

2026

Fall HOME IMPROVEMENT GUIDE



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Signs a fireplace is in need of repair

Fireplaces are most heavily used during winter, when temperatures outside are less inviting and few activities sound more appealing than huddling up indoors around a warm fire.

The American Heritage Insurance Group notes that neglect of chimneys and fireplaces can pose a range of notable dangers, including increased risk for carbon monoxide poisoning and chimney fires. Poorly maintained fireplaces also may fail prematurely, which is not insignificant, as a new fireplace can cost thousands of dollars. With so much to gain from a well-maintained fireplace, homeowners can learn to spot signs suggesting a unit is in need of repair.

- Insufficiently vented smoke: Smoke from a fireplace is meant to go up and out of a home through the chimney. If that's not happening and smoke is instead entering living spaces, then a fireplace and chimney inspection is in order. When such situations

unfold, the chimney may be blocked or a damper may be damaged. Such issues are easily and often affordably resolved. But smoke coming into a home also might indicate structural damage to the chimney or fireplace, which can be a more costly fix.

- Foul odors: Fireplace aficionados tend to love the smoky aroma that emanates from the fixtures while a fire is burning. If that familiar aroma has been overtaken by a foul odor, then there might be a buildup of creosote within the chimney. The United States Environmental Protection Agency notes creosote is a derivative of the distillation of tar from wood or coal. Though creosote is a byproduct of burning wood, if it's allowed to accumulate overtime, the risk of chimney fires increases considerably. A foul odor coming from the fireplace, particularly when it's not in use, is a sign of excessive creosote buildup, which necessitates immediate remediation.

- Water damage: Water damage, which can manifest as rust or dampness around the fireplace or chimney, is another sign a fireplace is in need of repair. Water damage often indicates that water is getting inside. Sometimes that's due to a faulty chimney cap, which is a simple and affordable repair. Other times it could indicate issues with the masonry, which requires a more costly fix.
- Diminished warmth: If cuddling up around the fireplace isn't quite as cozy as it used to be, that drop in warmth could indicate issues with airflow or suggest the buildup of creosote. Diminished warmth around a lit fireplace should be brought to the attention of a fireplace professional immediately.

These are not the only potential indicators that a fireplace is in need of repair. Physical signs like cracks or loose masonry and even unusual noises like cracking sounds also indicate repairs might be necessary.



Contributed photo
Neglect of chimneys and fireplaces can pose a range of notable dangers, including increased risk for carbon monoxide poisoning and chimney fires. Poorly maintained fireplaces also may fail prematurely, which is not insignificant, as a new fireplace can cost thousands of dollars.

Why an insulated attic is a good attic

As homeowners address energy efficiency around their homes, they may want to put attics at the top of their list. Because heat naturally rises during the winter and also infiltrates the roof during the summer, a roof with insufficient insulation can be energy inefficient. Many experts attest that upgrading attic insulation is a practical and cost-effective home improvement.

A desire to reduce energy bills is a primary motivator when installing attic insulation. Data from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's ENERGY STAR® program says homeowners can save an average of 15 percent on heating and cooling costs, or roughly 11 percent on their total energy bills, by air sealing and insulating attics and crawl spaces. Standalone attic insulation projects frequently achieve high rates of return.

Beyond financial matters, attic insulation also creates a more comfortable and stable indoor climate. Attic insulation will buffer the interior from extreme temperature swings. This can help preserve the integrity of the home. In cold climates, attic insulation will limit the occurrence of ice dams, which form at the eaves when heat inside living spaces escapes to the roof. Ice dams can cause water to back up under shingles and even tear away gutters.

The U.S. Department of Energy indicates residential and commercial buildings combined account for 40 percent of the nation's total energy consumption. By utilizing attic insulation and creating a proper thermal barrier, homes can draw less

power from regional grids and burn less fuel locally.

Attic insulation may not be as glamorous as a room remodel, but it is an important component of a safe, comfortable and energy-efficient home.





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Energy bills vary

Did you know? Energy bills vary significantly depending on where a home is located, but data from the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) and Statistics Canada indicates that energy prices tend to rise in summer and winter, when people are more likely to rely on heating and cooling to keep their homes comfortable.

Sealing windows might

states in America. Statistics Canada notes energy prices rose by 19.2 percent between April 2025 and April 2026. As winter approaches, consumers may be increasingly concerned, as the EIA notes that energy rates tend to rise in summer and winter, when people are more likely to rely on heating and cooling to keep their homes comfortable.

Sealing windows might

help cut those costs, as the U.S. Department of Energy notes that heat gain and heat loss through inefficient windows may be responsible for as much as 30 percent of heating- and cooling-related energy consumption. By checking windows for leaks and fixing leaks before winter, consumers might save themselves a considerable amount of money.

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Why ventilation may be the most important feature in your home

(BPT) - When you're building a new home or remodeling your existing one, there's no shortage of choices you have to make. Most homeowners focus on visible features like kitchens, flooring and smart technology. But there's one system that matters just as much, and it's hidden behind your walls. That system is your home's ventilation.

Why does ventilation matter?

Think of your home's ventilation system as its lungs. It brings in fresh outdoor air and removes stale indoor air. Good ventilation means fresher air throughout your home, better moisture control, and fewer odors and indoor pollutants.

Every home needs proper ventilation. Whether you live in a cold northern region, a hot and humid southern state or anywhere in between, proper ventilation keeps your home comfortable, healthy and structurally sound.

Here's where traditional ventilation systems often fall short

Modern homes are designed to be super energy-efficient, which means they're sealed more carefully than ever before. The downside? That same seal that saves on your electric bill also traps stale air, humidity and cooking odors inside. Traditional ventilation systems work with a one-way approach. Some pull air out of your home and hope fresh air seeps in through cracks and gaps. Others push air in and hope stale air escapes the same way. Neither approach works well in today's airtight homes.

The result? Uneven comfort, excess moisture, condensation on windows, lingering cooking odors and a buildup of indoor pollutants from everyday activities like showering and cleaning. It gets worse. Exhaust-only systems can create negative pressure, allowing moisture

and contaminants to seep into your walls. Supply-only systems trap moisture inside, increasing the risk of mold and long-term damage to your roof, walls, foundation and insulation.

Why balanced ventilation with an ERV is the solution

Energy Recovery Ventilators (ERVs) continuously bring fresh outdoor air into the home while exhausting stale indoor air. And it does something traditional systems can't. It transfers heat and moisture between the incoming and outgoing air streams. As energy codes continue to evolve and builders construct tighter, more efficient homes, balanced ventilation is becoming an increasingly important part of residential design. So, how can you ensure your new home provides the ventilation you need for good indoor air quality, long-term home performance and year-round comfort in any

climate? The key is balanced ventilation powered by an energy recovery ventilation (ERV).

One example of a balanced ventilation solution is the Panasonic Balanced-Home® Elite+210, an energy recovery ventilator designed for modern single-family homes. The system delivers what modern single-family homes need by:

- * Helping maintain indoor comfort while reducing energy loss
- * Filtering incoming air to support healthier indoor environments
- * Allowing homeowners to monitor system performance
- * Offering installation flexibility for different home designs
- * Operating quietly in

living spaces
As homes become more energy-efficient and airtight, ventilation is no longer optional. It is essential for your family's comfort and long-term home performance. Homeowners who prioritize balanced ventilation can enjoy fresher indoor air, improved comfort and greater confidence that their home is performing as intended.

Prevent pest problems

Pests can be problematic for homeowners. Pests can be frightening, and an infestation can result in property damage if it is not discovered or treated promptly. According to Green Pest Management, termites can hollow out beams, beetles can tunnel through hardwood, and rodents can chew through wiring and insulation. It doesn't take long for damage to escalate. And homeowners may not know issues are building until problems have become visible.

To address pests effectively, both inside and outside of the home, homeowners should prioritize prevention and physical barriers first. Chemicals and professional pest treatment services may be necessary if initial efforts are not enough. Here are some strategies homeowners can try.

- Check the perimeter. Pests can enter a home through small gaps in the

foundation, as well as around windows and doors. Use silicone caulk around windows and stuff steel wool in gaps around plumbing pipes.

- Address moisture issues. Many insects are attracted to dampness. It's important to fix leaky faucets immediately and use a dehumidifier in basements or crawl spaces to make the environment less hospitable to pests.

- Manage crumbs and trash. Pests like an easy food source, so move dry goods into glass or sealed plastic containers. Clean up crumbs around the kitchen, empty catches in the sink drain readily, and be sure to take out the garbage before it gets full and malodorous; otherwise, you might be luring pests indoors.

- Create a buffer zone outside. Try not to plant vegetation too close to the home. While mulch is coveted for its use in landscaping, it can act as a highway for termites and ants. Gravel or bare dirt may

be better against the house.

- Eliminate standing water. Clear gutters and address low-lying areas of the landscape. Turlock Mosquito Abatement District says mosquitoes grow in standing water, and they can develop into biting mosquitoes in amounts of water as small as that needed to fill a bottle cap. Tip and toss out any water to prevent mosquito breeding.

- Use natural repellents. Peppermint oil might deter spiders and rodents near entry points. Diatomaceous earth is a fine powder made from fossilized, microscopic remains of hard-shelled aquatic organisms. While used primarily in some pool filtration systems, DE also can dehydrate insects with exoskeletons, like ants or roaches.

If pests become problematic and first-line treatments are not working, consult with a professional pest company to see what might be the answer.

Did you know fall is not a time to rest

Gardening enthusiasts recognize that fall is not a time to rest on their laurels. In fact, fall is a great season to spend time in the yard. The Center for Agriculture, Food and the Environment at the University of Massachusetts Amherst indicates fall is the ideal time to improve the soil for next season. Amending the soil in the fall allows it to react accordingly over time and reap the benefits in spring.

UMass suggests getting an accurate soil test to see what is needed in the garden. Samples should be taken from various areas. Avoid doing so when the soil is very wet. At-home kits can test for nitrogen, potassium and phosphorous and determine the soil's pH.

Gardeners should till the soil and add compost or manure, which will counteract many nutritional deficiencies. Worm castings also are good

to add, particularly for summer vegetable gardens. The gardening company Park Seed says that worm castings are high in minerals and effective at holding water — so much so that they even can be used alone in place of potting soil.

Crushed egg shells, coffee grounds and banana peels also can be added in the fall, even if they are not part of a compost pile. The nutrients will break down throughout the fall and winter, and be available just in time for summer plantings.



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A rundown on kitchen cabinet projects

Updated kitchens are in demand, and homeowners are not hesitating to open their wallets when renovating these popular spaces in their homes. According to a 2025 study from Houzz, the median spend on kitchen renovations rose to \$60,000 between 2024 and 2025.

Homeowners concerned about the high price tag of kitchen renovations should know they have some less expensive means to giving their kitchens a new look. Cabinet projects can dramatically alter how a kitchen looks and feels. This rundown of cabinet projects can help homeowners answer any questions they have about this unique and budget-friendly way to revitalize their kitchens.

- Refacing and replacing each merit consideration. Homeowners unfamiliar with cabinet projects may

not realize they have two very different options to consider. Refacing allows homeowners to transform the look and feel of a kitchen while keeping the existing cabinet structure in place. When refacing cabinets, new doors, drawer fronts and typically hardware are installed to replace the existing ones. When replacing cabinets, the existing cabinet structure is torn out and completely new units are installed. Replacing might be done when the structural integrity of the existing cabinets is questionable or when homeowners are not fond of the existing cabinet layout and decide to change it completely.

- Cabinet refacing or replacing projects will not cost nearly as much as a complete kitchen overhaul. The cost of any home renovation project is unique to each home. No two homes are the same,

and variables like layout and square footage will affect the price of most projects, including cabinet renovations. But homeowners should know that the average cost of cabinet refacing projects and replacement projects falls far short of the \$60,000 price tag of kitchen renovations noted by Houzz. According to Angi.com, refacing cabinets costs between \$900 and \$6,000 on average, while cabinet replacement projects can cost anywhere from \$2,000 to \$30,000. The wide ranges reflect the variables unique to each home. Homeowners are urged to contact a professional who specializes in cabinet refacing and replacement to get an accurate estimate of how much these projects will cost in their homes.

- Cabinets also can be repainted. If refacing or replacing cabinets also threatens to bust the budget, homeowners

can consider repainting or re-staining existing cabinets. This is a particularly cost-effective project because it gives the kitchen a new look but does not require homeowners to purchase new doors, drawers or hardware. This is a potentially good option for homeowners whose existing cabinets are structurally sound and painted but started to fade in regard to their color. It's also a potentially sound temporary option for homeowners who are hoping to do a full kitchen renovation at some point in the near future but looking for a less costly and temporary means to give their kitchens a fresh look.

Cabinet projects can create a different feel in the kitchen without requiring homeowners to make as sizable a financial investment as a full kitchen overhaul demands.



Contributed photo
The cost of any home renovation project is unique to each home. No two homes are the same, and variables like layout and square footage will affect the price of most projects, including cabinet renovations.

Exterior decorating safety tips

Decorating the exterior of a home for the holiday season is a beloved tradition in countless households. In the movie, "National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation," Clark Griswold had "250 strands of imported Italian twinkle lights," each with 100 bulbs per strand. His grand total of 25,000 lights caused a temporary blackout. While driving around to take in holiday lighting displays, many people may see some that emulate Clark Griswold's vision and be inspired to create their own designs.

Lights are just one type of home decoration. Wreaths, inflatables, metal or wooden structures and much more are part of holiday displays as well. While decorating can be fun and festive, it's also important to ensure that it is done safely. The following

tips, courtesy of Travelers Risk Consultants and Meyer Landscaping & Design, can keep family and friends safe during this wonderful time of year.

- Plan ahead. Determine how many electrical outlets you have and plan the display around the accessibility of those outlets. Be sure to calculate the maximum amount of wattage allowed so you do not overload the electrical system. Never exceed the maximum number of strings or devices that may be linked together. Lighting packaging should provide such information. Also, plug all outdoor lights and decorations into ground-fault circuit interrupters to reduce the risk of electric shock.
- Test the lights. Only purchase lights that have been tested for safety. Look for a

certification mark from UL, ETL, CSA, or another nationally recognized laboratory.

- Go with LED. Light emitting diode string lights run cooler, last longer and use less energy than incandescent lights.
- Inspect decorations. Make sure all the lights, electrical cords, lighted holiday decor and inflatables are in good condition before use. Dispose of anything that has frayed wiring or is broken.
- Use only outdoor-rated products. Be sure the extension cords and any other products are rated for the outdoors. Electrical connections should be kept clean and dry before plugging things in, and an extra step of wrapping plug connections with electrical tape can further reduce moisture.
- Practice ladder safety.

Ladders are often utilized when adding lights or other decor to homes. Always be safe on and around ladders. It's essential to maintain three points of contact while on the ladder. Don't risk leaning too hard to one side while on the ladder, and always have a spotter. Use wooden or fiberglass ladders when stringing electrical decor and lights, as metal ladders conduct electricity.

- Identify where power lines are located. Be mindful of power lines when decorating outdoors. Keep oneself and decorations at least 10 feet away from power lines.
- Skip staples and nails. Nails and staples should not be used when decorating. Nails and staples can puncture the protective layers of a home, allowing moisture to get in and break down the

structure of the home. A nail or staple also may accidentally puncture an electrical cord, increasing the risk of electrocution. Use hooks and other attachment devices specially designed for holiday decor.

- Avoid items that can contribute to roof damage. Heavy items on the roof can cause unnecessary stress to shingles and result in damage. Only use lightweight and

appropriately anchored items on the roof.

- Dress appropriately. Before hanging holiday decorations and lights, assess the conditions and wear the proper clothing for the weather. If the weather is especially rough, skip decorating for a safer day.

Decorating safety is of the utmost importance and should be a priority this holiday season.



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Tips to winterize a home as cold weather approaches

It's not uncommon to spend a lot of time out of the house when the weather outside is warm. The popularity of outdoor living spaces has made it easier than ever to enjoy nature without leaving home, which can generally be done from late spring to mid-fall each year in many regions. But as fall creeps toward winter and temperatures drop, it's time to head back indoors.

As millions prepare to go back inside with winter approaching, it can be beneficial to winterize a home so interior spaces are more comfortable and exterior spaces are better able to withstand potentially harsh winter weather.

Check your carbon monoxide (CO) detectors. Fall is a great season to open the windows in many regions that feature prototypical autumn air. But the crisp air of fall will eventually give way to much colder air, at which time the windows will be closed and likely remain shut for months to come. When windows remain closed for long periods of time, such as in winter, the buildup of CO, which can come from sources like water heaters, gas stoves, fireplaces and clothes dryers, can poison residents over time. CO detectors are a safety net against such a fate, but they must be operating at peak capacity in order to be effective. As fall winds down, check all CO detectors to make sure they're working properly and replace any that are not.

Check for drafts. Check around windows and doors

throughout the home to see if there are any gaps that are allowing air from outside to enter the home. If daytime temperatures are mild well into the fall, then it can be difficult to see if there are any drafts before the sun goes down. Conduct this check in the evenings when temperatures are a little more chilly and leaks are easier to detect. If drafts are detected, apply weather stripping around doors and windows that do not require replacement. If there's drafts around aging windows and doors, consider replacing them.

Call a chimney sweeping service. Cozying up beside a fire can make anyone forget the cold weather outside. But fireplaces should be subjected to a thorough cleaning by a skilled professional before each winter. Animals might have nested in the chimney since the fireplace was last used, and you will want any nests cleared prior to lighting your first fire of the season. In addition, the tar-like substance creosote, which forms when wood is burned in a fireplace, can build up and harden over time. That's a dangerous prospect, as creosote is highly flammable, which can lead to chimney fires. Creosote also can block the flow of air through a chimney, and that can trap gasses, including CO, in a home.

Reverse your fans. It's a simple step but one people may not even realize they can make. In homes with ceiling fans, residents can reverse the fans so the blades spin clockwise. This simple step pushes

trapped warm air hovering around the ceiling into the living space below. This can make home interiors warmer without requiring residents to turn up the thermostat and increase their energy bill.

Replace your HVAC air filter. Replacing the air filter on an HVAC prior to winter can make the unit operate more efficiently, which can help reduce the wintertime energy bill. Replacing the filter

prior to winter also improves indoor air quality, which is a notable benefit during a time of year when the windows typically remain closed for months.

Winterizing a home is not a significant undertaking, but it can be very effective at making homes healthier and more comfortable once windows are closed for the season.2026



Contributed photo
Reversing ceiling fans in winter can help redirect warm air from the ceiling into living spaces below.

Remedies for creaky floors

Hardwood floors are coveted features in many homes. The National Wood Flooring Association says wood floors are the most environmentally friendly flooring options available. In the United States, the hardwood forests that provide flooring products are growing twice as fast as they are being harvested. Furthermore, wood floors can last for many generations and require fewer raw materials to produce than other flooring options. That means less waste may end up in landfills.

Hardwood floors can endure for decades in a home, but over time, those same floors may need some tender loving care to keep them looking good and working as they should. Squeaky floors are a common nuisance that homeowners may experience. Squeaking is often caused by movement and friction between floorboards. Treating the problem involves identifying the underlying issue.

Loose hardware

Squeaky floors may be due to the loosening of the hardware holding the floor in place, says The Home Depot. When nails or screws no longer are secured tightly, the boards can rub together. The noise heard is the sound produced by rubbing. Tightening or replacing the hardware can help reduce the squeaking.

Counter-snap kit method

This Old House says this kit method is a great way to fix squeaks without

damaging the floor. Once the source of the squeak is located, drill a 3/32-inch pilot hole through the hardwood flooring. Then insert a screw through the kit's depth-control fixture and into the pilot hole, and drive it until it automatically snaps off below the wood surface. Follow this up by filling the hole with wood putty that matches the floor color. Once the putty is dry, lightly sand the area to blend.

Use a shim or shims

Sometimes the floor may squeak because of a gap between the joists and the subfloor. Filling the gap with a small piece of wood called a shim can help alleviate the gap or gaps.

Drive up screws

If a squeak is just in one spot, The Home Depot says that you may be able to drive short screws from below into the subfloor.

Small gaps

For small gaps between boards, sprinkle talcum powder or powdered graphite between squeaky boards to reduce friction. Wood filler applied with a putty knife also may work. For larger gaps, use a liquid filler designed for wood floors.

Homeowners also can visit their local home improvement center for other hardware solutions designed for underfloor repairs to remedy squeaks. Many work from underneath the floor and involve mounting plates or brackets to sure up the floor.

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The benefits of a fall roof replacement

A roof is a vital component of a home that protects the structure from the elements and ensures that sun, rain, wind, and snow do not compromise the integrity of interior spaces. Peak Performance Roofing says the average asphalt shingle roof found on many homes lasts between 15 and 30 years. Alternative roofing materials, such as metal or clay tiles, can last much longer.

Homeowners who stay in a home for many years will likely need to replace a roof at some point. Choosing when to replace the roof may come down to selecting the right season. Experts typically consider fall the prime time to upgrade a roof for a variety of reasons.

- Moderate temperatures: Fall weather tends to be comfortable in many regions of the country. Fall temperatures are better suited for roofing and allow materials to work the best. When temperatures are too hot, shingles can become soft and prone to scuffing, while cold temperatures can make materials brittle and difficult to seal.

- Comfort for workers: The same moderate conditions can make it easier for roofing contractors to get the work done. It can be extremely hot on a roof during summer, necessitating frequent breaks for workers. Winter weather conditions are not ideal for working on a roof, with snow and ice making things slippery. Fall weather

can help workers feel more comfortable.

- Avoid the rush: Spring and early summer are peak seasons for roofing contractors due to post-winter repairs. Homeowners may experience shorter wait times, better pricing and flexible scheduling if they opt for a fall roof replacement.

- Prepare for winter: Getting a roof in the fall means

having a new and functional barrier against winter storms that can be hard on old roofs. It also means the roof will be ready for rainy, spring weather.

Fall is an ideal time to replace a roof for many reasons. Homeowners can use the summer to vet various roofing contractors and come up with a package that fits their schedules and budgets.



Contributed photo

Fall is an ideal time to replace a roof for many reasons. Fall temperatures are better suited for roofing and allow materials to work the best. When temperatures are too hot, shingles can become soft and prone to scuffing.

When to consider duct cleaning

Homeowners know that maintenance is vital to protecting their home and their investment in it. A well-maintained home is both a point of pride and a sound investment.

Home maintenance can improve the look of a home, and such efforts also may help to make spaces healthier for residents and guests. Duct cleaning is a home maintenance task that homeowners look to with the intention of making interior spaces healthier. The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) notes that duct cleaning has never been shown to prevent health problems, but the EPA nonetheless advises homeowners to consider duct cleaning if certain conditions are present.

- Mold growth: The EPA notes a duct cleaning may be necessary if there is substantial and visible mold growth inside hard surface ducts or on other components of a heating and cooling system. Mold growth can be difficult to confirm, as much of the heating and cooling system will not be visible. If an HVAC technician reports the presence of mold, ask that a sample be analyzed at a lab, which the EPA notes is the only way to confirm the presence of mold. The EPA estimates the cost to analyze a sample is roughly \$50.

- Presence of vermin: Rodents and insects in the ducts are a notable problem that

needs to be remedied. A duct cleaning should be a component of vermin remediation, as rodents can leave feces in ducts, which may look like small brown pellets.

- Dust and debris accumulation: The EPA notes that dust and debris that accumulates in the ducts can clog them. This also can lead to dust, debris and particles being released into the home

through the vents.

Duct cleaning can be part of the solution when homeowners are confronting certain conditions, including mold growth, vermin infestation and excessive accumulation of dirt and debris. But the EPA notes it's important that the underlying cause is addressed to prevent future issues.



Contributed photo

Duct cleaning can be part of the solution when homeowners are confronting certain conditions, including mold growth, vermin infestation and excessive accumulation of dirt and debris.



Why it pays to drain and shut off outdoor faucets each fall

Fall is a great time for homeowners to prioritize exterior maintenance around their properties. Doing so can make exterior areas less vulnerable to potentially harsh winter weather, but some projects also can prevent damage to a home and its hidden components as well.

Conventional wisdom notes the importance of shutting off outdoor faucets before temperatures drop below freezing. According to the Illinois-based Citizens Utility Board, this strategy is designed to prevent pipes from freezing over the winter. Pipes that freeze can eventually burst, which could lead to a host of harmful and costly side effects.

Fall is a great time to drain and shut off outdoor faucets because temperatures in many regions are still above freezing when late fall gives way to winter, and grasses and plants typically are not still being watered in late fall. In areas where winter tends to arrive in November as opposed to

the third week of December, it can be beneficial to drain and turn off outdoor faucets in mid-fall, if not earlier.

When turning off outdoor

faucets for the winter, be sure to remove any hoses or faucet connections. In addition, turn off the outdoor water supply valve. Homes with more than one outdoor faucet will likely have more than one supply valve, so be sure to turn each one off. Though supply valves theoretically can be anywhere in a home, they tend to be in a basement, crawl space, first-floor laundry room (look near a slop sink if your home has one), or even a garage. Once all outdoor supply valves are turned off, go outside and turn

each faucet on at full blast. Let all the water out until it comes to a stop.

Homeowners who forget to do this before the mercury drops below 32°F can rest assured that pipes will not necessarily freeze even if temperatures are below

freezing. American Family Insurance® notes that pipes that are not insulated typically will not freeze until temperatures reach 20°F and remain at that point or below for a few hours. However, it's

still best to make turning off outdoor faucets part of your fall home maintenance routine so you don't forget this important and simple task until it's too late.



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The basics of window replacement projects

Windows in a home are easily taken for granted. Even though residents look through their windows every day, it's only when issues arise that people tend to give the windows much thought.

Even if windows may not be foremost on the minds of homeowners, they are a notable component of every home. New windows also can be an expensive addition to a home, so it benefits all homeowners to gain an understanding of window replacement projects before they start shopping around for new windows.

• Windows are more complex than new homeowners may realize. Homeowners will need to choose between three commonly available window materials when picking new windows for their homes. Vinyl windows typically are the most afford-

able option, and opinions vary considerably regarding these products. Some tout their resistance to moisture, but others feel they lack the aesthetic appeal of costlier alternatives like fiberglass. Vinyl windows also can't be painted, which some homeowners may find problematic. Fiberglass windows can be painted and are known for their strength and durability. Aluminum windows are strong and durable as well, but they may not provide as much thermal protection as some other options. Each window type has its own unique pros and cons, and homeowners are urged to do their homework to determine the best fit for them.

• Consider variables unique to your home. Climate is an important consideration when choosing windows, and that of course is unique to each homeowner. How hot or

cold the local climate can be will affect how well windows insulate a home, so a window that's best for one particular region may not be ideal for another. Homeowners are urged to investigate which window materials are best suited to their local climates. All windows protect against the elements, but some might provide more adequate insulation, which can help keep utility bills low and everyone inside a home more comfortable.

• Homeowners may need to decide between replacement windows or new construction windows. The window experts at Pella note that new construction windows are the primary option for newly constructed homes or room additions. Replacement windows are typically installed when homeowners need new windows but do not

want or need to remove existing exterior cladding or trim. Replacement windows tend to be considerably less expensive than new construction windows, but the latter option merits consideration before making a final decision.

• It can be budget-friendly to replace more than one window at a time. Some, though not all, window installation

companies charge a non-negotiable project fee, so it can be more financially savvy to replace more than one window at a time. Replacing windows piecemeal may require homeowners to pay the project fee for each installation, whereas homeowners who replace multiple windows at the same time will only incur that fee once. If homeowners

know many windows in their home are in need of replacement, it can be financially advantageous to replace all that need it at once rather than breaking the project up and paying multiple project fees.

Window replacement projects require careful consideration so homeowners identify the best products for their home.

Tricks to trim your utility bill

Families need to eat and many professionals now must return to in-person work after years of pandemic-related remote working, which means they must confront higher fuel costs. That leaves little room to save money in those areas. However, there are ways for families to reduce home energy costs without adversely affecting their quality of life.

• Run appliances during off-peak hours. According to the United States Department of Energy and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the best time to use appliances in a home is when overall electricity use is low. Though this time changes depending on the season and can vary based on geography, the DOE and the EPA both note that after 9 p.m. and before 9 a.m. are generally the off-peak hours in most areas.

• Strategically use your

shades and blinds. It's estimated about 40 percent of unwanted heat comes through windows. Strategic use of curtains, shades and blinds can keep heat out on hot days, thus allowing homeowners to turn the thermostat up on their air conditioning units in summer. Opening curtains, blinds and shades on winter mornings and afternoons will allow more sunlight in, allowing homeowners to control heating costs more effectively.

• Reorganize your refrigerator. There are plenty of contradictory strategies regarding how best to store foods in a refrigerator so the unit consumes as little energy as possible while still keeping foods fresh and chilled. But various energy providers recommend consumers avoid packing a fridge too tightly. By allowing cold air to circulate within the refrigerator, the refrigerator won't need to

work as hard, and thus consume as much energy, to keep foods cool. It's important to note that the opposite should govern how the freezer is packed. Packing frozen items tightly in the freezer will help the refrigerator work a little less hard.

• Turn off the lights. Estimates from the U.S. Energy Information Administration indicate that electricity for lighting accounts for around 10 percent of electricity consumption in homes. A concerted effort to turn off lights in rooms that aren't being used can help consumers save money.

Rising utility bills are compelling millions of people to seek ways to trim their energy consumption. Thankfully, there are many ways to do that without upsetting daily routines.



Contributed photo

Window replacement projects require careful consideration so homeowners identify the best products for their home.

Did you know?

Professionals might be returning to work in offices after years of pandemic-related remote work, but that doesn't mean home buyers aren't still prioritizing home office space when shopping for a new place to call their own. According to a recent survey of home buyers conducted by the National Association of Home Builders, 66 percent would prefer to buy a home

with exactly one home office space and 13 percent want at least two offices. Just one in five buyers indicated they do not want any home office space. The majority of buyers who want home office space prefer a medium-sized space, which the NAHB defined as between 100 and 150 square feet. Just 22 percent of buyers prefer a home office space larger than 150 square feet,

while only 19 percent want a small space (less than 100 square feet). The NAHB survey indicates the enduring popularity of home office spaces, recognition of which can be particularly useful for current homeowners preparing to put their homes on the market as well as those looking to add office space.

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Reasons to insulate water pipes

Homeowners want to do everything they can to protect their investment, and that includes both renovating a property to reflect recent trends and keeping up with routine maintenance to ensure a home does not fall into a state of disrepair.

Anticipating potential issues and planning for them is part of maintaining a home. Such anticipation is an acquired skill, but homeowners can use the experience of others to identify ways to prevent home-related issues before they arise.

One issue homeowners may want to plan for is frozen pipes. The winter of 2025-2026 was notably cold. According to AccuWeather, the La Niña weather pattern was a driving force behind a particularly cold winter in various parts of the United States, including the northeast, midwest and mid-Atlantic regions. Temperatures in those regions were 10° to 15° F below normal, which AccuWeather notes laid the foundation for the most severe and frigid winter in nearly a decade.

The extreme cold that characterized the winter of 2025-2026 forced some homeowners to confront issues they had not anticipated, including frozen pipes. Pipe insulation is an important part of home maintenance that some homeowners may not have been aware of as recently as early 2026, but the following are some notable reasons to add this to your home-related to-do list before winter returns.

• **Insulation prevents pipes from freezing.** Frozen water inside pipes can start what's essentially a chain reaction that can cause pipes to expand. When pipes expand, the resulting pressure can cause them to burst. By insulating pipes, homeowners can prevent them from freezing. Insulating pipes that are already behind a wall is not a simple job, so it's best left to

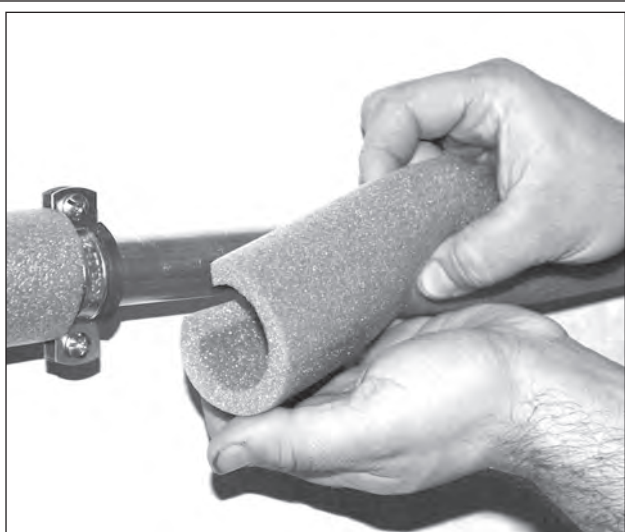
a professional. But pipes that are along exterior walls should be insulated to ensure they do not freeze when temperatures drop and remain low. Pipes in attics, basements and crawl spaces may be exposed, and homeowners may be able to insulate these on their own, though novices might still want to leave this important job to a professional.

• **Insulating pipes can save you money.** The United States Department of Energy (DOE) reports that insulating hot water pipes is a notable way to save energy and money. According to the DOE, insulating water pipes reduces heat loss and can raise water temperature by as much as 2° to 4° F. That allows homeowners to lower the temperature setting on their water heaters, which saves money. Insulating pipes also reduces the time it takes for water to warm up when turning on a faucet or shower, which in turn leads to less water consumption and lower water bills.

• **Insulation can reduce the risk of mold growth.** Winter is not the only time of year it pays to have insulated

pipes. According to the insulation experts at Aeroflex®, pipes are subject to mold growth. That can happen when pipes sweat in humid climates (think of a water bottle left out in the hot sun). The resulting condensation from sweating pipes can drip and lead to the growth of mold in surrounding areas, including within the walls. Mold growth in a home has been linked to various negative health outcomes, including respiratory issues. But insulation prevents the condensation that can lead to mold growth.

• **Insulation is inexpensive.** Homeowners who have grown accustomed to costly repairs and renovations should know that insulating pipes, particularly exposed pipes, is an inexpensive project. While it will cost more to insulate pipes within walls due to the extra work required to access such areas and address them once insulation has been installed, insulating those pipes, especially if they're along exterior walls, can greatly reduce the risk for potentially costly damage down the road.



Contributed photo
Insulating pipes is a worthwhile undertaking for all homeowners and can be particularly beneficial for those who live in areas with extreme weather in winter and summer.

Features that can redefine a living room

As homeowners seek to refresh their living spaces, they can consider these features to redefine their living rooms.

• **Fireplace:** A wood-burning fireplace is undeniably a game changer when looking to redefine a living space. But such a project could be a significant undertaking in a home that does not already feature a wood-burning fireplace. Homeowners who want to add a wood-burning fireplace can reinvent a living room, but they will likely need to adhere to building codes, secure permits and even consult with an engineer to ensure such an addition does not affect the structural integrity of the home. A gas-powered fireplace is a less demanding project, but will also require some extra work if homeowners need to connect a gas line where no such line currently exists. A plug-in electric fireplace can create a new ambiance and will not require as much time, effort and money as the alternatives.

• **Coffered ceiling:** A coffered ceiling can immediately redefine the impression people get of a living space. Coffered ceilings feature a series of rectangular, square or octagonal grids that are typically accentuated by molding. Coffered ceilings provide a luxurious and even historic aesthetic, making them an ideal addition for homeowners looking to redefine an existing space.

• **Windows:** New windows are another option when homeowners are hoping to redefine a living room. Modern windows are energy-efficient, so replacing aging windows may help homeowners combat rising energy costs. If a yard is a notable feature of a home's exterior, new windows that accentuate the view from a living space can quickly redefine how residents and guests see the room. Permits may be necessary if you're expanding existing windows, but that can be worth it if you're able to design the space around the view. All that extra natural light also may reinvent the feeling people get upon entering the space.

• **Wallpaper:** Interior design specialists note that wallpaper is making a comeback. Wallpaper can be used to draw attention to a wall in much the same way bold colors are chosen for accent walls. Wallpaper on an accent wall can feature a bold pattern or a strong color to add a sense of personality to a room that might be lacking if the walls are currently painted in neutral colors.

Homeowners can consider any number of features when looking to give their living spaces a fresh look.



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Recognize the signs it’s time to replace gutters

Home improvement projects run the gamut from complex undertakings like room additions to simpler renovations like a new front door. Some home renovations excite homeowners more than others, but all improvements are a way to make a home safer, more comfortable and/or more functional.

A gutter replacement might not inspire the same level of excitement as a room addition or an overhaul of an outdoor living space, but new gutters can help to prevent roof damage and make properties safer by ensuring rain water is directed away from walkways. Homeowners who suspect it might be time for a

gutter replacement can look for these signs of fading gutters.

- Cracks or splits: Cracks or splits at the seams of the gutters where two pieces connect is a telltale sign they need to be replaced. Cracks or splits are can slowly lead to separation of gutter pieces, which will lead to leaks. But not all cracks or splits are found at the seams. In fact, some homes feature seamless gutters, which also can crack or split. Regardless of where they’re found, cracks or splits are a warning signs of fading gutters.
- Rust: Rust is rarely a good sign whether you’re looking at a vehicle or even

garden tools. Rust also is a bad sign in relation to gutters. Gutters are painted, and not only for aesthetic purposes. Paint on gutter also serves to protect them from water. When paint begins to flake, gutters will begin to rust and may even produce noticeable rust flakes on the ground below. Rust on gutters and rust flakes beneath them are indicative of gutters that need to be replaced.

- Gutters pulling away from the home: Gutters that appear to be pulling away from the home is a sign that they need to be replaced. Gutters are fastened to a home during installation, which ensures they can withstand

rain and water. Over time, those fasteners can wear down, ultimately leading to gutters that appear to be pulling away from the home. Though gutters can be refastened, eventually they will need to be replaced.

- Pooling water: Pooling water in a gutter may just be a sign that gutters need to be cleaned. However, pooling water on the ground directly beneath gutters indicates

they’re not effectively directing water away from the home.

- Water damage inside: A home’s interior might not be the first place homeowners look when inspecting for damaged gutters, but a flooded basement or crawl space could indicate a gutter problem. Gutters and downspouts are designed to direct water away from a home when functioning properly.

When that isn’t happening, water can pool beneath the foundation, leading to pooling water and other water damage in basements and crawl spaces.

Gutter replacement projects may not be exciting, but new gutters can make a home safer and prolong the life of a roof and other features on a property.

Five signs a washing machine needs repair (or replacement)

Washing machines may be the unsung heroes of many households. People rely on them on a daily basis and take for granted that they will keep laundry clean. Only when a washing machine is not operating properly might a homeowner devote more attention to this important appliance.

People should keep an eye out for signs that a washing machine is not operating optimally and may be in need of repair, even though, as Consumer Reports notes, broken washers are few and far between. According to their most recent member survey, only 14 percent of washers broke between the second and fifth years of ownership.

The following are some common washing machine problems that can indicate a repair is on the horizon.

Leaking water: If you find puddles or slow drips beneath or around the machine, a repair may be needed. Torn door seals, loose hose connections a cracked internal drum or a failing drain pump all can contribute to leaking water, says Mr. Appliance.

Control panel failures: A repair is necessary if the machine won’t turn on or if the control panel is

unresponsive.

Water doesn’t drain: Clothes that are soaking wet at the end of a cycle or a drum that still has water in it is cause for concern. It could be something simple like a coin trapped somewhere, but it also might be something more troubling like a failing drain pump.

Vibrating or “walking”: Mr. Appliance says if the washing machine shakes violently or shifts position, it could mean the machine is unbalanced or the internal suspension rods and springs are broken or worn out.

Loud noises: Any time the washing machine is making a noise that is out of the ordinary is a cause for concern and warrants an inspection.

Some homeowners may wonder if they should

repair or replace a washer. Consumer Reports says an older washer with a lot of wear and tear may be better off replaced. However, if the machine is relatively young and expensive, a repair may be the better financial choice. Always check to see if the washing machine is still covered by the manufacturer’s warranty before calling a repair person. Most washer warranties last one year, though Speed Queen brand offers warranties of up to seven years on some models.

Washing machines in disrepair can be challenging because laundry will quickly pile up if a breakdown occurs. Homeowners can learn to spot the signs a washing machine needs to be repaired or replaced.



Contributed photo
Gutter replacement projects may not be exciting, but new gutters can make a home safer and prolong the life of a roof and other features on a property. Gutters that appear to be pulling away from the home is a sign they need to be replaced.





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Tips for winterizing exterior living areas

When the summer entertaining season draws to a close, homeowners need to ensure their outdoor living areas can handle weather that's right around the corner. Although outdoor furniture and other items tend to be durable, the impact snow, wind and ice can have on them may lead to damage over time. That is why many homeowners take steps to winterize their outdoor spaces and protect their belongings. Here's a look at how to prepare for the winter to come.

- Furniture: Cover or store furniture to protect it from the elements. Covering it with weather-proof covers can be adequate if storing items indoors is not possible.
- Deep clean: Items that will be covered or stored should be thoroughly cleaned prior to being removed from spaces for the season. Lingering dirt and moisture can

cause damage.

- Insulate and drain: Don't risk damage to pipes, which can freeze and crack in the cold. Shut off the water supply to exterior faucets and drain water lines to prevent pipes from freezing and bursting. Use foam pipe insulation to prevent freezing and cover any exposed pipes.
- Apply mulch: After cleaning up garden debris, think about applying mulch to garden beds and cover tender plants to protect them from the weather.
- Check gutters: Be sure that gutters and downspouts are clear of leaves and any additional debris. If gutters and downspouts are not cleaned, ice dams may form on the roof and cause water damage.
- Inspect and repair: Inspect walkways and driveways for any damage and make repairs now so water will not seep in and cause fur-

ther issues with freeze-thaw cycles. Consider applying a sealant to protect surfaces from snow and ice.

- Pools and spas: It's essential to follow the industry or manufacturer recommendations for closing down swimming pools and spas for the season. While covers may not be essential in all climates, covering can help prevent leaves and other debris from getting in the water. Water should be expelled from pipes and tubing to prevent freezing and bursting. If space allows, consider moving the pool pump indoors to prolong its longevity. Turn off the electricity to the outlet where the filter is plugged in.

There may be additional, region-specific steps to winterize a property, but these pointers are a good starting point to protect outdoor spaces.



Contributed photo
Many homeowners take steps to winterize their outdoor spaces and protect their belongings.

Mow to the right height for a stronger, healthier lawn

(StatePoint) How short to mow is a commonly debated topic, and getting it right is not only tricky, but critical to a healthy lawn.

"The goal is to find the right height for the turf type. Mowing too low can over-expose your lawn to the sun, weakening the roots and creating the potential for a weed infestation; and mowing too high runs the risk of excess moisture build-up, creating a welcoming environment for pests and disease," says Exmark marketing manager,

Lenny Mangnall. "On the other hand, grass mowed to the right height can most effectively leverage vital sunlight, rain and nutrients for deeper, denser, stronger and healthier blades."

A video that Exmark made to demystify lawn care explains that to strike the right balance, you should follow the golden rule of mowing: Never cut off more than one-third of the blade at a time, even if your lawn is overgrown. While you may feel like you're saving time,

overzealous mowing is doing your lawn a disservice. Gradually lowering your blades to the desired height will help maintain a strong root system and lush yard canopy.

Another consideration is grass type, with warm-season grasses and cool-season grasses falling into two mowing height ranges.

For warm-season grasses, like Zosia and Bermuda, drop the deck height of your mower close to its lowest setting, between 1-2 inches

high. These grasses thrive in scorching summer sun and can handle a lower height. If you have cool-season grass, like Fescue or Kentucky Bluegrass, cut it a little bit higher, between 2.5-4 inches. These grasses are built for freezing winters and need some height as protection from the elements.

It's also important to remember that over the course of a year, the height you mow to within the recommended range of your grass type will change. Once springtime

rolls around, lower your deck height by a half inch from your normal summer height. This encourages new growth.

During summer, mow on the higher end of your grass type's specified range. Taller grass provides shade to the soil, helping it retain the moisture needed to stay healthy and cool.

In fall, continue your normal summer routine, especially if you have warm-season grass. If you have a cool-season lawn, you might have to up your mowing

frequency, as it's this grass type's prime growing season.

For the last mowing session of the year, drop your mowing height by half an inch again. That brings you up to winter, the perfect season for you and your lawn to rest. With most grasses going dormant in winter, mowing isn't typically necessary. So, take that time to do other activities and tasks you enjoy in the yard. For warmer climates, you can continue to mow, just cut down on the frequency to ensure a healthier lawn.



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How to redecorate your home using the latest design trends

(BPT) - Ready for a home refresh, but not in the market for a pricey reno? You can transform your most lived-in spaces by leaning into trends making a splash in 2026. Whether you want to change the look of your living room, bedroom or any other area of your home, explore ways to use personalization, rich color and texture to bring new life to your spaces.

One of the biggest trends of the year is turning away from minimalism and toward a space that tells your story. You can create a personalized space by curating specific items that are meaningful to you, using them as inspiration for the rest of your decor.

An heirloom rug, piece of art or furniture, some special item you collected while traveling or any of your own treasures can become the room's focal point, using the colors, feeling or time period conjured by the piece to help you design the entire space.

Use a photo of your cherished item to create a digital or analog "mood board." Put that photo in the center of the board, then gather colors, textures and other photos that inspire the vibe you're going for. This process can help you make choices about paint colors, window treatments and furnishings you may want to add to the space, and what you want to remove.

Pro tip: Have a collection of special items? Put it proudly on display. Invest in a special case, shelving and lighting to show your treasures at their best.

Dive into rich earthy tones. Don't be afraid to experiment with color. You can get paint swatches, stickers or small samples of paint to try out in a room first, to see what you really like. Remember to view the paint color after it's completely dry and at different times of day.

Trending colors include earth tones like deep olive or plum, terracotta, rust or chocolate brown, which can be beautifully contrasted with warm neutrals such as taupe, cream and camel.

Color drenching is on-trend, which means painting all of a room one color - including the trim, doors and millwork. You can even include the ceiling. By eliminating the contrast you get with white trim, for example, color drenching creates drama and a strong sense of cohesion in a room.

Wallpaper has also made a serious comeback, so you may want to check out some of the latest designs, patterns and colors that can really transform a room. Don't want to wallpaper a whole wall? Consider using wallpaper in small areas, like behind open shelves or in framed panels using decorative molding. You can also add wainscoting or a chair rail and only use wallpaper above (or even below) the rail.

Pro tip: One surprising new trend is using wallpaper on the "fifth wall" - in other words, the ceiling. Wallpapered ceilings can create a great effect for any room,

especially small spaces, as it draws the eye upward. Consider using the technique in a space where you have a striking light fixture or chandelier you want to showcase.

Sink into texture. Creating a warm, comfy vibe in any space is easy if you choose textures that you want to run your fingers through. Make your whole room more cozy by opting for furniture with soft, sculptural shapes, and using natural materials such as wood, cotton, wool and linen. Textural variety is also on-trend with wallpaper choices like grass cloth and sisal, papers with fluted or ribbed effects, faux plaster and even woven fabrics.

Mixing different textures, including mixed metals for hardware, is a continuing trend this year, helping to contribute to the sensory-rich atmosphere that seems to be what everyone's craving in today's home design.

Pro tip: Maximize visual interest by mixing and matching everything from matte black and brushed nickel to silver and bronze for your faucets, cabinet pulls and more.

Whichever options you choose to create your own unique atmosphere at home, enjoy the process of discovering what you like best, and don't be afraid to let your own personality shine through. Personal expression, variety and comfort are the guiding principles of the latest trends in home decor.



Contributed photo

Color drenching is on-trend, which means painting all of a room one color - including the trim, doors and millwork. Color drenching creates drama and a strong sense of cohesion in a room.

Did you know?

Predicting mortgage rates is no small task and involves consideration of a wide range of variables, some of which are impossible to anticipate. For example, Yahoo! Finance notes that mortgage rates became volatile upon the beginning of the conflict in Iran in late winter 2026, and that volatility continued throughout the spring. That volatility came after years of high mortgage interest rates, which the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau notes had dipped to 2.65 percent in January 2021 but rose to 7.79 percent in October 2023. All that volatility may have some in the market for a new home wondering if rates are due to drop. Near the end of spring 2026, mortgage interest rates hovered around 6.5 percent for a 30-year fixed rate mortgage, according to data from the lender FreddieMac. Mortgage interest rates are key variables for potential buyers to consider, and Yahoo! Finance projects that interest rates will remain around 6 percent for years to come but steadily decline between 2026 and 2030, by which time the forecasted rates are 5.7 percent. While those rates are always affected by both predictable and unpredictable variables, a dip in interest rates over the next half decade could benefit buyers.

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Choosing the best foods for backyard birds

Feeding wild birds can be a popular and rewarding hobby. Such a hobby facilitates a connection with nature and helps to ensure local wildlife gets the sustenance it needs to survive.

According to estimates from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, around 50 million Americans engage in bird feeding each year. When feeding birds, it's important to choose quality foods to ensure health and survival, particularly during months when the weather is harsh. Here are some factors to consider when setting out food for birds.

Choose wisely

When selecting bird feed, homeowners should look for feed that is high in fat and protein. Black oil sunflower

seeds (BOSS) are a popular choice because they offer high caloric value and are easily opened by the greatest variety of species. The Cornell Lab of Ornithology reports that BOSS, which are small, thin-shelled seeds, attract more than 40 types of North American birds, making it the most universally accepted food. For smaller birds, like goldfinches and pine siskins, nyjer (thistle) seed is an ideal choice.

Offer essential fats

It's key for birds in colder climates to maintain significant fat reserves to achieve the correct body temperature. Suet cakes, which are rendered beef fat mixed with seeds or fruit, can be the meal birds need. Suet provides es-

sential calories for birds like woodpeckers, nuthatches and chickadees when insects are scarce. Homeowners should choose commercially produced suet cakes or raw suet, as homemade varieties made from cooking grease might melt and mat birds' feathers, affecting their insulation. Shelled peanuts and crushed nut meats, which are the kernel of nuts, can offer high-energy fats for titmice and jays.

Avoid certain foods

Although we've all seen people casting bread out to wild birds, bread products are particularly discouraged as bird food. They fill birds' stomachs without providing necessary nutrients. Table scraps containing excessive salt or sugar also should be

avoided.

Maintain avian hygiene

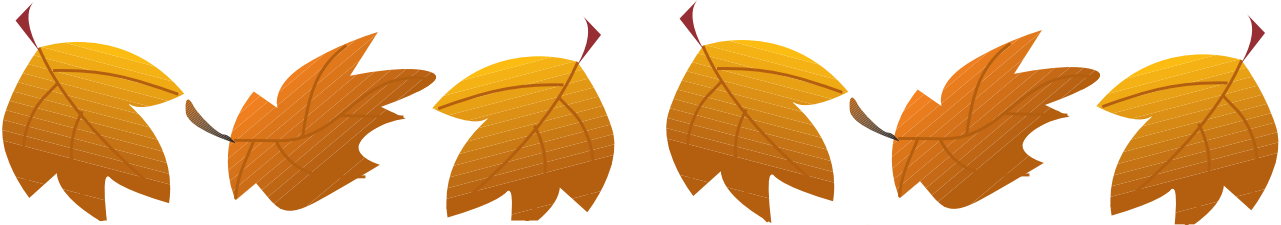
Bird feeders can concentrate flocks, which can be fun to watch. But it also increases the risk of disease transmission among birds. The Audubon Society and similar conservation groups emphasize that studies show poor feeder hygiene can increase rates of disease like salmonellosis. Feeders should be cleaned weekly with a mild bleach solution (one part bleach to nine parts water) and completely dried before refilling. Hosing off the area to wash away bird droppings also can keep feeders and surrounding areas sanitary.

Choosing nutrient-dense, high-quality seeds and fats and maintaining a clean feed-

ing station can ensure that a backyard remains a haven for wild birds. Those with additional questions about what to feed birds should consult with a wild bird food retailer.



Contributed photo
When feeding birds, it's important to choose quality foods to ensure health and survival, particularly during months when the weather is harsh.



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How to tell bees, hornets and wasps apart

People who spend any measurable amount of time outdoors likely have crossed paths with various flying insects that cohabitate in a typical yard. Some of the most ardent pollinators and pest control agents also have the potential to be dangerous if provoked. While most bees, wasps and hornets are content to go about their business, their stingers can make these insects formidable foes, particularly to those who are allergic.

According to The Best Bees Company, there are more than 20,000 known species of bees and more than 100,000 known species of wasps worldwide. Those who don't want to get too up close and personal with stinging insects may not know how to tell the different types apart. Bees, wasps and hornets are distinguished by their behavior, waist and body texture.

Bees

If it has a fuzzy body, it's

a bee. Bees tend to be non-aggressive and may be carrying pollen on their backs. They also live in wax hives. You'll likely see bees flitting from one flower to another in the warmer weather. Honeybees will die after one sting, advises PBS, but bumblebees and carpenter bees have smooth stingers that will not get stuck, enabling them to sting again.

Wasps

Wasps are stinging insects which can be social or

solitary. Wasps have smooth, shiny bodies and narrow waists. They can be bright black and yellow or black and white. Wasps can sting repeatedly, says The Spruce, but they may not always be aggressive; it depends on the species. Yellowjackets are a type of wasp. They are sensitive to threats and not afraid to use their stingers. Another way to distinguish wasps from bees is that wasps hang their legs down while flying and bees keep them tucked

in.

Hornets

Hornets are wasps and tend to be social in nature. They only construct paper nests and can be more aggressive than other types of wasps. The Old Farmer's Almanac says hornets can be highly defensive with more painful stings, and also may be larger and rounder in size than other wasps. In the United States, the one true hornet species is the European hornet, which nest in trees.

It's impossible to avoid bees and wasps entirely, but individuals can be mindful of where they are making their nests. As these insects are important to the ecosystem, it's key not to exterminate them haphazardly. If a nest is problematic, it's best to have a professional come and relocate or remove it safely.

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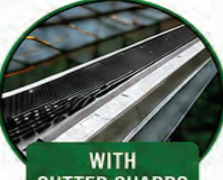
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Three ways to get more use out of a garage

Even though no two homes are the same, rooms have a tendency to take on similar characteristics regardless of which property they're a part of. Kitchens tend to be popular gathering spaces, while basements have become go-to spots for game rooms and watch parties.

Garages also tend to share certain characteristics between homes, and one notable attribute is the tendency to become difficult-to-navigate dumping grounds for a wide range of items, including lawn and garden tools, children's toys, sporting goods, and seasonal home decor. Though there's nothing wrong with

utilizing a garage as a storage space, the following are three simple ways homeowners can get more out of these spaces.

1. Utilize the wall space. The walls in a garage have lots of potential. Effective use of walls within a garage can ensure garden tools, small toys and other items do not accumulate on the floor. Such accumulations contribute much to the reputation of garages as dumping grounds for miscellaneous items. By clearing the floors of clutter, and utilizing wall spaces to store items, homeowners can open up the spaces to serve any number of functions, including home gyms, art

studios or even parking spaces to protect vehicles from the elements. A storage organizer system with various hooks can be mounted on a garage wall to free up floor space, while shelving can be hung to store paint cans, power tool batteries and other items.

2. Look upward. If garage ceilings extend several feet above the height of homeowners' vehicles, then the spaces above where cars might be parked can be converted into storage space for large recreational items, like canoes or kayaks, or seasonal decor that does not need to be accessed on a regular basis. A simple kayak hoist utilizing a pulley

system clears floor space and allows kayaks to be stored overhead. Lifting storage racks work in similar fashion and make for great additions for anyone who needs to store containers full of seasonal decor but does not want to do so by stacking items on the floor. A hand crank system for a lifting storage rack makes for easy and safe access.

3. Install new lighting. Without ample lighting, garages may not be conducive to recreational pursuits like painting, crafting or even exercising. A lighting upgrade is a relatively affordable renovation that can make a big difference, illuminating spaces not exactly known for brightness, especially if there's no windows. If you

want to spend time in the garage during winter and stay warm, then some new lighting can make that possible.

Homeowners whose garages are currently serving as cluttered storage closets can do much to get more out of these useful spaces.



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Homeowners whose garages are currently serving as cluttered storage closets can do much to get more out of these useful spaces. Effective use of walls within a garage can ensure garden tools, small toys and other items do not accumulate on the floor.



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A guide to fall lawn care for cool-season grasses

Spring is the season most often associated with lawn care, and for good reason. Grass starts growing in spring, and the season is a great time to fertilize many grasses in the hopes lawns can look their best and endure the hotter, drier weather of summer.

Spring might mark the time when many homeowners begin tending to their lawns each year, but it's important to recognize the significance of fall lawn care as well. Grasses vary, and homeowners are urged to identify which type of grass is in their lawn so they can ensure it gets the care it needs before winter's first frost. Cool-season grasses like perennial ryegrass and Kentucky bluegrass are common in various regions, and the following strategies can

help homeowners with these types of grasses tend to their lawns this fall.

- Stick to your recommended fertilization schedule. Homeowners who have been fertilizing since spring are urged to continue doing so in fall at the recommended interval. It's easy to forget to fertilize in fall thanks to cooler temperatures that don't call lawn care to mind and busier schedules after school starts again and summer vacation season ends. But many fertilizer manufacturers advise users of their products to fertilize several times over the course of the year, including in fall. Stick to the intervals recommended on the packaging of the fertilizer you've been using, making sure not to forget to fertilize this fall.

- Conduct a soil test. A soil test can determine if the soil is lacking any nutritive elements it needs to come back strong in spring. Certain amendments can restore pH balance if necessary and foster stronger growth when lawns come back in spring.

- **Aerate, if necessary.** Soil can become compacted over time, and that can cause a range of problems for a lawn. Compacted soil can make it harder for water to reach the roots of grass, which weakens grass and makes it more vulnerable to damage during adverse weather events like drought. Compacted soil also makes it harder for nutrients in fertilizer to get into the soil. Aerating is best left to professionals, particularly in larger lawns, as the job can foster

strong root development when done properly.

- Remove thatch where it's excessive. Thin layers of thatch can benefit lawns by delivering nutrients from grass clippings and leaves to a lawn. However, when thatch is excessive, it can block air, water and even fertilizer from reaching the soil. Thatch often can be removed with a rake, but lawns with especially thick layers of thatch may need to be scarified. Homeowners can take a DIY approach to scarifying or hire a landscaping professional to dethatch the lawn and remove the thatch from their properties.

- Continue to water the lawn. A cool-season grass will continue to require water into the fall. Though the lawn won't need to be watered as

frequently in fall as in summer, various lawn care professionals note cool-season grasses still need roughly an inch of water each week in fall.

- Remove leaves as they fall. Fallen leaves can affect a lawn in much the same way as excessive amounts of thatch, blocking water and nutrients

from reaching the soil. So it's best to remove fallen leaves, especially when they begin to fall in large quantities.

Fall is an opportune time to tend to a lawn to increase the chances grass grows back strong in spring.



Variables to consider before downsizing a home in retirement

Aspiring to save money in retirement makes perfect sense. Once professionals call it a career and are no longer drawing a paycheck, cutting back on expenses can be a sound decision that ensures seniors won't outlive their money. And housing remains a significant expense, even for retirees who own their homes and no longer have monthly mortgage payments to make.

Many retirees seeking ways to save money consider downsizing their homes. According to the National Association of Realtors, 12 percent of people between the ages of 60 and 69 who move

indicated their home was too large, and that percentage grows among movers between the ages of 70 and 78 (16 percent) and those who move after turning 79 (18 percent). Downsizing a home in retirement can seem like an ideal means to saving money after calling it a career, but individuals pondering such a move should consider a number of variables before putting their homes up for sale.

Costs

Downsizing may help retirees lower their property tax obligations, reduce their utility bills and lower their

monthly mortgage payments (for those who are still paying off a mortgage on their current homes), but that does not mean moving will not incur new expenses that render such savings moot. Expenditures like closing costs, real estate commissions, moving-related expenses and capital gains taxes can quickly add up. In addition, retirees who currently do not pay homeowner's association fees may be subjected to such fees when moving into a new home, and those fees can be substantial and hard to avoid. Indeed, recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau indicated

that 71 percent of new constructions in the western and southern United States were built in communities with homeowner's associations. Prior to downsizing, current homeowners should calculate all of the costs related to relocating, including anticipated HOA fees, to see if downsizing is to their financial benefit.

Social benefits

Another variable that merits consideration is the impact that moving can have on seniors' social lives. The World Health Organization reports that more than one in 10 seniors experiences loneliness, which can adversely affect their physical and mental health and potentially reduce their life expectancy. Retirees currently living in

communities in which they are socially active should weigh the effects of leaving that social network behind. Retirees also can weigh the benefits of moving to 55-and-over communities where they will be surrounded by people at a similar stage in life and how living in such developments may improve their social lives.

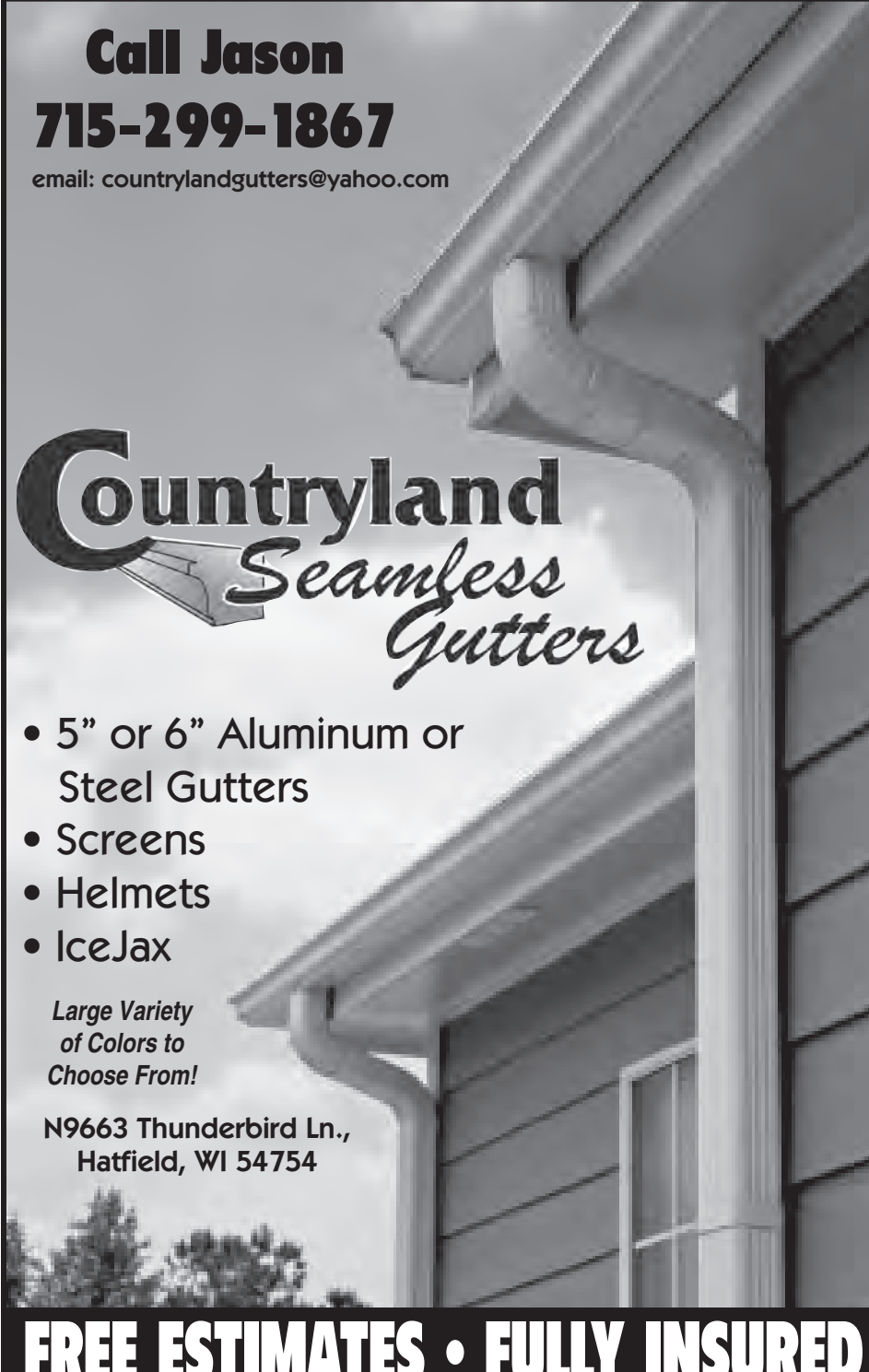
Adjusting and adapting

Downsizing will require an adjustment period and a willingness to adapt. Retirees may have an emotional attachment to their current homes, and leaving that behind can be a difficult adjustment. Adapting to life in a new community also can be challenging, particularly if retirees are moving from areas

where there are no restrictions regarding their properties to communities where homeowners' associations must approve of any changes to properties.

Moving also may require finding new health care professionals, which can be a particularly difficult adjustment for retirees who have spent years building a strong rapport with their current health care team.

Downsizing a home might be a pathway to more financial freedom for many retirees. Seniors considering such a move can consider a number of variables to determine if moving is in their best interest.



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Cracked walkways threaten homes and residents in many ways

The popularity of outdoor living spaces has increased dramatically over the last decade. The National Association of Home Builders® notes that industry projections estimate the outdoor living market will reach \$26.8 billion by 2027. That's a testament to the popularity of spaces that are transforming how people use their properties and spend time at home.

Outdoor kitchens, living rooms and expansive patios garner the bulk of the attention directed at exterior living spaces, but walkways into these spaces are equally important. A stunning walkway can set the tone for a space, while a cracked walkway can pose a threat to a home, its residents and any guests who visit to enjoy some R&R in an outdoor living space.

- Cracked walkways increase injury risk. The National Center for Biotechnology Information

indicates that roughly three in four outdoor falls are attributable to environmental hazards like cracked or broken walkways. The cost of a new outdoor living space can be significant, and some homeowners might delay redoing their existing walkways so they can use those savings to fund the larger project. But homeowners planning to entertain and even those who will be using their existing walkways to access an outdoor living space are urged to include cracked walkway replacement into their outdoor living space project. Doing so can prevent falls and leave homeowners less vulnerable to accidents involving guests that can ultimately lead to higher insurance premiums.

- Cracked walkways can contribute to damage to your home. Cracked walkways also can harm a home. A cracked walkway often slopes as well, and when it slopes toward

the home, it can then channel water in the direction of the home's foundation. That can cause the soil around the home to erode and ultimately threaten the structural integrity of a home's foundation. Homeowners may even be able to see such damage already if a walkway running alongside a garage is cracked. If so, walked into the garage and see if the foundation area opposite where the crack is outside is showing signs of damage. If it is, fixing cracked walkways can prevent further damage. If it's not, then homeowners might have gotten lucky and identified the problem before it affected the foundation of their home.

- Cracked walkways adversely affect curb appeal. According to Brown Jordan Outdoor Kitchens, 75 percent of prospective home buyers indicated they would prioritize homes with outdoor living spaces over homes that lacked

this popular feature. Outdoor living spaces certainly boast the wow factor, but cracked walkways en route to these areas can take away from that appeal and create a bad first impression. Savvy homeowners recognize that every investment they make in their

home is an opportunity to improve resale value. Fixing cracked walkways when redesigning exterior spaces is a great way to ensure the boost in curb appeal from an outdoor living space is not compromised by unsightly and even dangerous walking

paths leading residents and guests to these popular areas. Cracked walkways should be addressed so homeowners and their guests are safe and home values are not compromised by these unsightly yet fixable issues.

Top Reasons to Consider a Fiberglass Entry Door

(StatePoint) Do you love the timeless look of traditional wood entry doors, but desire something stronger, more secure, durable, weather resistant and energy efficient? Here's what to consider in an entry door, and why fiberglass is the number one replacement door choice of homeowners:

Strength and durability: Fiberglass is a composite plastic reinforced with glass fibers, which can be molded into various shapes, making it an ideal material to replicate the fine details of a wood door. At the same time, it's incredibly strong and durable, perfect for a door you'd want to last a long time.

Maintenance and cost: A fiberglass front door can cost as much or more than a wood door depending on the style and options, but it offers enduring value. It resists dents and scratches, requires far less maintenance, and retains its beauty for years without the upkeep that wood demands. A fiberglass entry door will also not shrink, warp, split, crack or delaminate, even in harsh or humid climates, making it an investment with a long-term yield.

An authentic look: Expert craftsmanship and advanced manufacturing allow today's fiberglass doors to recreate the distinctive beauty and

texture of wood species such as cherry, mahogany, knotty alder, fir and white oak. At ProVia, for example, they use real premium hardwood to create the woodgrain texture of the doors' skins and edges. Real hardwood is also used to craft the inner stiles and rails, for superior structural integrity.

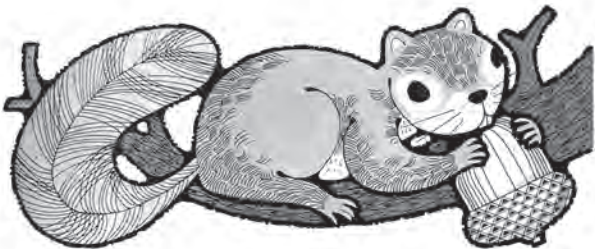
Energy efficiency: The best fiberglass door technology today offers impressive energy efficiency. Fiberglass exterior doors made by ProVia are engineered with a polyurethane core, weatherstripping and ComforTech Warm Edge Glazing System, all of which can yield greater comfort inside the home and reduced energy bills. And with ENERGY STAR options available, you can further optimize for even greater energy savings.

Security: The solid con-

struction of fiberglass doors provides significant security over wood doors.

Curb appeal: From wood-grain textures and paint finishes to glass options and door accessories, be sure to work with a manufacturer that allows you to tailor the look of your fiberglass door to maximize curb appeal and complement your architecture.

The entryway to your home is the first impression of your space. With the timeless design of a fiberglass front door -- reimagined for the modern home -- you can unite form and function, for an inviting blend of beauty, comfort and protection.



Simple ways to curb heating costs

As fall gives way to winter, air conditioners typically get turned off and heaters get turned on. Home heating costs can quickly add up for homeowners. According to data from the U.S. Energy Information Administration, heating a space is the single largest energy expense for American households, accounting for roughly 42 percent of total residential energy consumption. However, individuals can implement certain strategies to cut down on heating costs and optimize energy efficiency.

Manage the thermostat

Managing a home thermostat is a cost-effective and simple adjustment. According to the U.S. Department of Energy, turning a thermostat back by 7° to 10° F from its

normal setting for eight hours a day can save up to 10 percent a year on heating bills. Utilizing the automated scheduling capabilities on programmable or smart thermostats enables people to program a lower baseline temperature when out at work or school and while sleeping.

Seal up the home

Warm air from indoors can easily escape through unsealed gaps in a home. Similarly, cold air from outdoors can infiltrate through the same spots. This causes heating units to work overtime. Studies from the American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy indicate combining window upgrades with high-efficiency heating systems can cut heating demands considerably. Also, ap-

plying weatherstripping and caulking can prevent drafts, while ensuring adequate attic insulation will create a tight thermal barrier.

Change the heat delivery

Upgrading a heating system to a more efficient one can save homeowners money. According to research by Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, replacing traditional fossil-fuel furnaces with electric heat pumps can drastically reduce energy expenditures. Modern heat pumps deliver more thermal energy than the electrical energy they consume.

Homeowners have different options that may help them reduce their heating and energy bills.

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How to create more interior space for the winter

After a summer and fall spent outdoors, winter drives many people back inside. Homeowners may take inventory of their interior spaces in winter and find that there isn't as much room as they would like. When entertaining inside, a home may feel particularly cramped.

Creating an open, inviting indoor environment requires maximizing spatial design but not necessarily expanding square footage. By focusing on a few strategies, homeowners can maximize interior flow.

Change up the layout of furniture

Being able to move around a space more easily may come down to rethinking the furniture layout. Interior design experts often emphasize traffic flow in a space, which can determine how comfortable homeowners and their guests feel. Universal design methodologies point to establishing clear, unobstructed routes to link different zones of a room.

This will minimize physical congestion in the space. When entertaining, homeowners can push larger pieces of furniture against the perimeter of a room to open up a central gathering area. Heavy coffee tables can be swapped out for smaller tables to allow the rearrangement of the layout depending on how many people are spending time in a given space.

Subdivide rooms

Open-concept spaces might have lost some their appeal in recent years. Designers are now going back in the direction of room-based layouts over open concepts. Some homeowners now have a greater need for definition of the spaces they have to work with. Instead of one open room, dividing the space can create the illusion of having more square footage while providing distinctive spots for privacy and other room functions. An open-concept family room, for example, can be divided into a gaming room on one side and a home

office space on the other.

Change how spaces are perceived

Lighting and visual elements can make spaces feel more roomy and inviting even if they haven't gotten larger. Painting walls in soft tones will help them reflect more light, making boundaries feel like they are receding. Incorporating more natural light by removing heavy draperies is one strategy. According to the Journal of Biophilic Design, biophilic design is the intentional integration of nature into buildings and spaces to improve human health and productivity. Homeowners can incorporate natural lighting, living plants, organic materials, and organic patterns into their interior designs to make spaces feel more inviting.

Homeowners can look to various design strategies to open up interior spaces in their homes with a goal toward making them more comfortable places to ride out the winter.

Preserve your pile: Carpet maintenance tips

Carpeting adds warmth and comfort underfoot, but residential carpeting is a significant financial investment. Homeowners should do all they can to ensure carpeting remains in good condition for as long as possible.

According to the Carpet and Rug Institute, properly maintained carpet may last between 10 and 15 years. However, without the right care, the durability of carpet can be slashed in half. Maintaining carpeting is not just about preserving aesthetic appeal; protecting carpeting from too much wear and tear helps manage indoor air quality and maintain home value. These guidelines can help any homeowner protect their pile.

- Remove shoes when coming indoors. Industry experts say that the majority of the soil entering a home is dry particulate matter that is brought in on the soles of shoes. Particulates can act like micro-abrasives that grind against carpet fibers, dulling the sheen and weakening the structure. Removing shoes upon entering the home will cut down on the amount of soil that reaches the carpet.
- Utilize high-quality mats. Place mats both outside and inside of every entrance to cut down on the amount of debris that is tracked into a home. The industrial matting company NoTrax indicates at least 15 feet of matting is required to remove the majority of dirt and debris from foot traffic. Carpet industry experts refer to this as the "Rule of 15."
- Frequently vacuum the home. The CRI recommends vacuuming high-traffic areas daily, while other areas around the home may require less attention. Vacuuming removes dry soil before it can be ground into the backing of carpeting. For the best results, a vacuum cleaner with a HEPA filter will ensure the machine effectively removes dust instead of just redistributing it into the air while vacuuming.
- Get a deep cleaning. Major carpet manufacturers, including Shaw and Mohawk, require Hot Water Extraction every 12 to 18 months on their carpets to maintain warranties. Professional cleaning removes even more debris and keeps carpeting in pristine shape.
- Apply a protectant. While most new carpets come with a factory-applied finish to protect fibers, this wears off over time. Reapplying a carpet protector (like Scotchgard™) creates a shield that lowers the surface tension of the fibers, helping homeowners clean up spills fast before stains set in.

Reducing dirt tracked inside, vacuuming frequently and arranging for periodic professional deep-cleaning will help prolong the longevity of residential carpeting.

Hazards that compromise senior safety at home

Homes are supposed to be sanctuaries where people can be comfortable and live independently. However, houses that are completely suitable

for younger populations often harbor hidden threats that can compromise senior safety. At Heart Home Care notes aging in place remains a

top priority for more than 90 percent of older Americans, but only 10 percent of modern homes feature the necessary modifications to safely support aging residents.

Falls pose a significant threat to seniors. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicates falls are the leading cause of both fatal and non-fatal injuries among adults age 65 and older. More than 14 million seniors experience a fall each year. The Hospital for Special Surgery notes that around 60 percent of these incidents happen right in the home. Knowledge of the

potential hazards lurking at home may help seniors identify the areas where they need to be especially cautious.

Bathroom surfaces

Bathrooms are notorious for posing an injury risk because of slippery surfaces. Wet tile and pooled water can be a recipe for hazardous conditions. These conditions are made even worse in spaces that are not equipped with non-skid mats or anchored grab bars.

Lighting

Inadequate lighting can be a hazard to seniors, many of whom experience diminished vision. Dimly lit staircases,

bedrooms and dark hallways can impair spatial awareness. Without enough light, navigating the changes in flooring or obstacles can become a challenge.

Tripping hazards

Many things can cause seniors to trip and fall. Loose area rugs, exposed electrical cords, cluttered hallways, and too much furniture can make it difficult to safely navigate a space.

Cooking hazards

The National Council on Aging says adults over 65 are 3.5 times more likely to die in residential fires than the general population. Cooking

accidents and loose clothing or items catching fire near stovetops are a fire hazard. Seniors also may feel the cold more, and rely on space heaters or other less safe heating units to stay warm, which in turn increases the risk of a fire at home.

Many experts recommend a safety overhaul to secure a home for aging residents. Clearing all floor obstructions, securing loose carpets, installing bright lights, and anchoring heavy furniture are some steps that can be taken to keep a home a haven for older adults rather than a hazard.

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The dangers of mold infestation

Whether it's a fuzzy patch on a basement wall or a dark speckle on bathroom grout, mold might be dismissed as a minor nuisance. But a mold infestation is a serious health hazard and a threat to a home's structural integrity. When mold spores find moisture and a food source, they can multiply rapidly, quietly compromising both a living space and residents' well-being.

The most pressing danger of mold is its impact on personal health. Mold

releases tiny spores and volatile organic compounds into the air. When inhaled, these particles can trigger respiratory issues, particularly in sensitive individuals, according to the Cleveland Clinic. People with asthma, allergies or compromised immune systems are at the greatest risk of mold-related illness. Exposure often leads to a cluster of symptoms, which include chronic coughing, wheezing, nasal congestion, skin irritation and red, itchy

eyes.

More concerning is exposure to toxic molds, such as stachybotrys chartarum (commonly known as black mold). These strains produce mycotoxins — toxic substances that can cause more severe neurological issues, chronic fatigue, headaches and respiratory bleeding in extreme cases, according to WebMD. Because these spores are invisible, inhabitants often suffer from unexplained illnesses for months

before identifying the root cause.

Mold also poses a severe threat to homes and other structures. Mold feeds on organic materials like wood, drywall, carpet and ceiling tiles. As the fungi grow, they secrete enzymes that digest these materials, gradually weakening them. Over time, an unchecked mold problem can rot structural support beams, ruin insulation and cause drywall to crumble. By the time mold becomes visible on the surface, it has likely already caused extensive hidden damage inside the walls.

Preventing and addressing mold requires vigilance. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says mold thrives in environments with relative humidity above 60 percent. Therefore, controlling indoor moisture is a very important preventive measure. Fixing leaky pipes immediately, using exhaust fans in kitchens and bathrooms and running dehumidifiers in damp basements can keep spores dormant.

If one discovers a mold infestation covering an area larger than 10 square feet, he or she should avoid disturbing it, as this can launch millions of spores into the air. Instead, homeowners should look into hiring professional remediation services to safely isolate, kill and remove the mold. Treating mold early protects personal health and can prevent long-term damage to a home.

When is the right time to sell a home?

Identifying the optimal time to sell a home involves careful consideration of seasonal trends, market conditions and shifting economic indicators. Home equity represents the largest component of personal wealth for most households, and miscalculating the market by even a few days or weeks can result in a substantial financial loss.

Although there is no perfect moment to sell a home, the National Association of Realtors indicates data-driven insights can help maximize profits and minimize stress. The following are some factors that can determine the most advantageous time to sell a home.

- The seasons are a strong influencer. According to a Realtor.com analysis of trends from 2018 to 2025, spring consistently is the strongest period for sellers. Mid-spring is a popular time to list a home because it brings higher buyer demand and lower competition.

- The school year matters. Families looking to move will want to get into their new homes before the school year starts. The summer is a peak time for home sales, particularly when buyers can close on properties and move in before the kids start classes. The NAR says homes sell fastest in spring and summer, often in 31 to 35 days, with sales rising through June.

- Timing is localized, too. Some markets do not follow the typical seasonal trajectory. For example, home sales in San Jose, CA, peak during the first two weeks of February, according to Zillow. The Silicon Valley market and surrounding areas feature chronically low inventory, so this early selling window allows sellers to capture highly motivated buyers. Other markets around the country challenge conventional wisdom as well, and relying on a knowledgeable real estate profession can help sellers list at the best time in their markets.

- Financial and market factors play roles. Market conditions will often matter more than the calendar when it comes to the real estate market. The NAR forecasted a 14-percent increase in existing home sales for 2026 due to mortgage rate stabilization and an increase in inventory. Sellers benefit most when inventory is tight and buyer demand is solid. Zillow says 78 percent of sellers cite major changes like job relocation, family size shifts or lifestyle needs as driving decisions to move and buy.

Ultimately the right time to sell a home is when personal needs coordinate with reasonable market strength. Analysis of local data and reliance on local professionals can help homeowners sell on their terms.



Contributed photo

The most pressing danger of mold is its impact on personal health. Mold releases tiny spores and volatile organic compounds into the air.

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Signs suggesting doors and windows need air sealing

When pondering projects around a house, it's easy to overlook small tasks and direct your focus toward more significant undertakings. Small projects might not generate the reactions that larger projects do, but even the simplest tasks can go a long way toward making a home more comfortable.

Sealing leaks around windows and doors is unlikely to make any homeowner's list of dream projects. However, as the moderate temperatures of fall give way to harsh winter weather, homeowners who seal leaks around their doors and windows may be surprised by how effective this simple project can be at reducing energy costs and making a home more comfortable. In fact, the U.S. Department of Energy notes that sealing inefficient windows and doors can reduce annual utility bills by 7 to 15 percent. That's a potentially significant cost savings, particularly in an era marked by rising utility costs.

Before homeowners seal

their windows and doors, they can first look for signs that these areas are allowing outdoor air in. The United States Environmental Protection Agency notes there are some obvious signs that a home has leaks around the windows and doors. Those signs include:

- Drafts: If you place your hand around closed windows or doors but can still feel drafts, then there are leaks that will need to be sealed.
- Gaps: Gaps around windows and doors that are letting outdoor air in typically are noticeable to the naked eye. You might see light coming in through small cracks on a sunny day. These gaps may only be in one or two places, but that's enough to adversely affect energy bills.
- Unwelcome guests: Pests or insects may be another indicator that there are gaps around windows or doors. If you consistently see insects near a particular entryway or window, or signs of pests near doorways, that's

likely because there's a gap or hole in these areas that's enabling them to access the interior of your home.

- Odors: It's not only your sense of vision that might detect leaks, but also your sense of smell. If you notice exterior odors inside your home even though doors and windows are closed, then leaks around these areas may be the culprit.
- Peeling paint or wallpaper: Peeling paint or wallpaper is another potential indicator of a leak around a door or window. This can occur when water is entering the home through the leak. Over time, wet paint or wallpaper dries and can begin to peel. This is a potentially significant issue because it can lead to mold infestation and even structural damage to a home.

The EPA characterizes sealing behind windows and doors as a moderate to difficult project. If leaks are detected, homeowners can benefit from hiring a professional to do the job quickly and correctly.



Leaks around windows and doors can prove costly if they're not addressed promptly. As winter approaches, investigating for leaks and addressing any that are found can save money and ensure a home stays comfortable when the temperatures drop.

How to establish a home renovation budget

Homeowners know that the next home renovation project is always right around the corner. And that means finding ways to finance such undertakings.

When planning for renovations, the average home-

owner underestimates their project cost by approximately 22 percent, according to the 2026 Remodeling Impact Report. Establishing a pre-project budget can help avoid such surprises.

Don't over-improve

A common mistake homeowners make is over-improving a home beyond the neighborhood value. A good rule of thumb is to employ the average percentage-of-home-value approach in an effort to stay within range of what's acceptable. Budget a kitchen renovation or finished basement at 10 to 15 percent of the home value. A master bedroom will come in at 5 to 10 percent of home value, while a small bedroom or office falls between 1 and 3 percent of home value. These benchmarks are supported by the National Association of the Remodeling Industry and the National Association of Realtors. Historically, a functional, modern kitchen is

the top driver of home value, says Remodeling Magazine.

Learn the breakdown

Homeowners should understand that materials, fixtures, appliances and flooring, otherwise known as "hard costs," will eat up 50 to 60 percent of their renovation budgets. Labor, permits and design fees will comprise the next largest chunk, typically coming in between 25 and 35 percent. Homeowners also should factor about 15 to 20 percent of a budget to a safety net to cover unforeseen expenses, like mold remediation or structural issues.

Get three quotes

It's important for homeowners to get several estimates before establishing a budget. Experts advise working with contractors that offer fixed-price contracts rather

than those that list time and materials; otherwise, there may be a mid-project price hike that comes out of the blue. A person also can ask contractors for a line-item bid so it's possible to see where money can be trimmed through different material choices. With a list of desired items in hand, and acceptable substitutions if the cost comes in too high, homeowners can create a budget that works.

Saving versus splurging

It's important for homeowners to be realistic about their renovations. They can splurge on items that are seen or touched every day, like door handles, cabinet pulls and faucets. Other items, like lighting fixtures or backsplashes, can be replaced down the road. It may be better to direct funds to structural

elements or those "invisible renovations" like upgrading insulation or smart systems that save on energy costs and improve efficiency.

Keep a 20 percent cushion

Homeowners can determine the affordability if a proposed project ends up costing 20 percent more or takes a few months longer. If the answer is no, homeowners should scale back the project budget until they have that financial safety net. Alliant Credit Union says experts strongly recommend adding a 20 percent contingency cushion to a remodeling budget.

A home remodeling project is a big commitment of time and money. Budgeting correctly ensures that there are few, if any, surprises along the way.

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Five room designs that hide clutter (and optimize your space)

(BPT) Clutter is one of the biggest challenges homeowners face today. According to the National Kitchen and Bath Association, homeowners say minimizing clutter and cleaning while improving storage and space-efficiency are the design needs they’re craving. The good news? Modern sliding door hardware is

emerging as a design-forward solution that not only conceals mess but enhances the overall look and flow of a space.

From playrooms to pantries, here are five space-efficient room ideas that hide clutter beautifully - designed with innovative sliding, folding and pocket door hardware.

1. Kid zone with wall-



Contributed photo
A wall-mounted sliding door closes off a kids’ play area while maintaining a clean, distinctive aesthetic.



Contributed photo
Homeowners today want to minimize clutter while improving storage. Modern sliding door hardware hides the mess while enhancing the look of the space.

mounted doors

Customized slide-away doors are made easy with soft-closing wall mount door hardware, providing a smart way to hide toys, books and games in seconds. Whether using a single panel or a converging door kit, these doors are quick to install and glide smoothly along the wall, keeping visual clutter out of sight when needed most. Ideal for open-concept homes, they create flexible spaces that transition effortlessly from family-friendly to guest-ready.

A wall-mounted sliding door closes off a kids’ play area while maintaining a clean, distinctive aesthetic.

2. Seamless storage with pocket doors

Pocket doors slide neatly into the wall, making them perfect for hiding storage areas without taking up valuable floor space. From entryway drop zones to compact laundry nooks, soft-operating pocket door frame hardware kits offer a minimalist look with maximum function.

Pocket doors tuck away clutter-prone spaces, such as a combined mudroom and laundry room.

According to the National Kitchen and Bath Association, homeowners are craving minimized clutter and improved storage.

3. Closets that close in style

Creative spaces can quickly become chaotic. Special “full-access” bifold door hardware allows doors to fold flat against the walls, providing complete closet access when open and a tidy appearance when closed. This makes them ideal for craft areas, hobby stations or small workshops. Every inch of the closet interior is in easy reach with Full-Access Bi-fold doors.

4. Streamlined pantries with bypass doors

Bypass sliding doors are a go-to solution for closets in kitchens, bedrooms and bathrooms where space is limited. Unlike swinging doors, they glide past one another, keeping walkways clear while housing shelves, toiletries or pantry items. Bypass doors keep pantry clutter hidden

without interrupting kitchen flow.

5. Cozy nooks with designer appeal

Two converging pocket doors can transform a hallway overwhelmed by household traffic and storage needs into a tranquil passageway to a relaxing den or reading nook. When closed, these doors create a seamless wall appearance - perfect for modern interiors that value both form and function. Sliding and converging pocket doors turn congested hallways into sleek passageways.

As homeowners continue to seek smarter storage solutions, sliding, folding and pocket door hardware is proving to be a simple upgrade with a major impact - combining organization, flexibility and modern design.

The right door hardware can improve both function

and design in the home. Whether you’re renovating or simply upgrading, leveraging options like pocket, wall-mount, bypass, multi-pass and bi-fold door hardware will help you make a smart choice. Each type has unique benefits that suit different spaces, from saving floor space in compact bathrooms to dividing areas in spacious home gyms.

For more information on the advantages of pocket, sliding and folding door hardware, visit www.johnsonhardware.com or call 574-293-5664. Family owned and operated since 1958, Johnson Hardware prides itself on the precision design and the production of leading-quality, American-made hardware for residential and light commercial applications. Follow the company on Instagram, X, Pinterest and Facebook.

Upgrades to ensure a home stays safe and secure

A home can never be too safe or secure. When residents of a home leave or go to bed at night, a wide range of safety and security features can protect them and their belongings. In-home amenities also can make homes safer for residents with mobility issues or other limitations.

Homeowners indeed have no shortage of options when seeking to make their homes safer and more secure. An assortment of safety and security features can help homeowners plan for nearly every situation that could put residents in jeopardy.

Age-related safety features: Various features can help seniors age in place. The National Institute on Aging recommends installing grab bars in showers and bathtubs to reduce the risk of falls when bathing. Such features also can help seniors balance themselves while they bathe and get in and out of showers and tubs. Non-slip strips can be installed on bathroom and kitchen floors in areas that might be vulnerable to spills or puddling. The NIA also recommends fixing all carpets firmly on the floors, which may necessitate the removal of all area rugs. Adding handrails on staircases so there’s something to grab

onto on each side the staircase also can enhance the safety of these potentially risky spaces in a home.

Entry point security features: Deadbolts, security cameras and/or smart doorbells make it easier to keep strangers out and monitor entryways. Smart doorbells may deter criminals from approaching a property. Locks and sensors also can be installed on all windows, and especially those on the first floor that can be accessed from the ground. Locks on sliding doors can be reinforced with secondary locks that further prevent the door from being opened from the outside once the locks are engaged.

Fire safety features: The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) notes that the death rate in home structure fires is approximately 60-percent lower in homes with working smoke alarms than in homes with no alarms or in homes where alarms are not working. The NFPA adds that smoke alarms monitor for smoke and control the speaker that emits the sounds that notify occupants of the presence of smoke. The NFPA recommends both ionization smoke alarms and photoelectric smoke alarms, as each

employs a different type of sensor. The combination of both in a home ensures people are alerted in the case of both flaming fires (ionization alarms) and smoking, smoldering fires (photoelectric alarms). A functioning fire extinguisher also is a must (disposable extinguishers typically last between 10 and 12 years), as is a carbon monoxide detector.

Lighting: Sufficient lighting in a home and around the exterior of a home and even the property can be another important safety and security measure. Exterior lighting deters intruders because it makes them more visible to residents while they’re awake and makes them easier to see on overnight security cameras, which can be enough to keep them away. Interior lighting makes it easier to navigate a home at twilight and at night. Hallway night lights can make trips to the bathroom safer, and lighting alongside stairways can make these spaces easier to navigate when the rest of the home is dark.

There’s no shortage of ways to make homes safer and more secure, which should be a priority for homeowners of all ages.



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Say Goodbye to Hot & Cold Spots: Six Tips for Everyday Comfort

(StatePoint) Keeping every room in your home at an ideal temperature can be a frustrating battle. Whether it's an addition, upstairs office, older home, converted attic, or a room full of windows, these spaces often present unique climate control challenges. The good news? You don't need an expensive HVAC overhaul to reclaim your space. Simple updates can increase your comfort and potentially decrease your utility bills. From quick DIY upgrades to high-efficiency zone cooling, here are six smart ways to conquer stubborn temperature challenges in your home year-round.

Add Ceiling Fans
While fans won't lower

air temperatures, their wind-chill effect makes you feel significantly more comfortable. Setting the blades to run counterclockwise creates a downward breeze to direct refreshing air where you need it most.

Install Window Coverings
While rooms with large windows and natural light are appealing, the additional radiant energy from the sunlight can cause them to be significantly warmer. There are many aesthetically pleasing heat-blocking window treatments, such as cellular shades or blackout drapes, that can create a functional, yet fashionable line of defense against the sun during the hottest parts of the day.

Plus, these smart window coverings can ease the burden on your room's cooling system to help reduce energy costs.

Seal Air Leaks
According to Energy.gov, sealing air gaps is one of the quickest, most cost-effective ways to enhance indoor comfort and slash energy waste. Check around windows, doors and baseboards for gaps that can allow outdoor air in and indoor air to escape. Sealing these drafts with caulk and weatherstripping is a simple weekend project that yields immediate rewards.

Improve Insulation
Like air leaks, insulation stabilizes indoor temperatures for maximum comfort.

Simple enhancements can include adding insulation to easy-to-access attics or crawl spaces, placing foam gaskets behind exterior outlet plates, or even blowing foam insulation through small holes in the drywall to reinforce your home's thermal envelope.

Add a Window or Through-the-Wall Air Conditioner
When passive fixes aren't enough, adding a compact window or through-the-wall air conditioner delivers fast, targeted relief right where you need it. Forget the noisy, inefficient units of decades past; modern solutions from manufacturers like Keystone offer whisper-quiet operation and exceptional energy sav-

ings without the hassle of ductwork. Featuring smart features like remotes with built-in sensors, they monitor and adjust temperature based on where you are actually sitting rather than at the wall. Combined with eco modes and 24-hour timers, they provide pinpoint climate control that protects your wallet.

Add Year-Round Comfort with a Mini Split
For rooms that are perpetually too hot and too cold, a mini split system offers a simple, permanent solution. Because mini splits bypass the need for expensive ductwork, they serve as a surprisingly cost-effective fix, even when factoring in contractor installation costs. Beyond

lower upfront hurdles, systems from trusted brands like Keystone deliver reliable, affordable performance that drive down monthly utility bills. When it comes to comfort, they offer precise temperature control, year-round heating and cooling, and whisper-quiet operation. Finally, their aesthetics hit the mark with sleek, low-profile designs that blend seamlessly into any room. For more information, visit keystone-products.com.

With a few strategic fixes and upgrades, keeping even the most stubborn rooms comfortable year-round can be easy and affordable.

What Code Inspectors Wish Homeowners Knew

(StatePoint) When homeowners doing work on their property consider a cheaper route, for example, hiring a contractor who doesn't want to pull permits, they may not realize the risk they are taking. But they should know that there is no "undo" button on a disaster.

That's one reason behind the International Code Council (ICC) Building Safety Month, a campaign that reinforces the need for the adoption of modern, regularly-updated building codes, and helps communities understand what it takes to create safe, sustainable structures. As part of the campaign, two seasoned building safety professionals are sharing some important basics they

wish homeowners knew.

Egress
Codes require bedroom windows to be a specific size so occupants can escape a fire, and so firefighters can get in while wearing their equipment. Any modification, like adding bars to windows or changing a floor plan, must preserve that clear path to the outside."

Rocco also recommends keeping the area around bedroom windows clutter-free. In an emergency, time spent removing items from the exit path are valuable seconds that might make the difference.

Decks and Balconies
One often-ignored at-home maintenance task is inspecting exterior deck and balcony framing integrity.

Deck ledger boards often fail because the connection to the house rots or was never flashed correctly. This is something people don't think about until it collapses.

If the wood deteriorates, if it feels soft or is cracking, a professional needs to check it out. Basically, if it doesn't look safe, it's probably not. Pay attention to deck railings to ensure it's not loose.

Decks must be used safely. For example, a hot tub filled with water may be heavier than a deck can handle. Homeowners intending to place a hot tub on their deck should check with a licensed professional to verify if additional support will be needed. Also, it's not recom-

mended to cook on decks with roofs. BBQ fires can happen easily if left unattended.

Water Intrusion
A tiny drip can lead to structural rot and toxic mold before a spot on the drywall appears. Another is foundation drainage. If soil settles and slopes toward the house, water will eventually undermine the foundation, leading to costly structural failure.

Beyond structural damage and harmful mold, water intrusion can damage electrical systems, increasing the risk of fire or shock, and it often goes undetected until significant harm has already occurred.

Water Heaters
Homeowners often overlook sediment flushing for water heaters. Mineral build-

up at the bottom reduces efficiency and can cause the tank to overheat and fail prematurely.

Vents
Snow buildup on the side of the house can plug up vents and turn off the furnace. Clear snow around the furnace vents – and if they turn off, that is the first place to check.

Scope
Homeowners should never go beyond the scope of an approved building project.

Products
From luxury sinks to bogus smoke detectors, homeowners should ensure any product they purchase is UL listed and approved for use in their jurisdiction.

International Codes
ICC's codes and stan-

dards play an important role in creating safe, affordable and sustainable structures. Homeowners can read up on I-Codes and consult with a local professional before starting a project to avoid violations.

Electrical systems age, wood rots, and safety devices expire. The most dangerous home is the one where the owner assumes it's fine because it's always been that way.

For more home safety tips, visit ICC's Building Safety Month at <https://www.iccsafe.org>.

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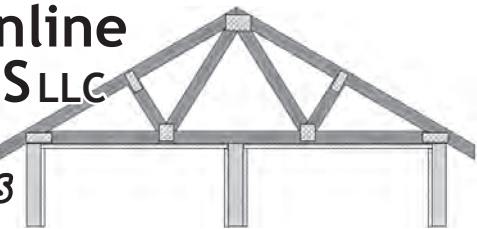
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Renovations with the biggest bang for your buck

Home renovations are a significant part of homeownership. Naturally, people want to make their own personal marks on the homes they buy and ensure that their properties fit their needs and wants.

While many renovations add value to a home, some offer more value than others. When allocating dollars to renovations, particularly when finances are tight, homeowners may want to direct their efforts to those projects that will offer the highest rate of return on investment. Each year Zonda Home, in conjunction with Remodeling magazine, puts together a list of high-return projects. Exterior projects drive the most value for owners who are selling their homes, and they consistently top the list of high-ROI (return on investment) improvements. Here are five projects offering a strong ROI that homeowners may want to consider.

Garage door replacement:

A garage door replacement is part of the curb appeal improvements homeowners can consider. At an average cost of \$4,672, it offers a recouped cost of 267.7 percent according to the 2025 Zonda report.

Steel door replacement: Also boasting an ROI north of 200 percent, a steel door installation is a wise choice for homeowners who want to drive up the value of their homes.

Manufactured stone veneer: Manufactured stone veneer is a manmade masonry product that looks like natural stone but is lightweight and easier to install. It can offer a recouped cost of 207.9 percent on the \$11,702 investment.

Fiber-cement siding replacement: Homeowners in the market for new siding can consider fiber-cement siding, which will see the investment recoup slightly more than 100 percent of its cost.

Minor kitchen remodel: Kitchens are the heart of a home, and a minor remodel offers a 113-percent return. Inside the home the golden rule is to keep things simple. Minor remodels tend to offer a better rate of return than major ones. Buyers will pay for move-in ready and updated, but sellers likely will not recoup the costs for luxury upgrades or over-the-top renovations.

It's important to note that 2025 was the first time a practical backup generator made the list of top improvements. Falling into the number seven spot, the generator averaged a return of 95.3 percent, which underscores how homeowners are gearing improvements toward the changing climate and unpredictable weather.

Those remodeling primarily to increase equity for future sales may want to consider exterior projects and basic kitchen improvements.



Contributed photo

While many renovations add value to a home, some offer more value than others. When allocating dollars to renovations, particularly when finances are tight, homeowners may want to direct their efforts to those projects that will offer the highest rate of return on investment. A garage door replacement is part of the curb appeal improvements homeowners can consider.

How to prepare a fireplace for the winter

As hours of daylight shorten and fall gives way to winter, thoughts shift from fall foliage to spending time cuddling under warm blankets and being cozy indoors. A fireplace can improve the ambiance of any room and help to create a warm and welcoming gathering spot. Home fireplaces typically are wood-burning or gas. Though maintenance for these fireplaces differs, certain preparatory steps must be taken to prepare a fireplace for winter.

Clear the clutter

Items can accumulate in areas that are not in use, and a fireplace is no exception. Take a few hours to remove any belongings from in front of the fireplace and clean the mantle thoroughly.

Have the chimney cleaned

Hire a professional chimney cleaning company to inspect the chimney and clean it thoroughly before winter. According to BobVila.com, a chimney should be cleaned once a year, or after about every 80 fires. The National Fire Protection Association says failure to properly clean chimneys is one of the leading contributors to home fires. That's due to creosote, a highly flammable residue that builds up in the flue that lines the chimney.

Inspect the interior

The interior of a wood-burning fireplace is likely lined with fire bricks. Check for cracks and loose joints. Hire a professional mason to

make any repairs, as special materials are needed to withstand the heat of fires.

Install a chimney cap and screen

According to Family Handyman, a chimney cap is a protective covering that goes over the top of the chimney. It is made of steel or copper mesh with a cap on top. This protects the chimney from rain and downdrafts and keeps animals and debris from getting into the chimney.

Prune overhanging branches

If there are trees close to the home and the chimney, cut them back, as they can be a fire hazard. Branches and leaves also can restrict the proper draft of the chimney.

Assess the outdoor vent

Gas fireplaces typically emit exhaust through a vent in the home. Remove any blockages from the vent, including leaves, cobwebs and debris.

Check glass or other coverings

The glass or face of the fireplace helps regulate carbon monoxide exposure and protects people from the flames. Be sure the glass covering is intact.

Clean ceramic logs

Gas fireplaces use ceramic logs, rocks or beads that can become dusty. Clean them prior to use. Dirty ceramic logs can be a fire hazard and produce an unpleasant burning smell.

Check the blower and pilot

If the fireplace has an electric blower, clean and dust it so it doesn't become clogged. Inspect the pilot light for any wear and tear that includes wiring or structural issues.

It takes several steps to prepare fireplaces for cold weather seasons when they're most likely to be used with frequency.



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