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Ways to make your garden more successful

Homeowners enjoy gardening for many different reasons. In addition to adding beauty to a property, gardens can offset grocery costs by yielding tasty produce. They also offer important habitats and food sources for both insects and animals.

While growing a vegetable or flower garden can turn into a rewarding hobby, or even a passion, gardening also can be overwhelming, particularly when the results are less than stellar. Novice gardeners have scores of resources at their disposal, including the advice of gardeners who have made mistakes and learned from them. The following guidance can make home gardens that much more successful.

START SMALL

You may have visions of an expansive garden growing rows of crops or acres of flowers. But it is smart to start small and build on what you find successful, which includes plants that thrive in your lawn and garden.

This also is beneficial if you are unsure of vegetable yields. Several blooming plants producing bushels of crops can be overwhelming, especially if you can't get to harvesting or cooking them in a timely fashion.

ASSESS THE SOIL

Plants need nutrient-rich soil to

encourage extensive root systems and produce strong and hardy plants. Nourish soil with organic matter, such as manure, compost, shredded leaves, and natural mulch. Add this organic matter in the off-season to give it enough time to be incorporated into the ground before spring. You can have your soil tested for pH and other characteristics that make it friendly or averse to plants at a local garden center.

ARM YOURSELF WITH KNOWLEDGE

Do you know how deeply to plant seeds and how far apart to space plants? Are you aware of the sunlight needs of certain flowers or plants? If not, read the packaging and do your research so your plants have the best chance of not only sprouting, but also surviving. Many people prefer to start seedlings indoors in late winter and then transfer those plants outdoors when they are stronger and more established.

USE RAINWATER

Rainwater contains fewer contaminants and additives than tap water, which can benefit garden plants. Collect rainwater in rain barrels and use irrigation systems to deliver it to the garden.

Home gardens can yield many gifts, from flowers to fruit. Beginners can

utilize some time-tested strategies to increase their chances of planting a successful garden.

SIT IN YOUR YARD AND OBSERVE

Watch the way the sunlight dances over areas of your landscape. Take note of which areas get the most sun and shade. This will help you plan what to plant and where to plant it. Vegetable gardens tend to need ample sunlight to bear pick-worthy produce.

You can give plants a leg up by growing them in optimal conditions.

CHOOSE HARDY VARIETIES

Certain plants have been bred to thrive in your climate, including heat-tolerant plants for climates with sweltering summer sun. Consult with a local gardening center to figure out which plant zone you are in and which plants will do best within that zone.

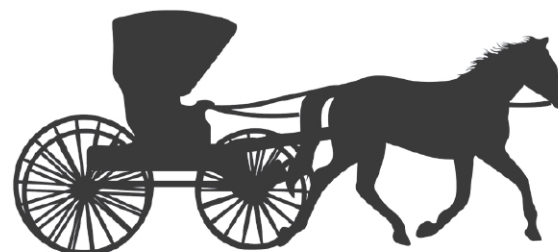


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Air conditioning maintenance tips

There is no denying the relief cool air provides when the temperatures outdoors are particularly steamy. In fact, having a place to cool off is a necessity for those who have succumbed to heat exhaustion or have difficulty regulating their body temperatures.

Even though air conditioning can provide relief, some people are reluctant to turn it on because of the drain on electricity and the subsequent high energy bills that come with it. Certainly running the air conditioning can be costly, but regular maintenance helps a system to work more efficiently. It also enables homeowners to recognize issues that can lead to expensive repairs if left unchecked.

Here are some air conditioning maintenance tips to keep a system in top condition.

CHANGE THE FILTERS

Dirty, clogged filters can cause a

system to work harder to cool down rooms, compromising efficiency. Check the HVAC system's manufacturer recommendation for how frequently to change the filters. Some may benefit from monthly replacement if the air is running constantly.

CONSIDER THE MERV RATING

The filter will have a minimum efficiency reporting value, or MERV, according to This Old House. The higher the number, the better the filtration. But a higher MERV rating requires more energy to pull air through the filter. Therefore, choose a balance of filtration and energy cost requirements.

MAINTAIN THE OUTDOOR UNIT

Clean the AC unit with a soft-bristle brush and vacuum the fins at the start of the season and if the unit becomes dirty from weather, pollen and other elements. Bent condenser or evaporator fins can restrict air flow that would

normally pass through the air conditioning system. Gently straighten them to improve air flow.

CHECK AND REPAIR LEAKS

Airflow leaks through ductwork and with window AC units can reduce efficiency. Hold an incense stick or another smoldering item to check for leaks. If the smoke blows around, there is leakage. Use foil tape to seal small gaps and duct mastic for large ones. Stuff foam around a window unit and use taping as necessary.

SUPPLEMENT WITH A WHOLE-HOUSE FAN

The Family Handyman says an attic-mounted fan pushes hot air out through the attic vents and draws cooler,

outside air through open windows and doors. The whole-house fan can be used to draw out most of the hot air before turning on the AC, or as a substitute on cooler days when having the AC on may not be crucial.

SCHEDULE ANNUAL MAINTENANCE

Homeowners may be able to handle various maintenance tasks, or they may want to have an HVAC technician come out and do the following: clean and inspect coils; adjust and replace fan belts; lubricate motors and bearings; inspect controls and safeties, check refrigerant; and determine if the unit is large enough for the home.

Air conditioning systems need routine maintenance to operate efficiently and at the lowest cost possible.



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Ways to address uninvited garden guests

A beautiful garden is a wonder to behold. After a homeowner toils in the yard amending the soil and planting, it's imperative that a garden be given the best chance to thrive. However, the natural wildlife that shares the space might see that newly cultivated land as the perfect place to enjoy an easy meal or gather nesting materials.

Every gardener likely has a tale about chipmunks, squirrels, woodchucks, and rabbits making nuisances of themselves in the garden. Many of these animals seem to have a taste for bulbs and other plants, which can wreak havoc on what gardeners carefully plan and plant. Finding balance so everyone can get along may require patience and some well-crafted deterrents.

PROVIDE FOOD ELSEWHERE

Try luring the animals away to another area of the yard where the meal is even easier to come by. Squirrels and chipmunks love to dig and bury their caches, so a far-off corner with

freshly tilled soil along with some berries, nuts and additional treats might attract them to that area instead of a newly established garden.

INSTALL FENCING

While chipmunks and squirrels can scale fences easily, such acrobatics may be more challenging for lumbering groundhogs or rabbits. Make digging more difficult by laying chicken wire fencing on top of the soil and stake it down in some areas.

USE WATER OR MOVEMENT

Animals can be scared away if they are sprayed with water, so a well-aimed water gun can chase away the animals when a gardener is able to stand watch. It may be easier to set up pinwheels that blow in the wind, or hang aluminum pie plates or old compact discs from strings near the garden, which may deter animals from getting too close.

USE A SCENT DETERRENT

Some animals are put off by the smell of other animals or aromas they

find unpleasant. The capsaicin in red pepper and cayenne can be off-putting to these animals, so sprinkling it around the garden may ward off pests but not harm the plants. Just reapply after each rain. Similarly, some people have had luck using peppermint. Plant mint around where you do not want the squirrels and chipmunks. Since mint can grow fast and become invasive, it's best to plant in containers and move accordingly.

BUILD A GREENHOUSE

When dealing with tenacious squirrels and chipmunks, the only solution may be to block off all access. Utilize an enclosed greenhouse for the garden, which will keep animals out and even extend the growing season.

Many animals can become nuisances in a yard, particularly in and around gardens. Some humane solutions could remedy the situation.



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How to prepare for a lengthy renovation project

Home renovations can increase resale value and outfit spaces to make them more accommodating to residents. Homeowners interested in remodeling projects understand that such undertakings are often a lengthy process. But the time spent waiting often is well worth it when the work is done and the finished product looks just as homeowners imagined.

Depending on the scope and scale of a project, home renovations can take anywhere from a day or two for minor cosmetic changes to nine months for a major project. Projects like remodeling a kitchen or bathroom have a lot of moving parts, including plumbing and electrical work, structural changes, flooring, and installation of appliances. Due to that complexity, such projects may take six to 12 weeks. A home addition can take months. Homeowners weary of such lengthy undertakings can implement



strategies to make conditions at home more manageable.

GET AN ESTIMATE

Get a rough estimate from contractors so that you can budget accordingly. A project will go nowhere without proper funding. Get detailed estimates that include labor and building materials. Then start saving and stash money away for the project so you're not caught off-guard later on.

CLEAR OUT CLUTTER

Remove any extraneous items from the room or rooms that will be remodeled. Although it will be an added expense, it is a good idea to rent a storage unit or have a storage pod placed in the driveway or yard for the duration of the project. Move items that will not be needed into the unit. This will get them out of the way and protect them from damage.

CONSIDER STARTING IN WARM WEATHER

Contractors will be going in and out of the home each day, and doors and windows may need to be propped open. Schedule a project during those months when temperatures are more

comfortable. If the project involves limited access to the kitchen to cook, utilizing an outdoor grill or kitchen is much easier when the weather is pleasant.

STAY WITH RELATIVES

While some people have no issues living in a residence during a renovation, others may find the work simply too inconvenient or distracting to be around. Time away from the property can help manage stress, and prevent kids, pets and others from getting in the way of work.

SAFEGUARD SENSITIVE ITEMS

Take inventory of items in the home and catalog them for insurance purposes. This way you're covered in the case of damage or theft. Remove documents, like birth certificates, passports, insurance policies, and other private papers, and keep them in a safety deposit box or fireproof safe.

Home renovations may stretch on for weeks or months. However, with adequate preparation, homeowners can see such projects through without facing too much adversity.

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What to know about fertilizing a lawn

Shortly after buying a home, many first-time homeowners recognize how challenging it can be to maintain a property. Many embrace that challenge and refashion their homes to reflect their personalities, interests and tastes.

First-time homeowners may direct the bulk of their attention to decorating the interiors of their homes upon moving in, but the work extends outside as well. Tending to a lawn is a responsibility worth taking seriously, as the American Society of Landscape Architects reports a well-groomed landscape can increase resale value by anywhere from 15 to 20%. First-time homeowners may not be thinking about resale value, but

it's never too early to prioritize lawn care, which should include routine fertilization. Fertilizing can ensure a lawn grows in lush, green and healthy, but first-time homeowners may want to know a few things prior to taking a spreader for a spin for the first time.

- Identify what the lawn needs before purchasing fertilizer. No two lawns are the same, and that's something to keep in mind when shopping for fertilizer. Even neighboring properties may have different soil needs, so it's imperative that homeowners identify any nutrient deficiencies prior to fertilizing. A simple, inexpensive soil test can reveal what a lawn needs, and such results can help homeowners pick the right fertil-

izer for their properties.

- Get a handle on nitrogen needs. First-time homeowners will undoubtedly come across fertilizers promising to address nitrogen needs in a lawn, but it's important to avoid over-fertilizing with nitrogen. Nitrogen is absorbed quickly, particularly when homeowners remember to water each day after fertilizing. So it's easy to add too much nitrogen, which can lead to the development of thatch that ultimately blocks sunlight, nutrients and water, thus leading to weaker roots and a lawn that looks nothing like the lush, green carpet homeowners are aiming for. Homeowners concerned about overdoing it with nitrogen can utilize a slow-release fertilizer that gives the lawn time to absorb nutrients and break them down.

- Apply evenly. Even application is an important component of successful fertilizing. Many find it easier to apply fertilizer evenly when using a spreader with a granule fertilization product.

Spray fertilizers can work as well, but first-timers may find it difficult to apply products evenly when spraying. When using a spreader, read fertilizing packaging instructions carefully to ensure the spreader is on the right setting when starting. If the setting is not correct, you may end up spreading too much or too little fertilizer.

- Fertilize more than once. The lawn care experts at Lawn Doctor® note that strategic applications across the seasons will increase the chances a lawn comes in lush and green. Fertilizing more than once between spring and fall is a necessity no matter which type of grass is in the yard, but the timing may vary depending on grass type and local climate. Consult with a local lawn care professional to determine when and how often to fertilize.

Fertilizing a lawn can produce a home exterior homeowners can be proud of, even if they have little or no experience with lawn maintenance.





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How to make outdoor living spaces comfortable

Private backyards are now go-to spaces for recreation and entertainment and great places to recharge the body and mind.

One ripple effect of the COVID-19 pandemic was more time spent outdoors, even if it was predominantly on one's own property. OnePoll, in conjunction with the lawn care company TruGreen, surveyed 2,000 American homeowners and found participants spent 14 hours outside every week in 2021, which was three hours more than prior to the pandemic. In addition, respondents admitted that time spent outdoors was therapeutic.

A separate survey conducted for the International Casual Furnishings Association found that people now spend more time relaxing, gardening, exercising, dining, and entertaining outside than in years past. Though COVID-19 may no longer dominate headlines, the desire to enjoy outdoor spaces has not waned.

While enjoying outdoor living areas, homeowners can do all they can to make these spaces comfortable and welcoming. The following are some good starting points.

GET ALL LIT UP

Outdoor spaces can be enjoyed no matter the hour when there is ample lighting. That could be why the International Casual Furnishings Association reports those who plan to renovate their



outdoor spaces list outdoor lighting as a priority. Outdoor lighting not only sheds light on entertaining spaces, but also makes spaces safer and more secure.

INCREASE PRIVACY

No matter how friendly homeowners

are with their neighbors, there comes a time when privacy is paramount. Fencing, whether it is wood or vinyl, or even a natural fence made from closely planted hedges, can ensure residents feel comfortable venturing outdoors to swim, take a cat nap or even star gaze in private.

ADDRESS THE ELEMENTS

Homeowners should note the direction their backyard faces and the typical daily conditions of the space. For example, a yard that faces southwest may get plenty of strong sun during the day, requiring the addition of shade trees, covered patios or arbors to cut down on the glare and heat. If the yard is often hit by winds, trees or bushes planted strategically as windbreaks can help.

SIT COMFORTABLY

High-quality comfortable seating increases the likelihood that homeowners will want to stay awhile in their outdoor

spaces. A deep seating set complete with plush chairs, outdoor sofa or love seat and chaise lounge chairs gives people more opportunity to sit and stay awhile.

TAKE A DIP

A pool can be the perfect gathering spot on a warm day, while a spa/hot tub can bridge the gap to cooler weather. According to the Family Handyman, soaking in hot tubs can relax tired muscles after a long day, loosen up stiff joints, improve cardiovascular health, and reduce the time it takes to fall asleep.

BITE BACK AT BUGS

Homeowners may want to consider using a professional exterminator to get rid of ticks, mosquitoes and other nuisance insects from outdoor spaces. As people spend more time enjoying their properties, they can consider the many ways to make outdoor living spaces more comfortable.

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Common questions and answers about carpeting

No two homeowners are the same, and that's perhaps most evident in the design decisions individuals make when decorating their homes. Flooring is among the first things a person notices when entering a home, and the array of options consumers have when choosing flooring materials underscores how unique each homeowner is.

Carpeting is a popular flooring option. Many homeowners prefer carpeting because they feel it helps to create a cozy, welcoming vibe in a home. Consumers considering carpet for their homes may have some common questions, and answers to those inquiries can help homeowners determine if carpeting is for them.

IS CARPETING EXPENSIVE?

Home renovations are expensive, and the cost of a project is often the first question homeowners have. The cost of carpeting varies widely and is contingent on an array of variables unique to each home and homeowner, including square footage, materials chosen by the homeowner and the cost of labor associated with installation, which can vary significantly between locations. According to the online renovation resource HomeAdvisor, the average cost to install or

replace carpet is between \$782 and \$2,812. That wide range illustrates how much the cost of the project will be affected by variables unique to each project. However, even homeowners who come in around or above the high end of that estimate may find carpet installation is among the more affordable ways to give the interior of a home an entirely new look and feel.

IS CARPET PADDING A MUST?

Carpet padding is one of the costs associated with carpeting. When shopping for carpeting for the first time, homeowners may notice carpet padding costs on their estimate and wonder what it is and if it's truly necessary. Carpet padding is necessary, as Flooring101.com notes that it keeps the underside of the carpet from wearing against the subfloor while absorbing the impact of foot traffic and furniture. That absorption helps to reduce stress on the carpet and thus extend its life expectancy. Carpet padding also can have an insulating effect and help to reduce sound in a room. So while carpet padding might be a costly expense on an itemized estimate, it's well worth the investment.

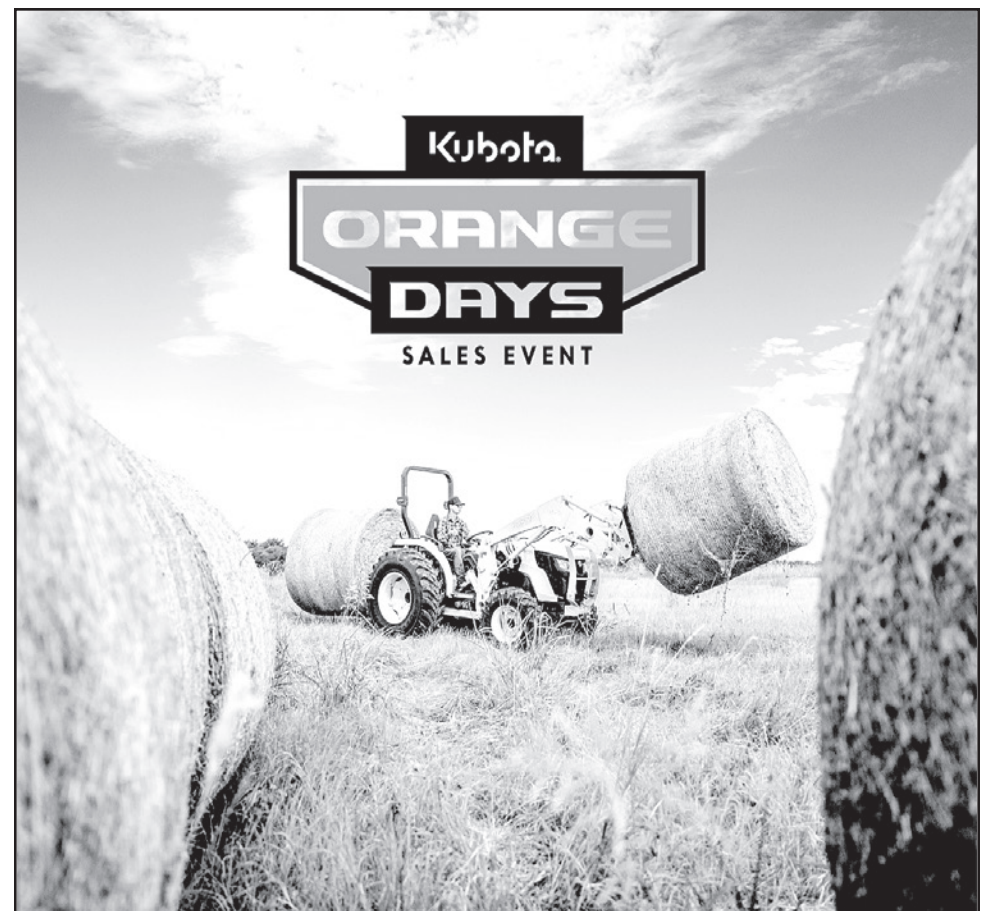
HOW DIFFERENT ARE CARPETING MATERIALS?

Carpeting materials differ in their

look, feel and function. The home renovation experts at Angi.com note that some carpet fibers are better suited to areas in a home that attract a lot of foot traffic, while others make for better options in areas with less use, such as a bedroom or home office. For example, Angi.com notes that polyester has a luxurious, soft feel, making it a strong option for bedroom floors. Nylon carpet fiber is resistant to stains and damage and maintains

its height under heavy weight, making this a good option in heavily trafficked rooms. Homeowners can discuss each carpeting material with their flooring retailer to determine which suits their budget and which is best in each room of their homes.

Carpeting can help make a home feel more cozy and welcoming. Homeowners can work with a local carpeting retailer to find a carpet that meets their needs and fits their budget.



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Spring planting pointers

Many people view spring as a season of rejuvenation. That renewal may be somewhat metaphorical for human beings, but it's literal for lawns and gardens that begin to grow anew as temperatures rise and hours of daylight increase in spring.

Each spring presents an opportunity for homeowners to get back outside and tend to their gardens. As the temperatures rise, homeowners can consider these spring planning pointers to ensure their landscapes look lush and full in the months ahead.

START WITH THE SOIL

Soil can serve as the starting point each spring. Winter can take its toll on a garden and even overwhelm the area with debris over the colder months. Clear rocks and other debris from the area before loosening the soil. The Farmer's Almanac recommends loosening soil to a depth of at least eight inches if planting a new garden. An existing garden may only need to be loosened to a depth of around six inches, after which homeowners can mix compost into the soil in early spring. Compost is organic matter that provides nutrients and helps to build strong plant roots.

CONSIDER A RAISED GARDEN

Consider a raised garden in colder climates. The Farmer's Almanac notes



raised gardens can help homeowners in colder climates dry out and warm up wet, cold soils more quickly. Homeowners in such regions also can cover their beds with black plastic or cardboard prior to planting. Doing so can protect the beds from late-season snow and spring rains and also helps to overcome erosion.

TAKE SOIL TEMPERATURES

Unpredictable weather is among the

noticeable effects of climate change in recent years. That lack of predictability can make spring planting a little more tricky than it once was. Experts note that soil temperatures around 50°F are best for cool-season crops, while soil should be 60°F or warmer when planting warm-weather plants such as tomatoes.

WORK WITH A GARDEN CENTER

Work with a garden center to identify what to plant. The right plants for

one region may not be ideal for another, so homeowners are urged to work with a local landscaper or garden center before planting. Such a consultation can be especially useful for homeowners planting a new garden. Landscapers and garden center professionals will know which plants work in the local climate.

CONSIDER PLANTING VEGETABLES

Consider planting vegetables in the spring. Various garden experts note that spring is an ideal time to plant a vegetable garden. If planted at the right time, a vegetable garden can save homeowners money on their grocery bills and provide a

season's worth of fresh veggies. Lettuce and spinach are sun- and shade-friendly vegetables, which can make them good options for a spring garden. Cool-season root vegetables, which include beets, carrots and swiss chard, are some other notable veggies that can thrive in early spring.

Spring is a season of rejuvenation for gardens. That's even more true when homeowners consider some conventional planting wisdom in early spring.

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Some great reasons to replace aging windows

Windows in a home are easy to take for granted. Unless windows are showing signs of wear and tear or so dirty that it's hard to see through them, it's easy for them to go unnoticed. However, replacement windows can add value to a home and even save homeowners a substantial amount of money.

Much of the savings that can be attributed to new windows is related to energy efficiency. The Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy estimates that as much as 30 percent of heating and cooling energy can be lost through heat gain or heat loss, and ag-

ing, inefficient windows contribute to such losses. Replacing those windows can save homeowners substantial amounts of money, with one expert at Angi estimating that installation of energy efficient windows can help trim energy bills by as much as 12 percent.

Cost savings are often noted when firms promote replacement windows, but homeowners should know that replacement windows also provide numerous additional benefits. In fact, the following are three great reasons for homeowners to consider upgrading their windows today.

1. New windows help reduce carbon footprint. The U.S. Environmental

Protection Agency reports that replacing single-pane windows with ENERGY STAR® certified windows can help to reduce CO2 emissions by a significant margin. The EPA reports that such windows can save the equivalent of as much as 6,200 pounds of CO2 emissions thanks to reduced energy consumption associated with the new windows.

2. New windows can brighten a home. Natural light brightens a room and can make it appear larger. Homeowners who have grown accustomed to old windows may not realize how little light such windows let into their homes. Aging windows can become foggy over time and prevent natural light from getting into a home. That can create a gloomy feel and force homeowners to turn up the thermostat on cold days. New windows brighten the home and the natural light that pours in on a cold day can

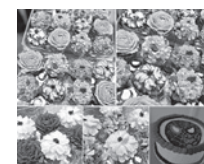
help heat the home at the same time.

3. New windows cut down on noise. Window manufacturers are always on the lookout for ways to produce windows that make homes more comfortable. Noise reduction is one way to accomplish that goal, and Consumer Reports notes that triple-glazed windows can help to dramatically reduce outside noise. Homeowners who currently have single-pane windows may be astonished by the difference in outside noise levels when upgrading to triple-glazed windows, which contain a third layer of glass. That third layer of glass significantly reduces noise levels, making triple-glaze windows ideal for homes on busy streets or those in urban areas with lots of foot traffic.

Replacement windows pay numerous dividends. Homeowners can reap these rewards and others by replacing aging windows.



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Beware of poisonous plants when gardening

Spending time in the backyard can be restorative and relaxing. Is it any wonder why homeowners are increasingly improving their homes so that they can blur the lines between the indoors and outside and enjoy more recreational moments in nature?

Part of what makes a landscape inviting is the bevy of plants dotting suburban landscapes. Individuals may take painstaking pleasure in mapping out landscapes that are both functional and appealing. When selecting foliage, it's wise for homeowners to familiarize themselves with certain plants that may not be very welcome in their entertaining areas, particularly those that are dangerous. Poison ivy, oak and sumac may be some of the better-known poisonous plants, but there are others that can prove problematic as well.

GIANT HOGWEED

This is an invasive plant that grows throughout North America but is particularly well-known along the Atlantic coast. The sap in the leaves can cause phytophotodermatitis, which is a chemical reaction after exposure to sunlight. Painful, severe blisters can form on the skin wherever it touches, and Giant Hogweed sap may cause blindness if it gets into the eyes.



LILY OF THE VALLEY

This plant is known for delicate, bell-shaped flowers and a sweet scent. While Lily of the Valley is not poisonous to touch, if ingested, toxic glycosides in the flowers, berries, leaves, and stems may cause a host of prob-

lems, including disorientation, vomiting, blurry vision, and rashes.

BLEEDING HEART

Native to woodlands, this perennial loves the shade. It produces unique flowers that resemble tiny pink or white hearts with drops of blood at the bottom. Roots and foliage of Bleeding Heart contain alkaloids that are toxic to animals if ingested in high quantities.

NERRIUM OLEANDER

All parts of this beautiful shrub are extremely poisonous. It should definitely be kept away from pets and treated with caution or avoided altogether.

FOXGLOVES

Adored among pollinators, Foxgloves produce towering pink and white trumpet blooms in early summer. The whole plant is toxic if eaten, however. People who eat any part or attempt

to make tea may find their heart rate slowing down or becoming irregular.

STINGING NETTLE

Brushing up against Stinging Nettle can be a painful experience. The plant has tiny stinging hairs on its leaves and stems.

WILD HEMLOCK

This is a very poisonous member of the carrot family. If consumed, Wild Hemlock, which looks like parsley, can cause health problems. Toxins also can be absorbed through the skin.

DEADLY NIGHTSHADE (BELLADONNA)

A beautiful plant that produces shiny, black cherry-like berries, this contains a poison that can paralyze the gastrointestinal muscles and eventually the heart. The Royal Horticultural Society says that even rubbing up against it can irritate the skin.

Many plants, however beautiful, can be dangerous if ingested or touched.

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Signs of potential electrical hazards

Homeowners know that the work of maintaining a home is never done. Cleaning is a daily task associated with homeownership, and such sessions can reveal more than dust buildup or dirty walls and surfaces.

When cleaning a home, homeowners can pull double duty and look for potentially hazardous situations. For example, vacuuming and dusting sessions can present a great opportunity to spot electrical hazards that might otherwise go unseen. With that in mind, homeowners can keep an eye out for these four signs of potential electrical hazards when working around the house.

TINGLING WHEN TOUCHING AN ELECTRICAL APPLIANCE

The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) advises homeowners to call a qualified electrician immediately if they experience a tingling feeling when touching an electrical appliance. The Electrical Safety Office notes experiencing a tingle or the feeling of being shocked is not normal. Homeowners who experience such a feeling should avoid the location and warn others in the home to do the same.

WALL OUTLETS THAT LOOK OR FEEL UNUSUAL

Wall outlets do not garner much attention, as many are low enough to be out of sight or even behind furniture. So a cleaning session might be the only time homeowners will notice issues with wall outlets. The NFPA notes discolored outlets or outlets that feel warm to the touch is a sign of an electrical problem. Various issues can cause outlets to

look or feel unusual. An outlet could be short-circuiting or wires could be damaged, and each issue merits the attention of a qualified electrician.

FOUL ODORS

An odor that calls to mind burning rubber is another indicator of an electrical problem. Various electrical experts indicate such odors can be indicative of damaged wiring, an overloaded circuit or loose connections, each of which poses a significant safety hazard. The NFPA urges homeowners to contact a qualified electrician immediately if they sense a smell of burning rubber in their homes.

FLICKERING LIGHTS

Homeowners won't need to wait until cleaning sessions to notice flickering lights. Such flickering is hard to miss regardless of what residents are doing inside a home. Sometimes lights flicker

because of a loose bulb, so homeowners who notice flickering should first turn off the light, let the bulb cool down if need be and then check to make sure it isn't loose. If the bulb isn't loose, then lights could be flickering for a multitude of reasons. A loose connection can cause flickering, as can an overloaded circuit. Homeowners also may not realize that not all bulbs and dimmer switches are designed to work together. For example, modern LED light bulbs often require the installation of specific dimmer switches or the lights won't operate properly. Flickering can result if these products are not compatible. If a home is old, then flickering lights could be due to old wiring that needs to be replaced.

Daily and weekly cleaning sessions can be a good time for homeowners to perform a quick audit of electrical outlets and lights to ensure everything is safe and working properly.



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The benefits of planting native species

Spring presents ideal growing conditions for many plants, making this season an ideal time to tend to lawns and gardens. Though it's easy to succumb to the temptation of exotic plants, avid gardeners and eco-conscious planters recognize the significance of native plants.

Novices may not realize that native plants are much better for a landscape and the local ecosystem it calls home. Recognition of the many benefits of native plants can make for healthier lawns and gardens and a healthier planet as well.

BUILT FOR LOCAL CLIMATES

Native plants are built for local climates. One of the issues gardeners who plant exotic plants run into is keeping those plants thriving when weather turns harsh. For example, exotic plants may require extra watering in areas that experience drought or even long periods without precipitation in spring. The United States Environmental Protection Agency reports that at least 40 states anticipate water shortages by 2024. Planting native plants can help to combat those shortages by reducing the need to water plants if conditions become dry in late spring.

SAVE MONEY

Native plants save money. It's also important to note that native plants save homeowners money. Because they're capable of thriving in local conditions, native plants tend to require less watering, which can help homeowners reduce their utility costs. But native plants also require less upkeep, which means homeowners can save on potentially costly, not to mention eco-unfriendly, pesticides and other amendments in order to maintain the

look of exotic plants. And though it's not always the case, exotic plants tend to cost more at nurseries than natives.

SAVE TIME

Native plants save gardeners time. In addition to saving money, native plants don't require as much attention. Though spring and summer is a great time to be in the yard, it's also a great time to be out and about. Because native plants thrive in local conditions, gardeners won't need to spend much of their free time tending to them. Exotics tend to require a lot of extra attention and effort, especially when conditions become harsh. Spending more time outdoors in harsh weather does not appeal to most gardeners.

BLEND IN WELL

Native plants blend in with an existing landscape. Native plants look natural within an existing landscape, adding some instant aesthetic appeal without breaking the bank. When planting exotics, homeowners may feel a need to redesign their en-



tire gardens to create a certain look (think Japanese garden). That can quickly consume a budget and take up a lot of free time in both the short- and long-term.

Planting season marks a great time to revitalize a landscape. Choosing native plants when doing so pays numerous dividends for homeowners and the planet they call home.



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