



Spring

Home & Garden

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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

See **Air 4D**



know?

Did you

While home buyers typically take their time to examine each room and space inside and outside a home before making an offer, the real estate experts at Trulia note that two rooms in particular seem to merit the closest inspection among prospective buyers. Kitchens and the bathroom in an owner's suite can dramatically increase the value of a home. Trulia recommends that homeowners consider their neighborhood and identify their target buyers prior to beginning a kitchen or owner's suite renovation, as such variables can provide direction and inspiration when refurbishing these widely valued areas in a home.

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Air

Continued from 2D

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 substi-

tute 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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Tips to revitalize a garden this spring

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

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

- Discard the dead weight. Winter can take its toll on a garden, even in regions where the weather between December and early spring is not especially harsh. Discard dead plants that have lingered into spring and prune any perennials that need it.



Branches that fell during winter storms also should be removed at this point if they have not previously been discarded.

- Test the soil. Soil testing kits can be purchased at local garden centers and home improvement retailers. Such tests are inexpensive and can reveal if the soil needs to be amended to help plants thrive in the months to come.

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

- Inspect your irrigation system. Homeowners with in-ground irrigation systems or above-ground

systems that utilize a drip or soaker function can inspect the systems before plants begin to bloom. Damaged sprinkler heads or torn lines can deprive plants of water they will need to bloom and ultimately thrive once the weather warms up.

- Tune up your tools. Gardening tools have likely been sitting around gathering dust since fall. Serious gardeners know that tools can be expensive, so it pays to protect that investment by maintaining the tools. Sharpened pruners help make plants less vulnerable to infestation and infection. Well-maintained tools like shovels and hoes also make more demanding gardening jobs a little bit easier, so don't forget to tune up your tools before the weather warms up.

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



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How to create an outdoor living retreat

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

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

Poolside retreat

Homeowners with pools and other water features likely want this area to be the star of the entertaining space. Furniture will be more of the lounging variety, with comfortable

chaises and spots to catch the sun. If a swim-up bar isn't possible, a rolling bar cart can be stocked with essentials for cocktails or mocktails for the kids. Furniture near the pool will be exposed to a lot of sun, so look for durable, sun-resistant fabrics.

Fireplace nook

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

Consider a custom banquette

Unused corners on a patio or rooftop retreat can utilize a custom-made banquette that provides the functionality of a sofa sectional outdoors. Have a contractor design it to

the exact specifications of the area, and add a rug to ground the space.

Vary the flooring

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

Create some privacy

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

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



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6 signs you may need a new HVAC system

There's no place like home, especially when that home is a comfortable and safe haven. One of the ways residents find com-

fort in their homes is by maintaining the right indoor temperatures, which fluctuate along with the seasons. While there is

much to be said about opening windows and doors to let Mother Nature do her thing, indoor comfort is often maintained with an

HVAC system.

HVAC stands for heating, ventilation and air conditioning. It can include heat pumps, furnaces and air conditioning units. It is an automated system that works by adjusting a thermostat to regulate air temperature, and sometimes humidity, in the home. According to Enviguard, a commercial contracting provider, HVAC systems also may be used to improve indoor air quality through filtration and oxygen replacement.

As with any mechanical device, an HVAC system has a life span that must be considered. Should any of the following conditions be present, it is likely time to consult with an HVAC technician to see if repairs or

replacement of the entire system is warranted.

1. Age

If the HVAC system is more than 10 years old, it could be time to begin budgeting for a new unit. Many modern, efficient systems may last 12 to 14 years with routine maintenance. But it's good to keep an HVAC system's age in mind so you can readily recognize when it might start to fail.

2. Longer or constant running times

An efficient, properly working system will quickly heat or cool the home and then turn off. A system that is turning on repeatedly or having to run for awhile before the set temperature is reached could be nearing the end of its utility.

3. Strange noises

Groaning, banging or loud humming noises should be addressed. While these noises may indicate that certain components need maintenance or replacement, they also could

be symptoms of age and a system nearing failure.

4. Frequent repair visits

Knowing the HVAC company's repair person by name is a sign that the system has required too much work in recent months. Repeated issues and repairs are probably signs that it's time to consider a system replacement.

5. Higher bills

Sticker shock when receiving electricity or gas bills likely mean the HVAC system isn't working efficiently and might need to be replaced.

6. Poor indoor air quality

If the home is dusty or humid or even if allergies seem to have cropped up out of nowhere, this could indicate a poorly functioning HVAC system.

HVAC systems are vital to keeping indoor environments comfortable and safe. Such systems may exhibit certain signs that indicate they need to be replaced.

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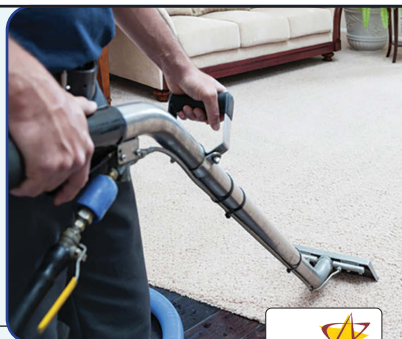
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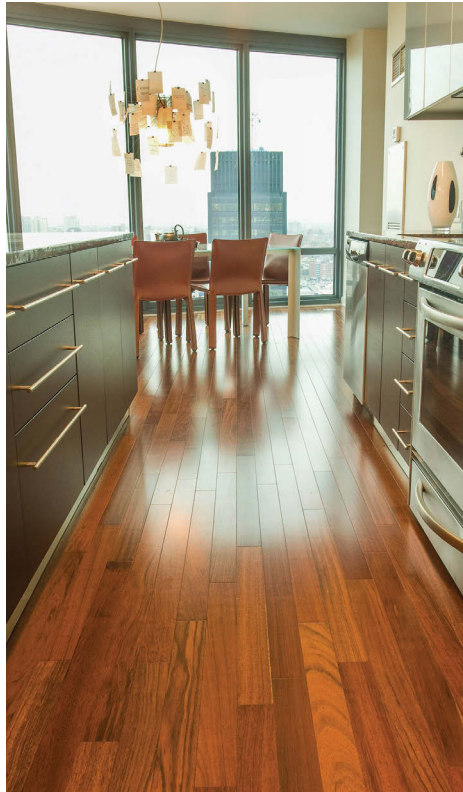
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A rundown of 3 popular flooring materials



ing. Solid wood flooring planks are made from a single piece of hardwood. Each type of flooring has its pros and cons, and homeowners who prefer hardwood floors

See **Flooring** 8D

Even though it's underfoot, flooring can set the tone for how a room or even an entire home is viewed. Perhaps that's one reason why flooring generates such strong opinions when homeowners look to refurbish or replace their floors.

Homeowners now have more choices than ever when considering new flooring for their homes. The following rundown of three popular flooring options can help homeowners as they try to decide which material best suits their homes.

1. Hardwood floors

Hardwood floors might once have been a relatively straightforward option, but homeowners may now choose between solid wood flooring and engineered wood flooring. According to The Home Depot, engineered wood flooring provides the look of solid wood flooring without the high maintenance of such floors. Engineered wood is manmade and created with the use of wood strands, particles, fibers or veneers of wood that are forged together with adhesives. Each engineered wood flooring plank is composed of several layers of plywood or fiberboard with a solid wood veneer on top, which is how it can provide the look of solid wood floor-

Gardening offers more than a day in the sun



Millions of people embrace opportunities to get back in their gardens each spring, and they might be reaping more rewards from that activity than they realize. According to the American Institute of Stress, gardening sparks a level of creativity among enthusiasts, and that can help to alleviate stress by lowering

levels of the hormone cortisol. In addition, authors of a 2022 study published in the journal *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening* concluded

that gardening during the COVID-19 pandemic helped people cope with coronavirus-related stress through outdoor activity.



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Flooring

Continued from 7D

are urged to speak with a flooring professional about the features that make these options unique from one another.

2. Laminate floors

Laminate flooring is another engineered flooring product. But unlike engineered wood flooring, laminate flooring does not utilize real wood and many people can recognize that the moment they step on a laminate floor. Flooring is such a vital and heavily trafficked component of a home that it's typically best to leave installation to a qualified professional. However, homeowners who prefer the DIY route should know that laminate flooring is viewed as among the easiest types of flooring for DIYers to install.

3. Vinyl flooring

The experts at Good

Housekeeping report that vinyl flooring is the fastest-growing category of flooring. The Home Depot notes that vinyl flooring is made from plastic and usually consists of acrylic, PVC and similar polymers. Luxury vinyl tile is thick and durable, and it's often noted for its likeness to solid wood. Vinyl tile also is considered a versatile flooring option, as The Home Depot notes it can be purchased in planks, sheets or tiles. The Home Depot advises homeowners to consider the thickness range when mulling their vinyl flooring options. Thickness ranges between four and 40 millimeters, and a thicker layer is more resistant to water, scratches and stains.

Homeowners will be confronted with a variety of options when considering a flooring project for their homes. The right option for a given home may come down to a host of factors, including cost, look and durability.



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

Some signs of pests

9 signs of pest infestation

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

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

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

3. Sawdust piles or trails: Sawdust could be indicative

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

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

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

6. Unexplained noises: Scratching or scurrying in walls or floors often indicates pests are present.

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

8. Presence of nests: Those who can see nests in corners or undisturbed areas of the home likely have pests present. Rodents often use chewed cardboard, insulation, paper, and other scavenged items to create nests, according to exterminators.

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

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



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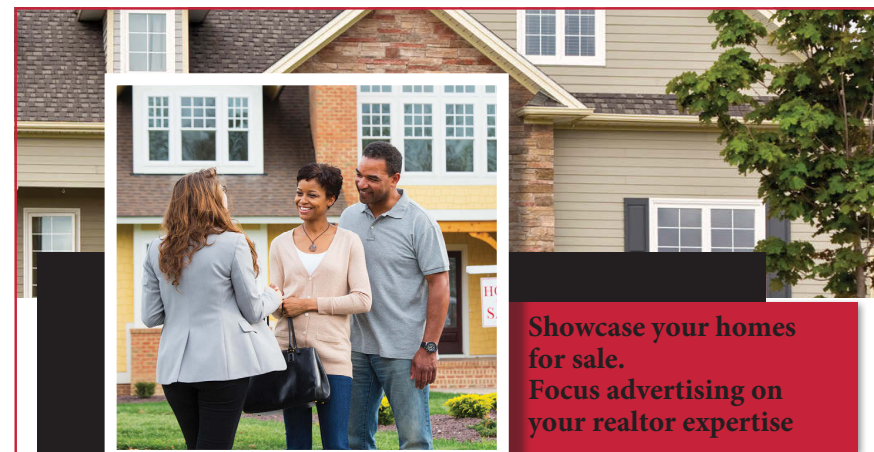
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Features to consider for a relaxing bathroom *remodel*

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

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

when remodeling a bathroom with relaxation in mind.

- **Open shower:** An open shower is a visually stunning addition to any bathroom. Such showers give a bathroom a more open look, thanks in part to the fact that these modern features do not feature a door or require the use of a shower curtain. The result is a clean look that many people associate with a luxury hotel. When speaking with a contractor about an open shower install, homeowners can ask about a half-

wall to safeguard against water splashing out of the shower. In addition, a heat lamp can help ensure residents stay warm until they're ready to leave the bathroom.

- **Heated features:** Additional features to keep everyone calm and warm can be considered when upgrading the bathroom. Radiant flooring can ensure everyone's toes remain toasty, and the installation of such a feature can eliminate the need for floor mats and bath mats that some homeowners may not like.

Commit further to the heat theme with a heated towel rack, which is another feature associated with luxury hotels that can be just as enjoyable at home.

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

- **Skylight:** Even if the goal of a luxury bathroom



is to leave the outside world outside, allowing some natural light inside is a great way to add a little extra calm to the room. Floor-to-ceiling windows may seem appealing in brochures or advertisements, but such features do not create the sense of privacy many people prefer in their bathrooms. One or two skylights

can create that sense of privacy and still allow for natural light to enter the room, making this an option that provides the best of both worlds.

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

Swimming pool landscaping ideas

Backyard pools provide a way to cool off and enjoy a taste of luxury without having to travel. Backyard pools provided even more convenience and a welcome respite in 2020, as many

public pools were closed in response to social distancing restrictions put in place during the pandemic.

After installing pools, many homeowners realize that touching up the landscaping around the pool can provide the finishing touch to their backyard retreats. Not all landscaping is the same, and homeowners should choose plants

that look beautiful, are tolerant to pool splash-out and won't outgrow the area. The home and garden resource The Spruce notes that a plant that is attractive at two feet tall can grow rapidly and drop leaves or other debris into the pool.

When selecting options for pool landscaping, there

See **Pool 12D**



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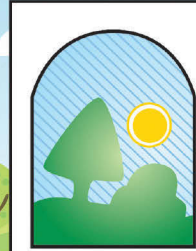
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Fun ways to celebrate the arrival of spring

Spring is a season of rebirth in more ways than one. Spring is when certain animals emerge from hibernation, while many species lay eggs or give birth this time of year. Flowers and trees also bloom in spring, providing spectacular foliage and awe-inspiring color.

People also may feel like they have a new lease on life as they shake away the doldrums of winter and embrace longer hours of sunlight and warmer temperatures. The arrival of spring is worthy of celebration, and these activities and ideas can be enjoyable ways to spend the first day of spring.

• **Spend time outdoors.** One is never too old for a picnic in a park or a bike ride along the trails. Spending time outdoors is beneficial because it exposes people to sunlight, which is a precursor to the development of vitamin D. Vitamin D affects muscles, joints and tissues. It also can affect mood.

• **Plant a tree.** Honor the first day of spring, and Earth Day shortly thereafter, by planting trees. Trees provide habitats for wildlife, create shade, reduce air pollution by filtering the air, and produce oxygen. A sapling is a manageable tree to plant and something children can do as well.

• **Enjoy spring crafts.** Grab an inexpensive canvas and paint a landscape that is in full bloom. Use quick-set plaster to create stepping stones embedded with mosaic glass pieces for color that can be added to the backyard.

• **Host a spring potluck.** Put fresh spring vegetables and fruits on display. Options include artichokes, apricots, asparagus, carrots, dandelion greens, and radishes. Put together a pasta primavera, which essentially is a spring pasta dish laden with fresh vegetables.

• **Decorate with flowers.** Bring fresh flowers indoors and put them on display in vases or table



centerpieces. Cut stems on a 45-degree angle underwater to help flowers last longer. In addition, choose floral themed curtains and throw pillows to add some spring decor.

• **Create a water feature.** The sound and sights of cascading water can be both relaxing and picturesque. A water feature can be something as simple as a small fountain or more

elaborate like a koi pond.

Spring is a time of year when people can enjoy seasonal activities that make the most of the warmer weather and blooming landscape.



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Must-have items for summer *entertaining* in the backyard

Summer entertaining season provides ample opportunities to soak up some sun and have some fun with family and friends. Backyard barbecues and other get-togethers at home are even more fun when hosts ensure they have certain must-have items for summer soirees.

• **Fire features:** The days when summer hosts only needed a few extra lawn chairs and some burgers and hot dogs on the grill for a backyard barbecue are long gone. Though those items still have a place at backyard barbecues, summer parties have taken a step up. Fire features, whether it's a standalone fire pit, one built into a patio or a gas-powered fire table, are now wildly popular. Fire features provide a welcome place to relax and converse with guests after the sun goes down. And much to kids' delight, a fire feature also paves the way for some post-meal s'mores.

• **Insulated wine cooler:** Coolers are great places

to store water, soda, beer, seltzers, and other popular beverages. But what about wine? An insulated wine cooler ensures wine stays properly cooled but doesn't get too cold, which can happen when wine is stored in a more traditional cooler filled with ice. Bottles are simply placed in the insulated cooler (much like canned beverages slide easily into can koozies), and the bottle can be kept on the table much like you would for formal dinners indoors. Hosts can go the extra mile by pairing insulated wine tumblers with their wine cooler.

• **Games:** Summer entertaining season might be all about relaxation, but games can up the fun factor at backyard gatherings. Cornhole is a wildly popular game, and customized cornhole boards can help hosts come across as party professionals. Ladder toss, bocce and wiffle ball are some additional games that can make the festivities more fun. Hosts who

don't have a pool also can invest in an inflatable pool big enough to fit all the kids who will be coming to the party.

• **Outdoor storage cabinet:** Hosts can save themselves the stress and effort of walking in and out for dinnerware and other table accessories by investing in a sturdy outdoor storage cabinet. As meal time draws near, hosts will appreciate that all the plates, napkins, utensils, and placemats are already outside. The top of the storage cabinet can double as a small but convenient buffet station for sides that aren't being cooked over an open flame.

• **Projector and screen:** A projector and screen can really up the ante on summer entertaining, turning a backyard barbecue into a great place to watch a game or cuddle up after dinner for a movie night under the stars. Projectors and screens won't bust the budget, but those who have more to spend may want to consider an outdoor televi-



sion. Outdoor televisions are built to handle the glare of the summer sun, but a retractable awning may be a good safety net for hosts who plan to spend many a weekend afternoon outside watching games or movies with family and friends.

These are just a handful of items that can up the ante on traditional backyard barbecues. Homeowners should know that there's no limit to the number of items that can make summer entertaining season more special.

Did you know?

Inflation has garnered countless headlines in recent years, and much of that news has focused on the notably higher cost of food. Though the cost of some items at the grocery store has gone down in 2024, many items remain significantly more expensive than they were as recently as three or four years ago. In an effort to overcome rising food costs, some consumers have thought about gardening. According to Washington State University, the average household with a food garden spends around \$70 per year on seeds and garden supplies. The reward for that small investment is roughly \$600 worth of food. Though the finan-



cial investment associated with a food garden might be minimal, it's important for prospective gardeners to recognize that the commitment of time required to establish and sustain a food garden can be significant.

Pool

Continued from 10D

are some considerations to keep in mind:

- Choose plants that will provide privacy.
- Know which kind of climate a plant needs prior to purchasing it. Tropical plants may be fitting poolside, but will they endure when the season is over?

- Design according to the theme of the home, as plants should complement the existing style. Modern foliage may not blend well with a home styled after a traditional English cottage.

- Decide whether you can accept spreading or trailing plants that can cascade over retaining walls and other infrastructure.

- Look at trees that won't drop too many leaves, flowers or fruit into the water.

- Think about having layers of plants to soften the landscape, which can make a small pool seem bigger and more luxurious, indicates the landscaping company Earth Development, Inc.

- Don't overlook the possibility of a lawn abutting pavers or concrete surrounding a pool, as it can soften the edges and keep spaces open and inviting.

- Incorporate herbs or fragrant plants, which can transform a pool day into a spa experience. Consider low-maintenance lavender as an option.

Pool landscaping must marry a variety of different features and plant requirements. As a result, a professional consultation may be the route to take. Landscape architects will have the know-how to select plant varieties that will be tolerant, beautiful and fulfill homeowners' wishes.

Backyard pools can make a backyard retreat that much more enjoyable. Landscaping offers the softness and beauty that adds a finishing touch to poolside retreats.

“Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.”
2 Corinthians 9:6

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What to know when picking new interior **doors**

Renovation projects run the gamut from patio paver installations to home additions to exterior lighting projects. There's no end to the ways homeowners can tweak their properties as they aspire to renovate and transform the interior and exterior of their homes.

Interior door replacement projects can dramatically alter how a home looks, especially when existing doors are dated, damaged and/or fading. Though homeowners may have grand visions of a new kitchen or outdoor living room when beginning such projects, they may not know where to begin when the time comes to replace interior doors. The following rundown can help homeowners as they begin to explore their options and start down the path of replacing interior doors.

Materials

Interior doors are manufactured from an array of

materials, some of which may be more effective at reducing noise than others. Wood, medium-density fiberboard (MDF), solid-core, hollow-core, and even metal and glass are some of the materials categories for interior doors. Homeowners can define what they prioritize with each door and then choose the material that aligns best with that goal.

Installation

Installation costs are another variable to consider when replacing interior doors. If the frame of the door is being replaced along with the door, homeowners may benefit from utilizing a professional installation team, as removing an existing frame and installing a new one is a complicated project. Pre-hung doors come ready to hang with hinges already attached, so skilled do-it-yourselfers may be able to hang these

on their own. Installation costs can be expensive, but homeowners with little DIY experience are urged to work with professionals so a job can be completed correctly, on time and within budget.

Style and design

Style and design merits consideration as well, and homeowners are urged to afford ample time to explore a wide array of options that might be more expansive than homeowners realize. Hinged doors, pocket doors, French doors, and barn doors are just some of the styles homeowners can choose from, and it may make sense to choose various styles when replacing all or most interior doors in a home. Each type of door typically comes in an assortment of designs as well, and it can take time to choose the right design for a given home.

Hardware

Hardware such as door knobs and locks is easy to take for granted. However, homeowners replacing their interior doors will need to make these choices when picking new doors. Standard hardware offerings may disappoint upon installation, so afford ample time to doorknobs and other hardware to ensure the finished product impresses from the get-go. Customization of hardware may add a little extra to the final cost, but it should not be enough to bust a budget and will likely result in a more impressive finished product.

Interior door replacement can create a whole new look inside a home. Homeowners are urged to afford themselves ample time to consider their many options when replacing interior doors.



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Creating your own backyard **oasis**

Our backyards are some of the best places to spend the summer months, especially if you're practicing social distancing and are tired of being cooped up indoors. Fortunately, it's possible to transform your outdoor living space into a

secluded, open-air retreat.

Bring the indoors out. We often hear about bringing the outdoors inside, but the reverse is also true when designing a luxurious extension of your home. Homey, lived-in touches can take your outdoor

space from sterile and unfinished to cozy and inviting. Think patterned throw pillows, fluffy blankets for chilly evenings, outdoor rugs, colorful lanterns, and decorative accessories like painted terracotta pots or metal tins.

Invest in comfy furniture. What's the best part of your living or family room? Chances are it's your comfortable couch or recliner. To recreate the same feeling, splurge on some soft furniture that will make you want to stay outside for hours reading a book or working remotely. It doesn't have to break the bank either — you can DIY a cozy lounging bench with reclaimed wood and hand-sewn cushions with outdoor stuffing and fabric.

Add a relaxing pool or spa. Water has a calming effect and is often linked to our favorite memories at the cottage or on vacation. A pool or spa can help transport you somewhere far away without leaving your home. A pool can help you and the kids get some exercise while swimming laps, while a spa can soothe tired muscles after a long



day hunched over your laptop. To reduce energy costs and increase longevity, consider using Nudura insulated concrete forms, which provide superior insulation. ICF pools also can be custom-made to accommodate any design, making them a very versatile and efficient way to build pools.

Go wild with greenery. Live plants can help you feel connected with nature, and tending to them can help you feel relaxed yet productive during isolation. A vertical garden can add visual interest, while trees and shrubs can provide shade and character. Aromatic herbs like lavender or rosemary offer pleasant scents and can spice up your cooking. And don't be afraid to cut some flowers from your garden to place in vases or pots for beautiful finishing touches.

Find more information at nudura.com.

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Signs it's time to *repair* or *replace* your deck

Spring is a season of rejuvenation that compels millions across the globe to quit hibernating and get back to enjoying the great outdoors. Spring also marks a great time to assess a home's exterior, namely those areas like a deck where people will spend a lot of time in the warmer months to come.

Assessing a deck after winter can be eye-opening. Harsh winter weather can take its toll on a deck, and the following are some tell-tale signs that a deck could be in need of repair or replacement.

• **Wobbly underfoot and in hand:** Wobbly planks and railings are one sign of a de-

teriorating deck homeowners won't recognize as they hide from winter weather indoors. But these tend to reveal themselves rather quickly when examining a deck after winter. Wobbly planks in the middle of the deck can be inconvenient, but wobbly steps and railings can be dangerous. According to the home improvement resource Angi, wobbly railings can be a byproduct of rot. A local decking professional can assess the extent of the rot in railings and elsewhere and determine the best course of action. If the rot is isolated to an area or two, a simple repair may be all that's necessary. Extensive

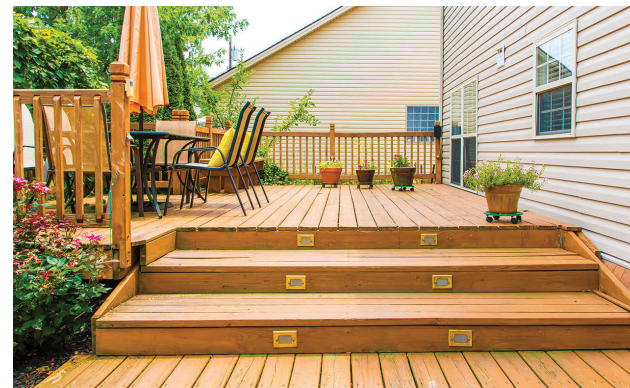
rot may require a full replacement of the existing deck.

• **Faded paint:** Many homeowners paint their wood decks, and that paint will not last forever. Faded paint can turn an otherwise lovely deck into an eyesore, and paint can fade over the winter. Thankfully, a local painter can address a faded deck and may recommend some additional strategies to safeguard the deck against fading next winter and beyond.

• **Holes in the wood:** Many a homeowner has encountered curious-looking holes in their deck. This could be a sign of insect infestation. Termites, car-

pen termites and carpenter bees are among the various types of insects that can bore holes through wood. Homeowners who notice holes throughout their deck are urged to call a deck professional and/or pest control firm to assess the holes and offer a solution. Though small issues may be addressed with repairs, a deck littered with holes caused by insects may need a full replacement.

• **Rust:** Wood decks may be made of wood, but they can still exhibit signs of rust, namely in the nails and metal connectors that hold the deck together. If screws have rusted to the point where they are no



longer holding the deck together, a full-scale replacement could be in the cards, as the deck could have substantial structural damage. Like other issues that can reveal themselves during a springtime inspection of the deck, rust necessitates

a thorough examination by an experienced decking professional.

Many people do not use their decks during winter, which only underscores the significance of a full deck inspection in spring.

A special twist on a classic

This recipe for "Venison Burgers" from "Texas Favorites" (Gibbs Smith) by Jon Bonnell utilizes venison and pork in lieu of beef.

Venison Burgers

Serves 8

- 2 pounds venison meat
- 1/2 pound pork shoulder
- 1/2 pound slab bacon
- 1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
- 1/2 teaspoon onion powder
- Pinch of cayenne pepper
- 1/2 teaspoon garlic powder
- 2 tablespoons Dijon mustard
- 2 teaspoons hot sauce
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

Optional toppings

- Bacon
- Cheddar cheese
- Guacamole



Clean the venison well and remove any fat or connective tissue. Cut the venison, pork shoulder and bacon into large chunks. Combine all ingredients together in a large mixing bowl and let marinate for 1 hour in the refrigerator. Grind everything together using the small plate on your grinder. Form into burger patties by hand, and grill or pan-sear. Cook to medium (135 F internal temperature), then remove from the grill and top with your favorite cheese or burger toppings.



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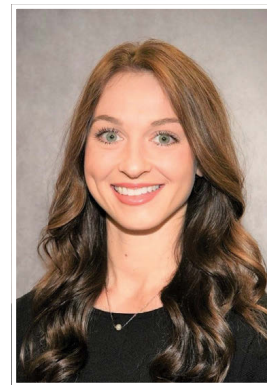


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