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### Simple Ways To Soundproof A Home

Advancements in technology have made it easier than ever before for homeowners to create a mini movie theater in the comfort of their own homes. The affordability of home-theater systems and big-screen televisions, once deemed a luxury only available to the super-wealthy, has made it possible for everyone to enjoy theater-style entertainment at home. But one thing that can put a damper on those home-theater plans is external noise. Movie theaters are soundproof so customers can't hear noise from the nearby freeway or their fellow moviegoers "oohing" and "aahing" in the theater next door. Private homes, however, are not so soundproof, so homeowners must take it upon themselves to soundproof their homes to create the ultimate home-theater experience. The following are some of the ways homeowners can do just that.

- \* Add some layers of drywall. An extra layer or two of drywall will block sound coming from neighboring rooms. Simply add a layer or two of drywall to the existing wall.
- \* Install double-paned windows. If it's noise from outside the home that's ruining your home theater experience, then consider installing double-paned windows with acrylic frames. Such a job can be costly, so if it's going to be a budget-buster, then sound-deadening drapes are a cheaper alternative that can also be effective.
- \* Decorate the home with sound-absorbent items. Another way to soundproof a home is to decorate the house with sound-absorbent items. Furnishings with substantial cushioning, carpeting and fabric on the walls will each absorb sound, reducing the transfer of sound from room to room. Upstairs rooms should be carpeted to further reduce the transfer of sound.
- \* Install soundproofing tile on ceilings. Soundproofing tile on ceilings is another effective way to reduce the transference of sound from room to room and keep external noise out of the home-theater room.

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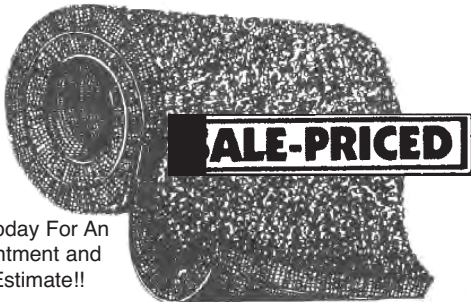
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- Flooring should be water  
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many products on the market,  
but consider laying padding  
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touches. Select furniture that  
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staircase and choose items that  
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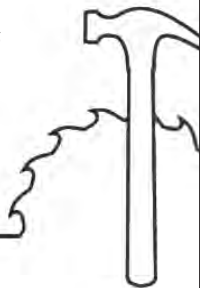
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**Houseplants Can Clean Indoor Air**

Gardening is a rewarding hobby that can pay a host of dividends, both for the planet and the people doing the gardening. Healthy plant life can help clean the air by absorbing carbon dioxide and various air pollutants, while the act of gardening can help gardeners combat stress. Published in 2011 in the Journal of Health Psychology, a study from researchers in the Netherlands found that gardening promotes relief from acute stress. In the study, two groups of participants were asked to complete a stressful task and then instructed to either read indoors or garden outdoors for 30 minutes. After 30 minutes, the latter group had lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol and even reported being in a better mood than the group instructed to read indoors. But gardening does more than just provide gardeners with a reason to spend some time relaxing outdoors in an effort to relieve stress. Gardeners who raise certain plants may be able to bring those benefits with them when going inside as well. Houseplants can work wonders when it comes to improving overall health,

removing toxins from air, soil and water by metabolizing some toxic chemicals and releasing harmless byproducts while sequestering such toxins by incorporating them into plant tissues. Clean indoor air is important for everyone, but especially so for those people who suffer from respiratory ailments like asthma. In fact, the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology considers indoor air filtration an essential part of any strategy to improve respiratory health. But filtration systems and air purifiers are often not enough, and those who want the air in their homes to be as clean as possible may benefit from introducing certain houseplants into their homes. The following are a handful of plants that can help to improve indoor air quality.

- Aloe vera: Aloe vera might be most often associated with hand creams and hand soaps, but the aloe vera plant, a succulent that even novice gardeners should have no problem growing, can clear indoor air of formaldehyde and benzene, two common byproducts of chemical-based cleaners many people use in their homes.
- Spider plant: Spider plants are resilient, and that makes them great houseplants for busy men and women who tend to be forgetful when caring for their plants. In addition, spider plants are pet-friendly and can be used to combat benzene, carbon dioxide, formaldehyde and xylene.
- English ivy: NASA researchers exploring the possibilities of long-term space habitation found that certain houseplants were more effective at cleaning air inside energy-efficient, nonventilated buildings than others. One such plant was English ivy, which can effectively combat the formaldehyde found in certain household cleaning products.
- Bamboo palm: Bamboo palms also found their way onto NASA's list. Bamboo palm plants thrive indoors, where they are especially effective at filtering out the chemicals benzene and trichloroethylene. Gardening has been proven to be a soothing hobby that can help gardeners reduce stress. But the health benefits of gardening can extend indoors as well.

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### Tips For Safer Renovations

Home renovation projects vary in scope. Something as simple as repainting a bedroom counts as a renovation project, as does a full kitchen remodel. But no matter how big or small a project, homeowners' top priority should always be safety. Before beginning a project, make a list of possible hazards and how to avoid them. Here are some potential dangers that can spring up.

- Asbestos: Many homes built when asbestos was legal still contain asbestos materials. Asbestos has been used in many applications, such as in ceiling materials, insulation, siding, and more. That's because asbestos is flame retardant and serves as an effective and inexpensive insulator. However, asbestos fibers released into the air during renovations can cause respiratory problems and even lead to lung cancer. Asbestos needs to be removed under specific guidelines and disposed of properly.

Disposal typically requires hiring a professional service.

- Dust and dirt: Sanding, sawing, welding, and other home renovation tasks can cast debris into the air. Ventilation may be needed to maintain clean, breathable air. Ventilation can also shuttle any harmful fumes generated from construction materials outside of the home. Do-it-yourselfers should wear masks and eye protection to guard themselves against debris.
- Electrical lines: All homes may not have been built in adherence to modern-day codes. Electric lines can be discovered where they are least expected. When doing demolition or drilling/nailing into walls, it's not uncommon to come across electrical wires. Extra caution needs to be taken, and an electrician should be consulted if the wires need to be relocated.
- Chemicals: Chemicals, such as sealants, cleaners, lubricants, and

fuel, may be used during renovation projects. Such substances can be dangerous to pets and children if they are touched or accidentally ingested. Exercise extreme caution when using chemical products, making sure all product containers are sealed and kept out of reach when not in use.

- Tools: Cuts, abrasions, burns and more can result when power tools and even manual tools are used incorrectly. Learn how to use tools before beginning a project, and always put tools away when work is done for the day.
- Falls: Falls are a leading cause of household injury, and the chance of a fall may increase when climbing ladders during home improvement projects. Don't climb beyond where indicated on ladders and always have a spotter on hand when climbing is necessary. Wear harnesses, sturdy footwear and gloves as well.

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# READING SUBURBAN

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### Converting Garages Into Livable Spaces

Many people decide to upgrade from their apartments or condominiums out of a need for more space. But even after moving into a new home, homeowners may soon begin to outgrow the room they have. Rather than looking for a new home, some homeowners consider expansion. Expanding a living space can be expensive, and a more affordable option may be converting existing



basement or garage space into something more livable. Garages already are built on a foundation, have four walls and a roof overhead, so a garage-conversion project is merely a matter of turning this utilitarian area into a living space. Before beginning the renovation, homeowners should consider the benefits versus the cost of converting the garage. For those who are planning to grow old in a house, a garage conversion can be a worthy investment. But those who intend to sell their homes rather than retire in them may learn that a converted garage can affect home value and make it less desirable at resale. Compare your home to others in the area and see what your

neighbors have done. If converted garages are the norm where you live, your own renovation may fit in with others. Always apply for the proper permits and learn the zoning laws to see if a garage conversion is acceptable in your town or city. It's best to go by the book so that work can be done in a proper manner and be inspected for safety. Many homeowners hope their garage-conversion projects will make their garages seem like a seamless part of the rest of the house. To do so, you will need to remove evidence the space was once a garage. Slab floor will need to be raised and insulated. Walls also will need to be insulated and finished to improve comfort and soundproofing. Many garages do not have windows, so for the garage to function as a renovated space, windows may need to be added.

One of the biggest transformations will come by way of modifying the garage door entry. Some homeowners prefer to leave the existing door so that the home still has the appearance of a garage from the curb, while others remove the garage door and rebuild the exterior wall so that it has a window or another architectural element. An architect can help suggest design elements that will camouflage the original garage look and make the space seem like it was always part of the main living area of the home. Landscaping work also can minimize the appearance of an old garage. Rather than having the driveway end at the wall of a home, shrubbery, pavers and other techniques can blend the garage renovation into the rest of the yard design. Transforming a garage into a living space can add several hundred square feet to a home. Hire a reputable contractor and follow the municipal guidelines for modifying the space to ensure the job is done right.



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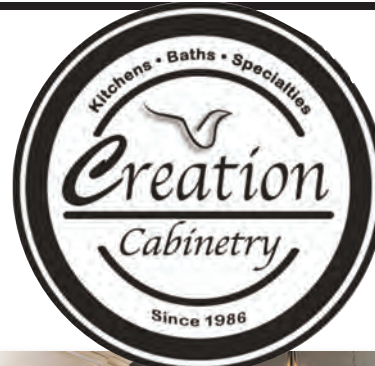
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(MS) Improved practices in the construction industry today reflect the greening of building codes across North America. This proactivity is highlighted by advancements in window daylighting, insulation, air infiltration, and new wall-building materials. However, many say that our eco-responsibility can do even better than this. Why not choose methods and materials, for instance, that are even more energy efficient than the minimum demanded by building codes? If you want lowered energy consumption, more conservation and increased property value, be sure to choose a builder who has a demonstrable record in eco-responsibility. "A huge step forward is to replace the traditional wood framing of your house with what we call ICFs, insulated concrete forms," says Keven Rector at Nudura, a leading name in this technology. "If, for

instance, you build the envelope of your house with concrete instead of wood, the energy required to heat and cool it will be significantly reduced, a plus for the environment, and along with reduced energy bills, a plus for you." SEVERE STORM RESILIENCE The compact ICFs (nudura.com) are delivered to the construction site, where each form interlocks with the next to quickly assemble one strong monolithic wall. "Our advanced design combines two panels of thick (EPS) foam with the structural strength and thermal mass of concrete," Rector explains. "The resulting envelope immediately gives your house hurricane wind-resistance up to 250 miles per hour. Concrete walls also deliver an energy efficiency rating as high as R-50 (compared to an average R-20 in wood structures), saving you up to 50 percent on utility bills. With

the concrete option, countless trees remain untouched, and with lowered energy consumption and less tapping of natural resources every day, imagine over the years how much of a contribution your house will make to recapturing a sustainable environment." As importantly, he says, a home built with this concrete system is also fire resistant and sound resistant, and is far less prone to mold, cold spots and drafts. "Builders receive workplace benefits too," Rector points out. "ICF construction assures the adherence to building codes, it takes up less shipping space, requires less manpower at the site, and the assembly is faster than wood framing. Time-strapped builders and eager homeowners benefit equally from this efficiency." If you want your builder to use ICFs, be sure to discuss it early in the plans.



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**How To Childproof Your Home**

New parents face a host of challenges upon bring their newborn sons and daughters home, not the least of which is childproofing their homes so the newest additions to their families are safe and sound. The strategies moms and dads employ when childproofing their homes will change as youngsters grow older and more curious, but the following are a few tips to get parents started.

- Install safety latches and locks on cabinets and drawers. Curiosity might start to take over at the moment infants learn to crawl, so new parents should install safety latches and locks on all cabinets and drawers in their homes. The United States Consumer Product Safety Commission notes that such latches and locks can prevent access to a host of potentially harmful items, such as medications, cleaning products, knives, and other sharp objects.
- Use anti-scald devices. Burns from hot water can quickly cause significant burns to young children's skin, so install anti-scald devices that regulate water temperature and reduce the risk of kids being burned. The CPSC also recommends lowering water heaters to 120 F to further reduce the risk of burns.
- Use safety gates at stairways and in rooms that are off limits. Safety gates around stairways and in doorways of prohibited rooms can reduce the likelihood of potentially harmful falls and keep kids out of rooms where they might be harmed. Place gates in the doorways of rooms that contain sharp objects, work tools, substances that can prove harmful if ingested, and any other items you don't want inquisitive tots to come into contact with. Make sure all safety gates at the top of stairways are the kind that can be nailed into the wall.
- Attach bumpers to the edges of sharp furniture. Corner and edge bumpers can reduce the risk of injury when kids bang their heads on sharp furniture such as coffee tables or other items with hard edges. Make sure the bumpers are firmly secured before allowing youngsters into the room. Infants, toddlers and young children are vulnerable to injury around the house. Parents can reduce that injury risk by taking several steps to childproof their homes. More childproofing tips are available at www.cpsc.gov.

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### Renovations For Senior Safety

As adults approach their golden years, the homes they once thought of as sanctuaries can become unsafe. Families wrestle with the decision to keep parents and grandparents in their homes or move them into assisted living facilities or other senior residences.

Modifying seniors' homes to make them safer is another option. The National Institute on Aging says that families may be able to have a senior stay at home by helping older relatives remain independent but safe. The following are a few ways to do just that.

- Remove fall hazards. The NIA reports that six out of 10 falls happen at home, where people spend the most time and fail to think about their safety. Seniors who want to be independent may overestimate their physical abilities. Because falls can be so dangerous, leading to cuts, abrasions, broken bones, and more, seniors and their families must take steps to prevent falls in homes. Improve lighting, especially at night when sight

may become diminished. Install hand rails and grab bars where possible. Pick up clutter and remove tripping hazards, such as slippery rugs or electric cords. Install an electric stair climbing seat to make traversing stairs less risky.

- Improve visibility and ability to communicate. Vision loss may accompany aging, but technology can help mitigate such losses. Use big-button phones, remote controls and even keyboards so seniors can keep in touch. Voice-activated thermostats or smart home technology also can make it easier for seniors to voice their needs.

- Modify fixtures and other features. Dexterity may wane with age, and arthritis can make grasping or turning doorknobs and faucets more challenging. Take inventory of areas of the home that present the biggest obstacles to seniors. Replace knobs in the shower or on faucets with lever handles, which are easier to maneuver. Install new cabinets and doors that freely glide open and self-

close. Replace toggle light switches with easier paddle-type switches that can be pushed with a hand or even arm. Motion-sensor lights also can be handy. Push-button oven controls may make cooking easier.

- Prepare for medical emergencies. Invest in medical alert systems, such as necklaces or bracelets, that can be used to contact police or emergency medical personnel directly. Make phones available in commonly used rooms in the home, such as bedrooms, the living room, bathrooms, and the kitchen.

- Install ramps and nonslip flooring. Ramps can make it easier to reach the front door or cross over elevated doorway thresholds. Nonslip flooring also can prevent falls around the house, offering more traction for feet, walkers or canes.
- Repair cracks in walkways and driveways. Safety should also extend to the outdoors. Be sure to repair cracks or uneven pavement. Replace loose patio

blocks or bricks with a more stable design or with concrete or asphalt. While outdoors, trim back bushes and make sure there are no tripping hazards outside as well.

A few modifications can make it possible for seniors to live comfortably in their homes for many years.



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**Find And Maintain  
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Carpets provide both practical and aesthetic appeal inside a home. In winter, carpets help keep homes warm, and the right color carpet can add to design schemes. While rugs may have originated in the Far East, North America also has some rich carpet history. According to The Carpet and Rug Institute, the United States carpet industry began in 1791 when the first woven carpet mill opened in Philadelphia. Others soon followed suit. Tufted carpets and machine-powered manufacturing helped churn out yards upon yards of carpeting, making it a popular, affordable and common addition to homes, especially after the post-World War II housing boom.

Carpeting remains a go-to flooring material in modern homes. In fact, many homes offer a blend of both carpeting in some rooms and different flooring choices in others. Upon choosing carpet, it is important that homeowners follow some guidelines to prolong a carpet's longevity and maintain its style. The following are some common carpeting dos and don'ts. DO consider the room's purpose and foot traffic before shopping for carpeting. Make a list of the attributes desired (e.g., soundproofing, easy care, high pile) and present these to the salesperson so he or she can help you make the best choice. DON'T rush into flooring choices. Unlike paint colors, flooring materials are more permanent choices that are only updated every several years or more. Weigh all of your options before diving in.

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**Renovating A Rental Property**

When the economy struggles to the point of recession, few people benefit. However, there are some businesses that thrive during a recession, using the circumstances to their advantage and actually growing business in spite of a sagging economy. One such business is rental agencies or property management companies. Even landlords with a single investment property tend to do better during a recession, when individuals might be fearful of buying a home or simply unable to afford it. Such individuals still need a place to live, however, and landlords benefit as a result. One of the best things a landlord can do during a recession is to pay more attention to their rental properties, ensuring the properties are in tip-top shape so they can get the most out of each unit at a time when the rental market is most competitive. This might require some renovations, which landlords should be making periodically anyway, regardless of how strong or tenuous the economy might be.

\* Update the paint. Apartments are typically empty when shown to prospective renters, and any issues with the paint job are very noticeable during such viewings. If the paint is outdated or there is any fading, update the walls with a fresh coat of paint. It's ideal to do so

whenever a tenant moves out, but landlords whose buildings have a high turnover rate likely won't need to repaint every time a tenant moves out. When adding a new coat of paint, choose a light, neutral color to give the property a fresh, inviting look.

\* Replace the carpeting. Carpeting is another area prospective renters are instantly drawn to when viewing an apartment. New carpeting is always attractive to potential tenants, and landlords won't have to break the bank to replace the carpets when an existing tenant moves out. Instead of expensive carpeting, choose a medium grade carpet with a neutral color, ideally beige or light brown, which can hide spills or stains should the next tenant prove messy and move out after the original lease terms are up. Before laying carpet, don't forget to lay down quality padding underneath. Such padding makes the carpet feel softer and of higher quality.

\* Upgrade the appliances. Perhaps nothing evokes a stronger response from prospective renters than a property's appliances. Outdated appliances make renters speculate as to what else might be outdated and if the building is well taken care of. On the other hand, newer appliances, particularly stain-

less steel items, create a contemporary feel and give the impression, true or false, that a landlord won't allow the building to grow dated or fall into disrepair. When shopping for appliances, choose ones that are more basic so any eventual repairs won't be too complicated or costly. Newer appliances enable landlords to charge more rent for a given property, and many renters would agree that such properties are worth the extra money.

\* Install new windows. Older buildings tend to have creaky or drafty windows, which not only makes the property colder during the winter months, but it also drives up utility costs as renters are forced to turn up the thermostat to combat drafts and cold air entering the unit. New windows can eliminate such drafts and reduce utility costs, something landlords can use to their advantage when discussing the property with potential tenants. Landlords might even be able to earn tax breaks when installing new, energy-efficient windows. Discuss if any such breaks exist with the local municipality. When it comes to renovating a rental property, landlords can make a handful of small renovations that, while relatively inexpensive, enable them to earn substantially more money from each unit over the long haul.

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**Prepare Cooling Systems For Warm Weather**

One springtime task on homeowners' to-do lists is checking cooling systems to ensure they are ready for summer. Proper maintenance of cooling systems is essential to saving energy and keeping utility costs down. Fortunately, homeowners need not be certified HVAC technicians to maintain their cooling units.

- Clean filters. Whether a home is kept cool by a whole-house central air conditioning system or window units, clean filters are necessary to keep the units working efficiently. Routinely replacing or cleaning filters is one of the most important maintenance tasks to improve airflow and increase efficiency. The U.S. Office of Energy Efficiency & Renewable Energy says replacing a dirty, clogged filter with a clean one can lower an air conditioner's energy consumption by anywhere from 5 to 15 percent.
- Know the square footage. When replacing a cooling system, have an understanding of the size of your home (or room if installing an window unit). Determine the area of the home so you buy a unit that suits your needs. Air conditioners use BTUs (British Thermal Units) to define cooling power. The more BTUs, the larger the space that can be cooled. However, homeowners do not want to exceed the necessary cooling power. This leads to energy waste. EnergyStar.gov can help homeowners find the right cooling system for their needs.
- Inspect system coils. The evaporator and condenser coils on air conditioners can collect dirt, even when filters are maintained. Dirty coils are less efficient at absorbing heat, so periodically remove the dirt. Outdoor coils can be kept cleaner by cutting back foliage from the unit to allow better air flow.
- Inspect condensate drains. Energy.gov also suggests making sure condensate drains, which take moisture pulled from the air away, are functioning properly. If they're clogged, they may not be effective at reducing humidity in a home, and they may even leak.
- Clear debris. Remove fallen leaves or other plant material from condenser units and fan blades. Obstructed components can cause the system to retain heat, compromising its ability to work effectively. Some homeowners prefer to cover their condensers at the end of the cooling season to keep leaves and dirt out of the unit.
- Check window unit seals. When installing window units, make sure all seals around the air conditioner are in place to prevent cool-air loss.



• Hire a technician. Air conditioner technicians can be very helpful and will know how to prepare a system for hot weather. Technicians typically conduct multipoint inspections and measure such things as refrigerant levels and duct leakage. Airflow through the evaporator coil also may be checked. If a homeowner suspects the thermostat is not working properly, a technician can verify if that is true and even install a new one if necessary. As summer approaches, homeowners should prepare their air conditioning units for the busy months ahead.



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### Coping With Condensation And Other Home Moisture Issues

Finding the right moisture balance in a home can be challenging. Too little moisture and a home can be plagued by static electricity and interior spaces that can feel dry and uncomfortable. But too much moisture in a home may make it susceptible to mold, mildew and insect infestations. Moisture also can rot wood and cause unsightly stains on walls and ceilings. Maintaining humidity in the optimal indoor range helps to keep the home safe, reduce energy consumption and keep a home's occupants healthy. Damp

conditions can lead to the growth of fungi, viruses and bacteria and may exacerbate people's asthma and allergies. The ideal relative humidity range of a home should be between 40 to 50, according to heating and cooling experts and the Environmental Prevention Agency. Humidity should be even lower in the winter to prevent condensation on windows and other surfaces. Lower relative humidity also reduces the out-gassing of volatile organic compounds (VOCs). Measure humidity with a

hygrometer to get an accurate assessment. If the humidity levels fall above or below the desired range, action should be taken. Homeowners dealing with excessive moisture can try these remedies:  
• Ventilate areas of the home. Ventilation can be the first step to reducing indoor humidity. Target the areas that create the most moisture, such as kitchens and bathrooms. Turn on venting fans to remove moist air from the bathroom during showers and baths. Exhaust hoods can control humidity from cooking in

the kitchen. When possible, open windows on dry days to help air out damp spaces.  
• Rely on fans. Use fans to circulate the air and prevent moist air from pooling in certain locations. Fans also will help increase ventilation.  
• Keep gutters and downspouts clean. Prevent water from pooling around the foundation of a home and infiltrating the basement or crawlspace. Direct gutter water further away from the house if possible, and keep gutters free of obstructions.  
• Service HVAC systems regu-

larly. Routine inspections of heating and cooling systems can identify any problems, such as clogged air-conditioning drain lines or faulty operation, that can contribute to moisture problems.  
• Beef up insulation. Insulate cold water pipes and look into insulated toilet tanks that will help eliminate condensation issues. Sealing out moisture in a basement or crawlspace also can help. Vapor barriers can eliminate a great deal of moisture coming into the home.  
• Address any plumbing leaks. Make sure you trace possible

leaks to their sources and have them repaired. Constantly dripping water can add to humidity levels and create other problems.  
• Use a dehumidifier. If all other efforts have been tried, a dehumidifier unit can help remove excess moisture from the air. Dehumidifiers are particularly helpful in basements where moisture can collect. Controlling moisture in a home results in a safer and healthier space. Target indoor moisture at its sources, such as bathrooms and kitchens.

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### Spring Cleaning Projects You Don't Want To Forget

Spring cleaning is an annual tradition in many households. After a winter spent cooped up indoors, spring cleaning can rejuvenate a household and provide a great chance to rid a home of a season's worth of clutter. Donating old clothes and cleaning out the garage are popular spring cleaning projects, but there are a host of additional tasks homeowners can tackle to freshen up their homes this spring.

#### FLOORS

Simply vacuuming or sweeping the floors might not be enough to banish some of winter's most uninvited guests. Dust has a way of settling into a home over the course of a typical winter, and it's easy for a home's inhabitants to track dirt and debris inside as well. After vacuuming or sweeping floors, go over them with a mop. Doing so can remove any lingering dust, dirt, debris, and allergens the vacuum or broom failed to pick up. Apply wood cleaner and polish to wood floors to make them look even cleaner.

#### BASEBOARDS

Though baseboards might not seem all that dirty, upon closer inspection homeowners might notice substantial accumulations of dirt and dust. Such dirt and dust many not be removed so easily, so homeowners might need to use hot water and a sponge to remove any debris that is clinging.

#### CURTAINS

Curtains also may have absorbed substantial amounts of dust, dirt and debris over the winter. This might be more visible near the end of winter when more sunlight begins to shine through. Clean the curtains in adherence to the manufacturer instructions before you open windows for the season so any wind that blows in does not spread debris onto nearby furniture. Once the curtains have been washed, opening windows may help them dry more quickly.

#### BATHROOMS

Bathrooms also tend to bear the brunt of winter weather, as mold and grime can accumulate throughout a season in which it's too cold to open bathroom windows to let fresh air in after bathing. Inspect ceilings, tubs, shower stalls, and floors for any signs of mold growth or grime. Mold growth in a home can lead to respiratory problems and exacerbate existing conditions such as asthma, so it's best to inspect bathrooms for any signs of mold growth throughout winter. If you have let that slip, prioritize such inspections come spring cleaning time.

#### FURNITURE

It's easy to overlook furniture when tackling spring cleaning, but dust and dirt can quickly accumulate on couches and chairs over the course of winter. When possible, vacuum furniture to remove any debris that might have accumulated while windows and doors were kept shut, and shampoo any cushions or seat covers that don't pass the smell test. Spring cleaning encompasses a host of tasks, and homeowners who want a truly clean house should not overlook smaller tasks that can produce big results.

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The dawn of spring marks the return of many things, including long hours of sunlight and warm temperatures in which to enjoy that sunshine. But homeowners know spring also marks the return of insects, unwelcome guests that can be difficult or expensive to control once they have entered a home. As problematic as insect infestations can be, preventing such problems can be simple, especially when homeowners are proactive. The following are a handful of ways to keep insects out this spring and summer.

- Consider potential food supplies and cut those supplies off. Insects often enter a home in

**Safeguard Your Home From Insect Infestations**

search of food, so cutting off potential food supplies is a great way to prevent insects from coming inside. Give dining areas a thorough cleaning after meals, vacuuming or sweeping the floors beneath dining tables each night before going to bed. (Parents of young children may want to sweep floors after each meal.) In addition, clean pets' bowls each night to be sure there are no food scraps left that may entice insects, and make sure pet food containers are tightly sealed after each serving. Sinks are another potential food source, so empty food traps after using the sink and run the garbage disposal

as well to remove any food that might be lingering.

- Address potential shelters. Insects also seek shelter inside homes, and there are many areas in a home that can provide adequate shelter. Cracks around windows and doors and in the foundation provide both entry points and potential shelters for insects. Seal such cracks with caulk, testing the areas by feeling for any incoming air. If you still feel air coming in, there is still some sealing to do. Cracks in cabinets or counters also may provide shelter to insects, so address these areas as well.
- React quickly upon seeing

insects. Insect infestations happen gradually, so homeowners should react quickly when seeing a single insect or a handful of insects inside their homes. The slower your response, the more likely one or two intruders is likely to turn into a large infestation. Immediately clean any areas where you see insects, and take more substantial measures if your initial efforts were not enough to prevent more insects from coming in. Clean kitchen sinks thoroughly after preparing foods and washing dishes to prevent insect infestations from becoming a problem.

Termite swarms are often the first visible evidence that ter-

**Get Set For Spring Termite Swarms**

mites are a problem in and around a home. There are several different types of subterranean termite species, and many begin to take flight when weather conditions are favorable, such as in the spring and summer.

According to the pest management company Orkin, swarming may be linked to the age and maturity of a termite colony. Swarms also may indicate the presence of other conditions, such as moisture in the air or abundant light. Swarming termites are the winged alates that venture outside of the nest to mate and reproduce, forming newer colonies. Thousands of swarms may be in the air. The termites will squeeze through cracks and crevices in the walls and foundations of homes. They also may be seen coming out of the ground outdoors.

The presence of a swarm of termites around a home suggests a strong likelihood that there is a well-established colony of termites living in or near the home. Over her lifetime, a termite queen can lay one million eggs, producing new swarms each year.

It is essential that homeowners recognize when termites are a problem in a home, as they can cause considerable damage. In the United States alone, subterranean, drywood and dampwood termites cause more than \$5 billion in damage annually and can cost homeowners an average of \$8,000 in treatment and damage repairs. Homeowners who suspect they have a termite problem should call a professional exterminator. There are some other indications that termites may be in a home or nearby.


- Termites shed their wings as they enter a new home. If wings are found around windows, vents, doors or pipes coming into a home, it may mean termites have entered.
- Look for muddy, flattened tubes about the width of a drinking straw. Termites travel through these tubes and the tubes help protect the termites from predators and temperature extremes.
- Dark areas or bubbling in flooring can indicate termites are feeding below.
- Termites eat wood from the inside out, so any damage may not be visible. Tap suspect wood and listen for a hollow sound.
- Look for and mark any areas

where termites are seen entering or exiting the house. Then direct the exterminator to these areas. Termites can cause substantial

damage to a home, but their infestations are largely treatable. When a termite swarm is spotted, call a professional immediately.

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**7 Home Improvements That Will Add Value To Your Property**

(HIT) - When renovating your home, it's important to think about both aesthetic and resale value. There's no use in building a thousand-dollar, custom-made deck if your return on investment (ROI) will be peanuts when you move! If you're serious about getting the most out of your home improvements, here are just a few that will add value to your property instead of detract or deflect from it.

**1. AUTOMATED SYSTEMS**  
 "Smart homes" are selling like hotcakes in today's technology-obsessed economy. Buyers will pay top dollar for things like remote security alarms and voice-activated sprinkler systems,

so if you can plug your home into a wireless network that makes life smarter and more convenient, you'll definitely see a monetary return.

**2. UPGRADED KITCHENS**  
 According to surveys, the kitchen is one of the most important rooms to prospective buyers. They want to see shiny new appliances and spot-free countertops, not rusty taps and old, cracked cabinets. Expect to spend a few hundred dollars whipping your kitchen into shape. If you play your cards right, you'll get it all back when you sell.

**3. ATTIC ROOMS**  
 Attic rooms look good to buyers

even if they don't plan on using them. Why is this, you may ask? It's because attic rooms usually have plumbing, insulation and other comforts of modern living, and these things signal that it isn't just a dusty space waiting to collect asbestos. Attention has been given to attic rooms, and buyers appreciate that assurance.

**4. LUXURY BATHROOMS**  
 Everyone likes a little luxury when they're unwinding from a long day's work. Think about things like bidets, hot tubs and waterfall showers if you're looking to increase your bathroom's value. You can also contact a pool and spa company or even shop directly from manufacturers like Hydrosport to learn more.

**5. ADDITIONAL CLOSETS**  
 You can never go wrong with more storage space. According to experts, the average closet can recoup up to 80 percent of what it costs to install, making it a worthy investment and a relatively simple one to pull off. You don't need a large-scale renovation project to add a few closets to your home. A good contractor can do it without breaking a sweat.

**6. FRONT YARD AESTHETIC**  
 When's the last time you replaced your front door? How often do you change the shutters on your windows? These things have immense value when it comes to making a good first impression on realtors and buyers. You'll also want to cut the lawn, shine the garage door and re-gravel your driveway. This is called "curb appeal" in some circles.

**7. MORE BATHROOMS**  
 Doesn't a "two-bedroom, two-bath" just roll off the tongue? Increase your number of bathrooms to increase your overall property value. Even if you don't have the money to install a full bathroom, a half-bath will give your home prestige and increased worth. Just do what you can afford and allow yourself to reap the benefits later! These are just a few home improvements that can add value to your property. Keep in mind that things change annually, so what's hot today might not be a big seller next year. You'll need to stay on top of the trends if you want to maximize your ROI during a real estate sale.

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### Say "So Long" To High Utility Bills

Utility bills are among the largest expenses homeowners have each month. Trimming utility bills can not only benefit homeowners' bottom lines, but also be prove beneficial for the environment.

Unnecessary energy consumption can drive up utility bills, costing homeowners substantial amounts of money every year. Fortunately, homeowners can take several steps to reduce unnecessary energy consumption, saving themselves money and helping the planet along the way.

- Conduct nightly energy audits. Before going to bed at night, homeowners can spend a few minutes walking around their homes making sure all devices, appliances and lights are tuned off. Devices left on when not in use may not consume significant amounts of energy on their own, but when many are left on, the resulting energy consumption can be considerable. The U.S. Department of Energy notes that unplugging cable boxes each night can save homeowners nearly \$20 per box over the course of a year. Unplugging additional appliances each night when not in use can add to those savings while reducing excessive energy consumption.

- Lower the temperature on your water heater. Water heaters make it possible to take hot showers each morning, but when used improperly, such heaters can be very wasteful. Water heaters set at 120F will not affect the quality of your daily showers and can help prevent scalding. But water heaters may be set at 140F by manufacturers, and that can waste energy and pose a scald-

ing hazard. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the cost of bringing fresh water up to 140F can cost homeowners as much as \$400 per year. Setting water heaters to 120F and lowering that temperature when going on vacation can save homeowners money and reduce the standby heat losses necessary to keep water at 140F or higher.

- Clean filters more frequently. It's easy to forget about filters on heating and air conditioning systems. But forgotten filters could be costing homeowners significant amounts of money. When neglected, HVAC filters accumulate dirt and dust, making systems work much less efficiently than they do when filters are clean. Clean filters once per month to make sure you aren't wasting money and energy when heating and cooling your home.

- Monitor your meter. If you are taking steps to reduce energy consumption but your utility bills are staying the same or even increasing, start monitoring your energy meter. Meter readers are not immune to mistakes, and the readings may be incorrect. Jot down the energy consumption figures reflected on your meter, and compare those figures to those on your utility bill, reporting any discrepancies to your utility company.



- Air conditioning should be set no lower than 75F.

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### 5 Signs Your Roof Might Be Wearing Down

Replacing a roof is a costly venture few homeowners look forward to. According to Remodeling magazine's 2010-11 "Cost vs. Value" report, the national average cost of a roof replacement is nearly \$22,000, a costly endeavor considering the tenuous nature of the economy. What's more, homeowners who choose more upscale roofing materials can expect to spend almost \$40,000 on their roofs.

Such costs make it no small wonder that many homeowners fear the dreaded diagnosis that their home needs a new roof. While there's little homeowners can do to reduce the cost of a roof replacement, there are warning signs homeowners can look for that might indicate a roof replacement is on the horizon. Recognition of these signs can help homeowners be more financially prepared should the day come when the roof needs to be replaced.

1. **THE PRESENCE OF ALGAE**  
If the roof has lots of dark streaks and stains clinging to it, that is likely algae, which can grow on the roof for quite awhile. Algae does not necessarily do any damage to a roof, but it does do some damage to a home's physical appearance, as algae on the roof is not very pleasing to the eye. Algae is most often found on the roofs of homes located in climates that have warm, humid summers. If algae is a problem on your roof, spray washing with a mixture of water and bleach can effectively remove it.

2. **BUCKLING SHINGLES**  
Like algae, buckling shingles are more than just an eyesore, they actually might indicate significant problems. When shingles buckle, that's typically because hot air from the attic is forcing the shingles away from the home. Buckling shingles also indicate that the roof is poorly ventilated, which can take years off the roof's life expectancy while driving up home cooling costs along the way.

3. **GRANULE LOSS**  
Granule loss is typically a byproduct of normal shingle wear and tear that results from inclement weather, such as

hail. Older roofs might experience granule loss, but granule loss can also occur on a new roof if a defective roofing product was used. Any granule loss, even if slight, should be addressed, as the side effects of granule loss include a weakened roof and leaking. If granule loss is not addressed, the consequences could be severe the next time a storm occurs.

4. **MOLD**  
Unlike the warning signs already discussed, mold is not visible on the outside of the home. Instead, homeowners should look in the attic of a home to see if there is any mold growth. If there is, the roof is likely leaking, and the health risks of mold growth in a home are substantial. Mold is not necessarily easy to detect, so a professional inspection might be in order if mold growth is suspected. If a professional determines mold is, in fact, present, then the mold will need to be removed and all options, including a roof replacement, must be considered to keep mold from coming back.

5. **ROOF ROT**  
Perhaps the most discouraging sign a homeowner can see on his or her roof is roof rot. Roof

rot appears when a roof is in considerable decay and, if not addressed, its consequences can stretch far beyond the roof, damaging other parts of the home thanks in large part to water getting through the roof. If roof rot is either not noticed or just ignored, it won't take long for water to get through the roof and blaze a destructive path through the rest of the home.

Homeowners might fear a full roof replacement because of the cost associated with such a project. But if ignored, problems with a roof could eventually prove far more costly than the price of replacing the roof.



Should a roof exhibit any signs of decay, homeowners should address those issues immediately to avoid further damage.

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### Sustainable Flooring Options Abound

Kitchen and bathroom remodeling projects tend to make great investments, earning homeowners significant returns when they sell their homes down the road. But flooring upgrades are another home renovation project that can attract attention and help sellers when they put their homes on the market.

Home flooring options abound, and it is easy to get excited and overwhelmed about flooring renovation projects. When choosing new flooring materials, homeowners should keep in mind the latest consumer trends, as those trends might help them recoup more of their flooring investment down the road.

One popular flooring trend is the use of sustainable materials. In addition to the more widely known benefits of choos-



ing sustainable flooring, such as protecting natural resources and reducing a home's carbon footprint, sustainable flooring can help reduce indoor air pollution. Various studies from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency have shown that indoor air pollutant levels may be higher indoors than outdoors. A major contributor to indoor air pollution are the volatile organic compounds, or VOCs, being off-gassed by carpeting and other flooring in a home. Flooring manufacturers and designers are embracing the green design and remodeling movement. Today there are many beautiful and sustainable eco-flooring options. Here are some of the more popular materials.

- **Bamboo:** Contrary to popular belief, bamboo is not a wood, but a grass. It is a fast-growing grass, and that makes it a smart choice in many design applications. Also, unlike wood, which will absorb moisture and can warp, bamboo repels water and can be used for flooring in areas where one wouldn't think to put wood, such as in bathrooms, entryways or mudrooms. Bamboo is naturally very light in color, but can be stained in many different hues to give homeowners more options.

- **Green carpeting:** Consumers can now find a wide range of sustainable carpets and rugs that are available at competitive prices. Wool carpets made with undyed or vegetable-dyed

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yarns and minimal glues are some options. Some carpets are even made from recycled content, such as rubber and plastics. Water-based, low-VOC adhesives paired with recycled cotton padding can reduce the toxicity and impact of carpeting even further.

- **Cork:** Growing in popularity, cork is a material harvested from the bark of cork trees found in the forests of the Mediterranean. The bark grows back every three years, so it is a handy renewable resource. Cork boasts fire-retardant properties and may naturally repel insects. It can usually be stained to suit various color schemes.
- **Rubber:** Rubber flooring may call to mind fitness gyms and

playground safety substrate, but it's also slowly finding its way into homes. Made from recycled tires, rubber flooring is flexible underfoot and can be long-lasting and colorful.

- **Reclaimed wood:** Rather than purchasing brand new hardwood planks for flooring, homeowners can opt for reclaimed wood reused from other building applications. After some sanding, staining and finishing, reclaimed wood provides homeowners with the opportunity to choose traditional hardwood flooring without any concerns about deforestation.

Eco-friendly flooring materials continue to evolve and can be smart choices in today's homes.

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According to the Penn State Department of Plant Science, thatch is a loose and intermingled organic layer of both dead and living shoots, stems and roots that develops between the zone of green vegetation and the soil surface. While leaf clippings may be found in a thatch layer, they do not typically contribute to thatch buildup because clippings are easily broken down by microorganisms in the soil. While some homeowners may only know thatch as a threat they must periodically address by aerating their soil, thatch can benefit turf depending on the amount of it that is present. For example, a layer of thatch that is 1/2-inch or less can insulate the turf from extreme temperatures and fluctuations in soil moisture. But it's important that homeowners address thatch before it gets too thick, as excess thatch can harbor disease-causing organisms and insects.

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### Freshen Up Your Home For Spring Season

After a few months of chilly temperatures, come spring, many homeowners are eager to throw open their windows and doors and breathe new life into their homes. Simple changes made now, even before the weather begins to warm up, can improve interior spaces and brighten the atmosphere of a home.

- Go plant shopping. Research from NASA suggests adding at least one plant in your home per 100 square feet is efficient enough to clean air. Fresh foliage also makes a home feel warm and inviting. Watering and misting plants introduces moisture into indoor air, which can make rooms overcome with dry air from heating systems feel comfortable. Just be sure to avoid overwatering plants, which can lead to mold growth.
- Swap out throw pillows. Accent pillows on beds and sofas are quick and inexpensive ways to add new bursts of color to rooms. You may be able to make over a room's entire color scheme with new pillows. Invest in pillows that you can switch with each season so your decor will never look tired or dull.
- Clean existing light fixtures. Another way to brighten the mood in a home is to periodically clean light fixtures to make sure they are working effectively. Spend time dusting them and cleaning off any accumulated debris. If need be, switch out old lamp shades for newer ones that let more light shine through. If inadequate lighting is a problem no matter how many lamps you have, consult with an electrician about installing more overhead and accent lighting.
- Give rugs and floors a deep cleaning. Recirculated air may be full of dust and other microscopic particles that end up blowing throughout your home. Also, it's easy to track in dirt and other materials on your shoes that become imbedded in carpeting. At least once a year, rent or enlist the services of carpet and upholstery cleaners to give floors a thorough cleaning. You may be surprised at how clean and fresh a home looks and smells once rugs and carpets are deep-cleaned. You also can make a dry carpet cleaner using baking soda, corn starch and desired fresh herbs for fragrance. Sprinkle and then vacuum up after a few hours.
- Color-coordinate bookshelves. Group all books with similarly colored covers together for an instant and eye-appealing look.
- Simmer some homemade home deodorizer. In a large pot, boil water and some scented herbs, such as rosemary, citrus rinds, vanilla, or lavender. The aroma will waft through the home, creating a pleasing scent.
- Invest in new window treatments. Lightweight draperies or new blinds or shades can transform the look of a room. Be sure to keep curtains and blinds open during the day to maximize the hours of sunlight. Homeowners can make some simple changes while they're stuck indoors and reap the benefits when the weather warms up again. Fresh flowers, new throw pillows and lightweight draperies are some easy ways to transform a home in time for spring's arrival.

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