



# Fall Home & Garden Guide

A special publication of the

Salisbury  Post | 1D

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# The benefits of working with an interior designer

Homes require an investment of time, energy and money. The payoff of those investments is substantial, and the benefits of home ownership are more profound than even longtime homeowners may recognize.

A 2016 report from the National Association of Realtors indicated that home ownership boosts kids' performance in the classroom, leads to greater participation in civic and volunteer activities and improves health care outcomes, among other benefits. With so much to gain from home ownership, it's no wonder so many people across the globe are willing to commit the time, energy and financial resources necessary to own their own homes.

Homes are undoubtedly a point of pride for millions of homeowners, and that sense

of fulfillment is even greater when interiors are up-to-date and welcoming. Home trends come and go, and busy homeowners can be forgiven if they're not able to keep up with the latest interior design styles. That's the job of a skilled interior designer.

Working with such professionals when redoing a home's interior can make all the difference and increase the already profound sense of pride many homeowners have in their homes.

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that fit the overall design scheme, interior designers are saving homeowners the cost and headaches associated with fixable yet expensive mistakes.

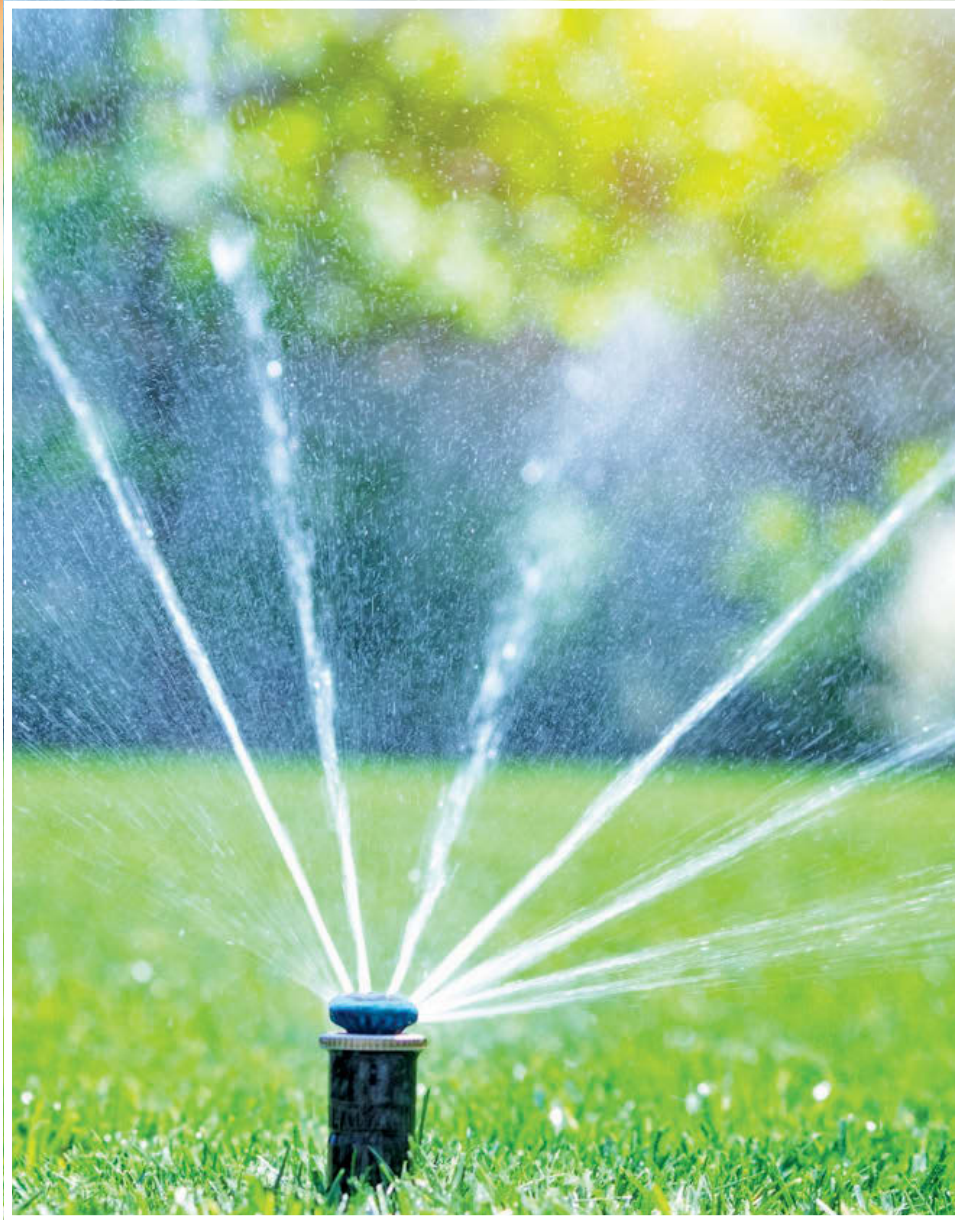
Interior designs are up-to-date on the latest trends. Real estate and design trends come and go, and dated designs can adversely affect what homeowners recoup at resale. Homeowners who want to update their home interiors with the ultimate goal of selling their homes can work with experienced interior designers who know which trends are in and which are out. That knowledge can make it easier and more lucrative to sell a home.

Homes are a significant investment, and investing in the services of an experienced interior designer can ensure homeowners maximize the value of their homes.

Interior designers can help narrow down the possibilities. A simple internet search prior to beginning a home renovation project will turn up millions of results. That can leave homeowners' heads spinning as they try to identify their own style and plan a project that coordinates with their preferences. Experienced interior designers can help homeowners identify their style and offer practical insight as they work with clients to choose elements to incorporate into spaces they aspire to renovate.

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# 8 steps to a more functional kitchen

A kitchen is often the most utilized room in a house. Meals may be prepared, cooked and often eaten in kitchens, and the room is often utilized as a homework spot or a makeshift place to pay bills and stay on top of household needs. By enhancing the organization and functionality of the kitchen, homeowners can enjoy these popular spaces even more.

Homeowners have increased their spending on home improvements in recent years. According to the Joint Center for Housing Centers for Harvard University, project spending rose to \$472 billion in 2022 from \$328 billion in 2019. It's estimated consumers will have spent \$485 billion by the end of 2023. Kitchen renovations were the most popular upgrade and accounted for the highest budgets in 2021, according to Houzz. When the time comes to renovate a kitchen, homeowners can take steps to make these spaces more organized and therefore functional. Here are eight tips to creating a more functional kitchen.

**1. Increase storage, and then invest in more.** Make the most of corner cabinets and other potential dead spots in a kitchen. Various products can be used to organize



Meals may be prepared, cooked and often eaten in kitchens, and the room is often utilized as a homework spot or a makeshift place to pay bills and stay on top of household needs.

awkwardly angled or shaped areas. Kitchen designers also can work with you to reconfigure cabinets and kitchen layouts.

**2. Organize utensils and dishes around**

**the sink/dishwasher.** Rather than traversing the kitchen to put clean dishes away, make loading and unloading the dishwasher that much easier by locating commonly used items next to and above it. Similarly, place frequently used saucepans, baking dishes and other items near the oven or food preparation area.

**3. Utilize drawer and cabinet organizers.** Make a place for everything in the

kitchen. Take out all items and see what you need and use all the time. Then coordinate storage around those items so everything fits perfectly. Pull-out shelves and Lazy Susans also can facilitate access.

**4. Add shelves to cabinets.** If you can afford to have a custom-built kitchen, by all means design cabinets according to preference. If you're using standard cabinets, you may have to reconfigure shelves and spacing to fit the items you have. This also will help you maximize cabinet space.

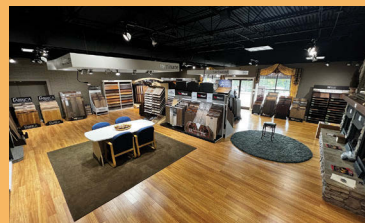
**5. Organize the garbage.** Have a pull-out drawer or cabinet to store trash bins. Separate compost, trash and recycling needs.

**6. Create continuity in the room.** Many open concept homes will have kitchens open up to another room in the home. Mirror the design scheme from elsewhere in the house, and make sure that the flow between spaces is not obstructed.

**7. Create a beverage station.** A beverage station can minimize the time needed to make a cup of tea or coffee or for the kids to grab juice or chocolate milk.

**8. Have a workspace in the kitchen.** Whether paying bills, making a grocery list or leaving notes for the family, a dedicated workspace can add more function to the room. Be sure there is task lighting nearby and ample overhead lighting to ensure that all kitchen needs are illuminated properly.

A more functional kitchen can make this already popular space even more so.



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Various products can be used to organize awkwardly angled or shaped areas.

# What to know about kitchen countertop materials

Kitchens are the busiest rooms in most homes. Kitchens have become more than just places to prepare meals, with many functioning as gathering spaces and even go-to dining spots in homes that do not feature formal dining rooms.

So much time spent in the kitchen makes it worthwhile to invest in these popular spaces. Kitchen renovations are high on many homeowners' to-do lists, and there's many decisions to make once they commit to redoing the room. When renovating a kitchen, homeowners will have to choose which countertop material they want to install, and the following rundown of popular options can help simplify that decision.

## Quartz

Quartz is considered a low-maintenance and durable countertop material. The home improvement experts at This Old House note that quartz countertops are typically 94 percent ground quartz and now come with an honed, sandblasted or embossed treatment, which makes them appealing to homeowners with varying ideas on the ideal look of a kitchen countertop. Quartz can crack if it's not handled properly, and edges and corners can chip over time. Rounded edges can minimize the risk of chipping. Costs vary by location and product availability, but quartz typically costs about the same as natural stone.

## Granite

Consumer Reports notes that no two slabs of granite are the same, and that uniqueness has long appealed to homeowners. Tests run by Consumer Reports found that heat, cuts and scratches did not harm granite, though this

material, like quartz, can crack around edges and corners. Granite is a durable material that, if properly maintained, can last several decades. Granite also is nonporous, which makes it resistant to bacteria.

## Laminate

Laminate countertops appeal to budget-friendly homeowners and Consumer Reports notes that

they're easy to install. Home Depot also notes that laminate countertops come in a wide range of colors, textures and designs. Laminate countertops also are durable, which helps budget-conscious homeowners stretch their dollars even further. Laminate countertops are easily maintained, though it's also easy to permanently damage them

with knives, so Consumer Reports recommends always using a cutting board when preparing meals on laminate.

## Butcher Block

Butcher block countertops are among the more unique options homeowners may consider. Sometimes referred to as "wood countertops," butcher block countertops are made from wooden strips that are fused together. The home improvement experts at BobVila.com note that butcher block is among the more affordable materials, but the final cost will be dictated by location and availability. BobVila.com notes that butcher block countertops are highly sensitive to liquid, so exposure to moisture should be limited. Sealing butcher block countertops immediately after installation can help protect against bacteria and warping. Though butcher blocks can be high maintenance, many homeowners find the unique look is well worth the extra elbow grease.

Kitchen countertops can define how the room looks, and homeowners have many options to choose from when designing a new kitchen.



**When renovating a kitchen, homeowners will have to choose which countertop material they want to install, and the following rundown of popular options can help simplify that decision.**

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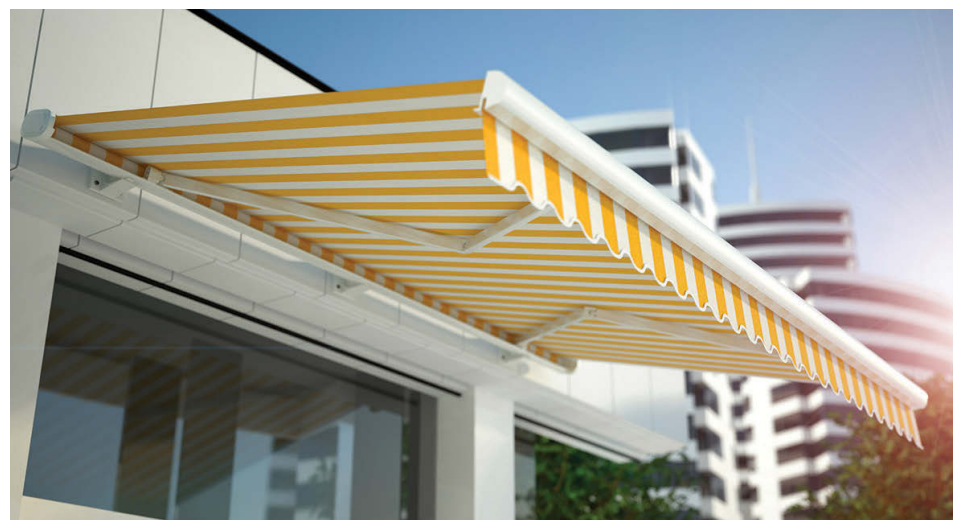
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Learning about the various types of awnings can help homeowners determine which option best suits their needs.

## A guide to various types of home awnings

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

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

### Fixed awnings

Fixed awnings are stationary on a building's exterior. While the awnings are generally stable, they can be damaged by snow

or wind. It's key to find an installation expert to make sure the awning is installed correctly so that it can withstand weather and other issues. It's also important to know that fixed awnings remain in the same position and orientation, so its best to know exactly where to place it beforehand.

### Retractable awning

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

### Motorized retractable awning

Motorized retractable awnings offer the utmost convenience. Standard retractable offerings require a handle or hand crank to manually extend or fold up the awning. Motorized awnings can be operated with a sensor, remote or even motion trigger. Even though

they cost more, they're a favorite among homeowners.

### Areas of use

Awnings can be installed in various locations. Patio awnings are much preferred because of their large coverage area, which typically spans entire patios. Door awnings are installed above the exterior door of an entryway to protect visitors and occupants from precipitation and to improve the home's look. Window awnings can add additional shade and privacy. There also are side awnings, which are essentially wall-like structures that run across a patio, garden or balcony for wind or sun protection. They're also utilized to improve privacy.

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



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# Prepare your garden for winter's onslaught

Individuals who don't live near the equator or in another warm climate know that winter will rear its chilly head this year. Cold temperatures and snowy conditions may be excellent for skiing and sledding, but gardeners recognize these conditions are not ideal for their plants.

The inevitable slowing of activity in the garden during fall marks a time to shift attention from constant plant care to preparing the landscape for next season. It may be tempting to simply let Mother Nature take over, but a little pre-winter TLC can ensure gardens make it through winter unscathed.

## Remove spent plants

Decomposing organic material is the basis for compost and other fertilizers. However, vegetable plants that are left to sit can lead to decay in the garden. Decaying plants can serve as hosts for pest populations and diseases. Rotting vegetables also can drop unwanted seeds into the soil, which eventually can strip nutrients that normally would go to next year's crops.

Ornamental plants and perennials can be cut back in fall. Cut down stalks and remove leaves.

## Plant a cover crop

The gardening resource This Is My Garden recommends planting a cover crop to set the stage for a successful spring. A cover crop protects the soil and can return nutrients to it. When the soil is bare during winter, weed



**Adding a layer of mulch around plants can insulate roots and the soil against hard frosts.**

seeds can easily blow in and lie in wait, ultimately becoming a problem during the ensuing year. Cover crops can include clover or field peas, which will increase the levels of available nitrogen.

## Amend the soil

Fall is a perfect time to add soil amendments, such as

manure and compost. These fertilizers will add nutrients and break down gradually, enriching the soil over the winter.

## Replenish mulch

Gardeners may have added mulch around shrubs and other areas of the landscape early in the season because it is attractive. But mulch also does much to reduce water loss and protect the soil from erosion. It may inhibit weed growth as well. Replacing mulch when the mercury drops can insulate the soil, which helps to regulate soil temperature. A thick layer of mulch around root vegetables left in the garden can offer protection against hard frosts.

## Divide bulbs

Divide plant bulbs and plant them where you want flowers like daffodils and tulips to grow in the spring.

## Prune dormant plants

Wait until plants are dormant to prune them and adjust their shape. Most shrubs and trees should be pruned in late winter, right before new growth.

## Move potted plants

Bring delicate plants into a sheltered area, such as a greenhouse or indoor garage, so they can continue to thrive during the winter.

Fall and winter still provide opportunities to spend time in the garden. At this point in the year, gardeners can prepare landscapes for the next season.

# Fresh produce to enjoy this fall

As hot, humid days give way to cool fall temperatures, it is prime time to enjoy a new bounty of fresh vegetables. Homeowners may be ready to pick the vegetables they have been growing the past several months. While many home vegetable gardeners focus on early spring plantings that yield the tomatoes,

cucumbers and squashes of summer, they also should consider summertime sowing that will yield tasty offerings throughout fall. Some of these cooler-weather stock can be harvested just before frost sets in. Individuals ready to bite in to produce plucked at the peak of fall have many different options to look

forward to. Here are some of common fall produce items that will be available at farm stands near you well into November.

- bok choy
- broccoli
- cauliflower
- kohlrabi
- leaf lettuce
- mustard greens

- spinach
- Swiss chard
- turnips
- beets
- Brussels sprouts
- cabbage
- green onion
- kale
- peas
- radishes

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# Did you know?

When remodeling a home with the ultimate goal of making it more attractive to prospective buyers, homeowners can benefit from taking stock of current trends, including the style of home that's most popular. According to a 2020 Homes.com survey of more than 5,000 adults across the United States, modern farmhouse is the most favored house style.

The survey asked participants to choose from a selection of styles, including mid-century modern ranch, Spanish colonial/southwest, bohemian craftsman, Italianate, French chateau, and Tudor. The modern farmhouse style was the most popular choice in 42 of the 50 states, proving that home style preference is not beholden to geography.

Respondents gave a host of reasons for favoring the modern farmhouse look, including that the style is "aesthetically appealing but not boring" and that it looks "simple, cozy, and not too busy."



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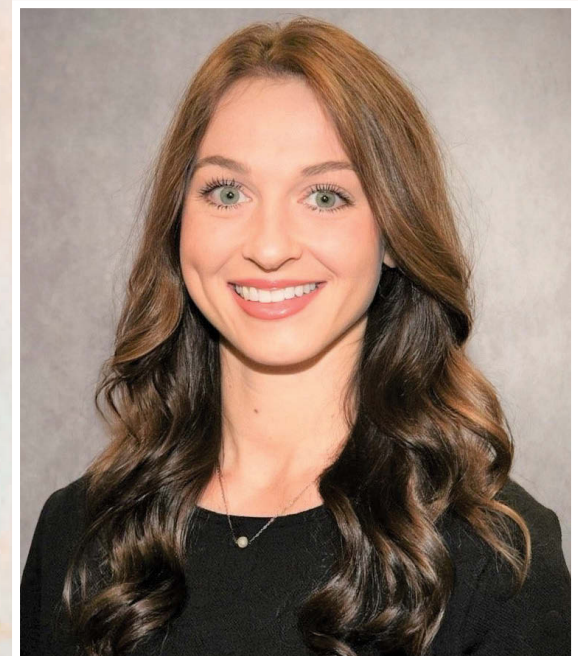


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## How homeowners can turn attics into livable spaces

Houses typically feature various areas that are traditionally designed for storage, such as garages, basements and attics. However, with some renovation, these spaces can be transformed into livable areas.

Homeowners who would like to convert attics into livable spaces need to take certain things into consideration before starting an improvement project. While the attic may seem like it has plenty of room and is structurally sound enough to walk in, that's not necessarily so. To be converted into usable living space, an attic must be brought up to the standards of modern building codes, according to the design experts at Board & Vellum.

Retrofitting beams and insulation can eat up available space in an attic. Thus, it is best to consult an expert to see if an attic can be converted.

Furthermore, an attic that was not initially designed as a room when the house was built can add extra "load" upstairs if it is converted. That could present certain structural problems. That means a structural engineer also must be consulted to see if adding beams, flooring and drywall will necessitate other changes elsewhere in the home to accommodate the extra load.

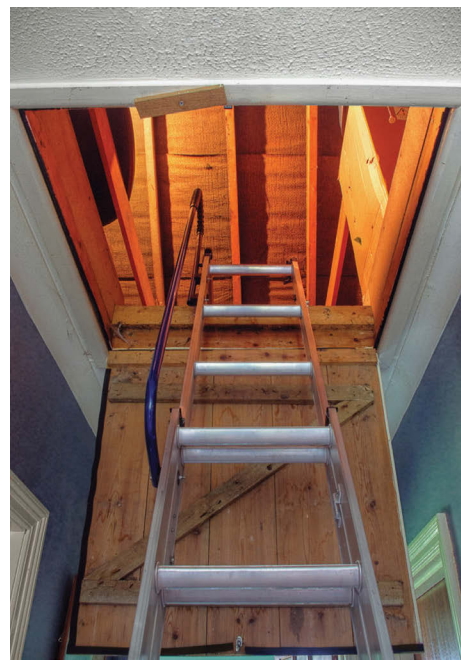
In order to have a functional attic room, building codes will dictate that it needs to be accessible by a full-size stair-

case. Also, it will need to have another exit in case of an emergency so that will likely be an accessible window, according to the home information site The Fill. Homeowners' budgets and renovation plans will need to factor into these considerations. Homeowners also are advised to check local permits to determine what else may be required to go forward. It is best to follow the rules. Lack of a permit for work can affect the ability to sell a home down the line.

Individuals also should plan for heating and cooling upgrades as the home will need to have ductwork installed in the attic, or at the least, a stand-alone heating and cooling unit.

As heat rises, it can get quite warm in an attic, so ventilation and comfort should be considered. The attic will need to be wired for electricity for lighting and other needs. Air sealing and additional insulation can the attic space more comfortable as well. Consult with a qualified electrician and an HVAC technician and have an energy audit done to discuss needs.

Attic renovations can give homeowners more space in their homes, which can be used as offices, bedrooms or cozy corners. This is no small undertaking and all of the right steps need to be followed to ensure a legal, safe and successful renovation.



**Homeowners who would like to convert attics into livable spaces need to take certain things into consideration before starting an improvement project.**

## Tired of the color of your vinyl siding? Paint it.

Vinyl siding is not something that many homeowners may consider painting, but it can be done. However, some contractors may not recommend it as the best option to overhaul a home. Painting siding

means it will only be as durable as the paint used. It's also essential to determine if painting vinyl will void any warranties. Wood or engineered wood or fiber cement siding tend to be better options than vinyl

should you want to switch colors down the line. But vinyl siding can be painted if it is done right, and it can be an affordable way to change the look of a home without investing in new siding. According to Benjamin Moore Paints, vinyl siding that will be painted will need to be cleaned thoroughly, including the removal of any mildew, chalk or dirt, to enhance paint adhesion. Pitted or porous vinyl siding always

must be primed, but others may not require priming. Choose an exterior paint designed for painting on vinyl. Benjamin Moore has a palette called Colors for Vinyl that can be used in select exterior paint lines. Two coats of paint are recommended. According to BobVila.com, paint for vinyl has acrylic and urethane resins that accommodate the expansion and contraction of vinyl and help the paint stick. Also, for the

best results, the home improvement experts on the site advise painting when

temperatures are mild and there is low relative humidity and an overcast sky.

## Did you know?

A recent survey of home renovation industry professionals conducted by Fixr.com found that creating indoor spaces outdoors was homeowners' biggest priority regarding renovations in 2022.

Sixty-two percent of renovation-minded homeowners surveyed indicated outdoor dining areas are their most sought-after living space. In addition, 41 percent of respondents felt outdoor kitchens were their biggest priority. The survey found that certain outdoor living space features were especially popular, none more so than comfortable outdoor furniture.

Firepits, outdoor fireplaces, swimming pools, hot tubs, and outdoor connectivity were some additional popular features among homeowners focused on their outdoor living spaces.



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# Don't get shocked by home electric safety issues

Electricity helps run the world, including our homes and businesses. Without electricity, we'd have no access to lighting, our interior spaces may not be heated or cooled effectively, and the computers and other devices we rely on so heavily would not run.

Even though electricity is designed to make people's lives more convenient, it's easy to take it for granted and become complacent about the safety needed to use it effectively. The Electrical Safety Foundation International says each year electrical malfunctions account for 35,000 home fires causing more than 1,130 injuries, 500 deaths and \$1.4 billion in property damage. Since the average American home was built in 1977, many existing homes of this age and older simply cannot handle modern demand for electricity without modification.

The following are some warning signs that electrical issues could lead to bigger problems:

- Tripping of circuit breakers or blowing of fuses regularly
- Dimming of lights when other devices are in use
- Buzzing sounds from outlets or switches
- Discolored outlets
- Seemingly underpowered appliances

Additional warning signs can include a tingling feeling when an electrical appliance is touched, rubbery smells or an aroma of burning.

Individuals can take certain precautions to ensure electrical safety at home and at work. Here are nine guidelines to follow, courtesy of the National Fire Protection.

1. Have any home you are buying or renting inspected by a qualified private inspector in accordance with local requirements.
2. When electrical work is needed, hire a qualified, licensed electrician.
3. Use only one heat-producing appliance plugged into a receptacle outlet at a time.
4. Do not use extension cords for major

appliances like ovens, washers, stoves or microwaves. They should be plugged directly into a wall receptacle outlet.

5. Ground-fault circuit interrupters (GFCIs) should be installed in kitchens, bathrooms, garages, and basements to shut off an electrical circuit when it becomes a shock hazard.
6. Extension cords should only be used temporarily. Have an electrician install more outlets if they are needed.
7. Keep the area around the electric meter clear.
8. Make sure outdoor lights and other fixtures are rated for outdoor use.
9. Label the circuit breakers to understand the different circuits in the home and know which to turn off when electrical work is being conducted.

It doesn't take much for an electrical issue to become serious and start a fire or cause shocking. Treat all electricity use in a home or business seriously.



Individuals can take certain precautions to ensure electrical safety at home and at work.

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## 5 signs it's time to renovate

Homeowners renovate their homes for a variety of reasons. Renovations can increase the value of a property and make homes safer and more comfortable for their occupants. Improvements also can be made to stay current with the times or to give a home a new vibe.

Statista projects \$510 billion will be spent on home improvements in 2024. The home improvement market is generating significant revenue. In fact, nearly a quarter of Americans opting to renovate their homes will spend an average of \$10,000 on their projects. According to a Home Stars Renovation report, 8 percent of Canadian homeowners who have renovated have spent more than \$20,000 on a home improvement project.

Kitchens and bathrooms often get the most attention when it comes to home improvement. However, every room and space in a home may need a renovation at some point, and the following are five signs it's time to renovate.



Improvements also can be made to stay current with the times or to give a home a new vibe.

### 1. Age

The National Association of Home Builders states that 50 percent of U.S. homes are over the age of 40. That means that age alone could dictate a need to renovate, particularly if some materials are original to the home. For example, asphalt roofs typically last 25 to 30 years, while window frames can last 20 to 50 years depending on how well they have been maintained.

### 2. Inconvenient layout

Some homeowners

scratch their heads when faced with awkward floor plan layouts. While one may live with the inconvenience for some time, typically a floor plan that isn't working for the homeowner is a major driver of renovations.

### 3. Outdated looks

A home can look dated even if it is a relatively recent build. That's because trends change quickly. For example, dark, cherry cabinets that were popular just a little while ago have now been replaced by lighter color palettes. Homeowners whose homes do not match the looks emulated in design magazines may consider a change, particularly if they're planning to sell soon.

### 4. Deterioration

Signs of water, storm or structural damage should be addressed as soon as possible. Any deterioration should be a strong indicator that it's time to renovate.

### 5. Efficiency

Escalating utility bills could be indicative of an inefficient home. Homeowners can conduct energy audits and then improve the areas where energy loss may be occurring, such as windows, doors, siding, and insulation.

Homeowners can renovate their homes when they see fit, but various signs may warn that it's time consider updating or remodeling a home.

## What to know about replacing gutters

Certain home renovation projects are more glamorous than others. A remodeled kitchen is sure to garner its share of "oohs and aahs," while a newly paved driveway is much less likely to dazzle guests.

A gutter replacement is another job that might not have the wow factor. But fully functioning gutters are a must and can help to prevent potentially expensive roof damage. Gutters rarely draw attention, but homeowners can keep an eye out for signs that indicate gutters need to be replaced.

### Signs gutters should be replaced

Various signs indicate it's time to replace existing gutters. Homeowners should act promptly if any of the following signs arise, as poorly functioning gutters can make it hard for water to get into the downspouts, ultimately pushing it backward and likely underneath roof shingles, where the result can be costly water damage.

- Peeling paint
- Cracks
- Pooling water in the gutter
- Mildew in the gutter, which can sometimes be seen even from the ground
- Water damage: Water damage on the gutter can be limited to certain spots and will be noticeable on the underside of the gutter
- Soffit damage
- Sagging gutters
- Detached gutters, which can be detached from other pieces or the house
- Rust

### Who should replace gutters?

Many home improvements can be completed successfully by skilled do-it-yourselfers, but a gutter replacement is best left to the professionals. Homeowners who live in single-story homes may be able to replace gutters on their own, but the issues that can arise when gutters are not functioning at optimal capacity make this a job best suited to professionals, even in residences without high roofs.

Some gutters may be under a manufacturer's warranty, so homeowners can check to see if their gutters qualify for a free upgrade. Experience is one of the best reasons to work with a professional gutter installation team. Experienced professionals can identify which gutters are the best fit based on a host of factors, including the pitch of the roof, local conditions and the size of the house. In addition, gutter installation requires the use of various tools that many DIYers may not have on hand, which can cut into the cost savings of doing the project yourself.

Homeowners also should not underestimate the challenges of working on ladders that are high up off the ground. Professionals are accustomed to such challenges, while DIYers may not be comfortable or used to climbing ladders with materials and tools in hand.

A gutter replacement is a worthwhile investment that can ensure rain water efficiently and effectively runs through gutters and away from the roof. Leaving this task to the professionals can ensure the job is done right.

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# 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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# The facts about insulation and home efficiency

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**Insulation can go a long way toward making a home more comfortable.**

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## Signs of septic system malfunction

Homeowners recognize that their work is never done. Homes require maintenance that runs the gamut from daily tasks like cleaning kitchen countertops to more significant undertakings like replacing roofs. For many homeowners, keeping their homes running smoothly involves tending to septic systems.

Estimates from various sources indicate that roughly one in five homes in the United States has a septic system. Homeowners who live in areas with regional sewage systems may not give much thought to the operation and maintenance of their wastewater and disposal system. But that responsibility typically rests squarely

on the shoulders of homeowners whose homes have septic systems. Learning to maintain septic systems so they operate safely and efficiently is essential. Homeowners should know that recognizing signs of septic system malfunction is vital to avoiding potentially costly, messy accidents that can put the health of humans and local wildlife in jeopardy.

### What happens when a septic system malfunctions?

The Washington State Department of Health notes that a malfunctioning septic system is a threat to the health of both humans and animals as well as the environment. When a septic system is malfunction-

ing, untreated sewage can be released and end up in places where it shouldn't be, such as groundwater, surface water and marine water. That's true even if it's not visible to the naked eye. Humans and animals are in danger when septic systems malfunction because untreated sewage contains pathogens and other contaminants that can make them sick.

### What are the signs of a malfunctioning septic system?

The DOH of Washington State notes that properly maintained septic systems should provide reliable service for many years. Part of that maintenance

See **Septic** pg. D15

# Signs your HVAC unit could be fading

A day outdoors soaking up the sun's rays is many people's idea of the perfect way to spend a summer afternoon. On such days, a periodic retreat indoors into an air conditioned home can offer some much-needed relief from the heat.

HVAC systems are worth their weight in gold during the dog days of summer. Of course, such systems must be replaced from time to time. Learning to recognize the signs of a fading HVAC system can help homeowners replace their units before they cease working, saving everyone the uncomfortable ordeal of being stuck at home without cool air on hot summer days.

## Weak air flow

An HVAC unit operating at peak capacity produces a strong flow of air through the vents of a home. The experts at Select Home Warranty note that when the air flow from the vent is weak, this could be a warning sign of a damaged AC compressor or blocked or damaged vents. Damaged vents might be replaceable, but issues with the AC unit might require a replacement. That's especially so if the unit is old. Repairs might be possible, but it might be more cost-effective to replace an aging unit rather than commit to costly repairs.

## Excessive moisture around the unit

Excessive moisture around the unit may indicate that its refrigerant is leaking. In addition, Home Select Warranty notes that large pools of water around the unit could contribute to mold growth and floor damage. Homeowners are urged to contact a qualified HVAC technician immediately if they notice any leakage or

moisture issues around their units.

## Interior temperature

If your home is not quite the respite from summer heat that it once was, despite the AC being on and running, then this could be indicative of a fading system that may need to be replaced. However, the home warranty firm American Home Shield® notes that hot interior temperatures also may be indicative of clogged ductwork. Qualified HVAC technicians may be able to fix clogged ductwork without replacing the AC unit. If the issue persists even after ducts have been cleaned and unclogged, then a new unit might be homeowners' best bet.

## Foul odor

Sometimes the nose knows best when an AC unit needs to be replaced. Unusual odors emanating from the vents when the AC is on suggest that the unit is distributing mold or mildew throughout the home. The Florida-based heating, cooling, plumbing, and electrical experts at Cool Today note that a moldy or mildew-like smell coming from the vents could indicate a host of issues, including a dirty evaporator coil, a clogged drain line or leaky air ducts. Each of these issues can be fixed, but homeowners must weigh the cost of fixing them versus the cost of replacing an aging unit.

Come the dog days of summer, homeowners want a reliable AC unit to cool their homes. Recognizing signs of a malfunctioning AC unit is a good first step toward ensuring homes remain cool, relaxing respites from the heat this summer.

## Septic from pg. D14

is keeping an eye out for these signs that suggest a system is malfunctioning or failing:

- Water and sewage from toilets, drains and sinks is backing up into the home
- Bathtubs, showers, and sinks drain very slowly
- Gurgling sounds are

coming from the plumbing system

- Standing water or damp spots near the septic tank or drain field

- Bad odors around the septic tank or drain field

- Bright green, spongy lush grass over the septic tank or drain field, even during dry weather

- Algal blooms in nearby ponds or lakes

- High levels of nitrates or coliform bacteria in water wells

Homeowners with septic systems should make tending to those systems part of their routine home maintenance.



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