision should be based on your needs.

Ask questions. Talk with the staff at the store or ask on-

line about the equipment. In the store, ask to pick up and hold equipment to determine its "fit" for you. Discuss safety features and ask about manufacturer fueling and care instructions. Find out how often equipment may need to be serviced.

Make a plan for storage and maintenance. Store your equip-

ment in a cool and dry place. It also should typically be serviced at the end of the fall and the beginning of the spring. Put service dates on your calendar with a reminder.

For more information, go to www.opei.org.

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The role of nature in home design in the years ahead

Outdoor living spaces were prioritized during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, when public gatherings were greatly limited and individuals were urged to stay home as much as possible. Such demands have had a ripple effect on various industries, including home design. According to a survey conducted by the New Home Trends Institute in collaboration with Pro Builder, 58 percent of the more than 300 residential architects, designers and design-minded builders who participated said connection to the outdoors/nature will be an important influence on their design choices in the years to come. In addition, 45 percent of respondents indicated increased attention will be afforded to outdoor entertaining spaces.

So what might the outdoor spaces of homes built in the not-so-distant future look like? Respondents to the survey anticipated a growing demand for various built-in outdoor features, including:

- Firepits or fireplaces
- Outdoor kitchens

- Gazebos or pergolas
- Pools
- Spas or hot tubs

Though trends and consumer demands are ever-shifting, architects and

designers are anticipating that future homeowners will want more developed outdoor living spaces and greater access to nature, which is something current homeowners can keep in mind when renovating their properties.



“There is a garden in every childhood, an enchanted place where colors are brighter, the air softer, and the morning more fragrant than ever again.”
—Elizabeth Lawrence

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How to determine how much house you need

Potential home buyers typically have lists of requirements they would like to find in a new home. Although there are many features that are universally appreciated, certain elements may appeal to particular buyers more than others. For example, a swimming pool may be coveted by active families, but may not be as desirable to retirees looking for less upkeep.

Size is consideration that merits significant attention. The mantra “bigger is better” is well known, but homes with significant square footage may not be ideal for all buyers. “How much home do I really need?” is an important question for buyers to ask themselves before they embark on their home-buying journeys. Here’s how buyers can identify how much house they need.

How many occupants will be living in the home?

The first consideration in home size is the number of residents. Rocket Mortgage says a good rule of thumb is to give

each person 600 square feet of space. So that means a family of four would ideally live in a home that is 2,400 square feet, while a couple may be fine in a 1,200 square foot home.

Number of rooms

Generally speaking, the more rooms in a home, the larger the house. Potential buyers should identify rooms they feel are essential. While formal dining rooms once were de rigueur, they largely fell out of favor in recent years in lieu of open floor plans. The more rooms you need, the larger a home should be.

Potential life changes

It’s important to consider life changes on the horizon, and buyers should decide if they want to move as a result of those changes or if they want to set down strong roots and stay in one home. For example, a starter home may be perfect for newlyweds, but the space may be too tight when kids come along. Also, those who anticipate caring for a parent in the future may want a home that will ac-

commodate an extra resident in the years ahead.

Tiny house movement

The trend to live in very small houses has gained popularity in recent years. Many people have chosen to live with less and downsize to diminutive homes. Most “tiny” homes are less than 400 square feet and are not much bigger than some owner’s suites in larger homes. There are merits to small homes, and that includes a small environmental impact, less clutter, financial advantages, and other perks like spending more time outdoors.

Housing budget

Sometimes how much house a person needs comes down to how much he or she can afford. Small homes tend to be less expensive than large ones. However, even small homes in urban areas or those close to the water or other attractive amenities could still cost quite a bit.

Housing size is a personal preference that potential buyers must consider when they are shopping around.



“God made rainy days so gardeners could get the housework done.”

—Anonymous



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What to know about landscape lighting

Home improvement trends come and go, and one trend that has become wildly popular in recent years is recognizable in yards every night. Landscape lighting has transformed how people see and enjoy their properties at night, making it one of the more sought-after upgrades among modern homeowners.

Curb appeal is often seen through the lens of how homes appear during daylight hours, but landscape lighting can make homes look better and more modern, and potentially safer, after the sun goes down. With such potential, landscape lighting is worth exploring for homeowners looking to upgrade their properties.



most certainly better off working with a professional. Solar lighting that does not require any electrical work can be installed quickly and easily by anyone, but such options may not provide the look homeowners are aiming for.

How much lighting is necessary?

The amount of lighting homeowners want to install is up to them. If the home currently has little or no landscape lighting, a consultation with a professional can help to determine how much lighting to install and where to install it. When discussing landscape lighting, homeowners may want to inquire about dimmers. Dimmers can increase or decrease lighting depending on the situation. For example, homeowners may want a little extra light during a party, but less when relaxing alone outside at night. Dimmers allow homeowners to adjust as necessary.

Landscape lighting is a popular home renovation trend. Homeowners considering adding landscape lighting to their property are urged to work with a skilled professional to devise and install a setup that makes their homes more appealing at night. to be difficult. With an idea in place and some professional touches, an entirely new vibe can be achieved.

Are there different types of landscape lighting?

When considering landscape lighting, homeowners should know that there are various options to consider. According to the lighting experts at Lumens, spotlights project a concentrated and narrow beam of light that's usually around 45 degrees. Spotlights are often chosen to highlight specific features on a property, like a component of the landscaping. Individuals who want to cast light over wider, more general areas may consider floodlights, which Lumens notes spread light up to 120 degrees.

Inground lighting is among the more sophisticated landscape lighting options. Lumens notes that inground lighting illuminates the whole of a tree or structure, often creating a dramatic look. These circle-shaped lights also

are great at illuminating walkways and driveways.

Post lights are another outdoor lighting option, and these are often used to light up long walkways and pathways so it's easier and safer to navigate dark areas at night.

Is landscape lighting a job a DIYer can handle?

Many homeowners consider a do-it-yourself approach when pondering a potential home renovation, and a land-

scape lighting project is likely to inspire such curiosity as well. The home experts at HGTV note that the feasibility of DIY in regard to a landscape lighting project depends on the type of lighting homeowners want to install and where they want to install it. Replacing an existing electrical fixture may be well within the skill of a seasoned DIYer, but installing a new fixture is a job best left to the professionals. Homeowners whose homes currently have no or very little landscape lighting are al-

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