Designs Easy on Your Pocket

How to Choose Kitchen and Bath Design
Page 3

What Lies Ahead

What to do to prepare your garden for winter
Page 11

Downspout Damage

Signs your gutters are in need of repair
Page 6

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Trends in home design come and go, but the basic look of modern kitchens and baths tends to remain consistent, with some variations to complement the style of the home. Granite or quartz countertops, stainless steel and hardwood floors retain their popularity.

Any builder or real estate agent will tell you that upgraded, stylish kitchens and bathrooms are the most in-demand areas of a home to remodel for your own comfort and pleasure or to sell your home.

Kitchen and bath remodeling can improve your home’s value and increase its charm. This is especially true if your current kitchen and baths are dated and showing their age. And while remodeling can be costly, these are areas where you don’t want to cut corners. After all, you use your kitchen and bath every day you are in your home.

If it’s time for some updates in your home, here are some things to consider with regard to kitchen and bath remodeling.

**Function**

Functionality is paramount. What exactly will you be doing in this room? Do you eat in your kitchen, or in a dining room? Some people get dressed in their bathroom, while others put on clothing in their bedrooms. Make a list of all the activities you perform in the room. Prioritize this list from most important to the least.

Upon finishing this list, figure out the items you need to store in your bathroom or kitchen. Do you really need to have the washer and dryer near your kitchen or bathroom? Can you create a closet in your bathroom?

Next, create a floor plan. Think about your traffic pattern as you complete tasks. When you are tired from a hard day, you will be glad you thought ahead.

Some people use their kitchen to entertain guests. If that is your preference, include it in your floor plan. You might want to add a bar or table for entertaining.

Everyone wishes that they had more storage space, so be sure to build it into your design.

**Décor**

Look for inspiration. Leaf through home design magazines to find appealing designs. Make notes on what you like most about each design scheme.

Also consider watching home design shows or looking on the internet. You can often find the most up-to-date information from those sources.

If you are redecorating to sell your home, keep in mind what future homeowners may enjoy. In the kitchen, consider using stainless steel appliances. They usually are easy to clean.

Neutral flooring is always a good option. These floor coverings consist of sustainable, low-maintenance material. They are a good choice for any kitchen or bathroom.

Neutral paint may open up opportunities for a variety of decorating options. It could make it easier to change the decor in the future. If you sell your home, it allows potential buyers to visualize their own preferences in that space.

Of course, any room you design must be coordinated with the design of other rooms in your home. If your house has a contemporary, modern or traditional design, you will want the kitchen and bath to blend with that decor.

Experts suggest that you spend most of your money on countertops. It is often a focal point in any room.

Small accent pieces can also help boost your design. Pick unique pieces that display your personality.

**Budget**

Remodeling can be expensive. Experts recommend you spend up to 20 percent of your home’s value on remodeling the kitchen, and less than that on remodeling the bath.

You can save money by adding a coat of fresh paint to your current kitchen cabinets or installing energy efficient appliances. Leave some room in your budget to hire a professional to do electrical and plumbing work, along with other chores you are uncomfortable with doing yourself. It will save you money in the long run.
Types of home insulation and where to install them

When thinking about renovating their homes, homeowners may imagine changing wall colors, expanding room sizes or upgrading appliances and fixtures. However, unless people take inventory of the less glamorous components of the home, such as structure, plumbing, heating and cooling, and insulation, other improvements may be for naught.

A home insulation project certainly doesn’t offer the wow factor of a kitchen remodel, but insulation serves a vital function in the house that helps keep people comfortable and reduces energy consumption. Insulation is typically placed in areas where air escapes, such as between the stud cavities inside the walls and in the attic, and serves to slow and reduce heat transfer.

The U.S. Department of Energy says between 50 and 70 percent of the energy used in homes is for heating and cooling. By improving home insulation, homeowners can make their homes more comfortable, consistent and efficient. In fact, the ENERGY STAR program overseen by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says home inspectors should save an average of 15 percent on heating and cooling costs by adding proper insulation. To do so, homeowners can take a crash course in home insulation and find the products that fit their needs.

Blanket batts and rolls
Blanket batts and rolls typically are constructed with fiberglass, so proper safety gear, such as a mask and gloves, is needed when handling them. Installing this type of insulation is relatively easy since the materials are designed to fit the standard width between studs, rafters and floor joists.

Loose fill
Loose fill is usually made of fiberglass or cellulose (recycled paper fiber). It is blown or sprayed into place with pneumatic equipment, according to The Home Depot. Loose fill can be ideal for hard-to-reach areas in attics or inside wall cavities. It’s good for adding insulation to irregularly shaped areas. Since it requires special equipment, this is a job best left to professionals.

Sprayed foam
Sprayed foam is just as the name implies, a foam made from polyurethane, polyisocyanurate, cementitious, or other materials that are applied by a spray container. DIYers who need only small applications can use canned products. Large quantities are pressure-sprayed by professionals.

Foam board/rigid foam panels
Ideal for unfinished walls, such as basement or foundation walls, floors and ceilings, these are boards of polyurethane or polystyrene. Foam boards tend to reduce energy consumption more effectively than other types of insulation.

Homeowners considering upgrading their insulation or amending existing insulation should do their homework on the type of insulation that will be most effective for their homes.

5 tips to prepare for window replacement

Winter is coming, and for millions of people who reside in areas of the country that see the mercury drop considerably between December and March, that means prioritizing staying warm. Inefficient or aging housing materials may compromise your ability to do just that. Drafts from doors, poorly protected attics and basements and aging windows may force heating systems to work extra hard to maintain interior temperatures.

Replacing old windows can make a home quieter by blocking out exterior noises. Consumer Reports also notes that new windows are often easier to clean and maintain than older varieties.

Many homeowners are interested in replacing their windows, but may not know where to start. These guidelines can help the process along.

1. Get several estimates. Ask for recommendations from neighbors or other people in your area on which companies they used to install their replacement windows. When you interview the prospects, ask several questions about how they go about installing the windows. Questions can include:
   - How long will the project take?
   - Will I need to remain home during the process?
   - Do you discard old debris?
   - What is the protocol for installation during inclement weather?

2. Research permits. Most home renovation projects need to be approved by the local municipality. Go to the permit office and find out the requirements. Some window contractors will include securing permits in the cost of the project. After the project is completed, an inspector will come by and ensure the work was done according to code.

3. Change up the appearance. Look at the type of hardware you have around the home and other fixtures. Choose windows that have locks or latches that can match those features for continuity of style. Think about choosing a different style or frame color of the window, or a different type of window to improve efficiency and function.

4. Research top window manufacturers. It’s tempting to purchase windows based on price alone, but replacement windows are often a decision that only has to be made once or twice for the life of the home. Invest in durable windows that will have staying power. Consumer Reports offers unbiased reviews on various window brands and can help homeowners make sound decisions.

5. Prepare for installation. Clear pathways, remove window treatments and disconnect window alarm systems. Plan for one to two days of installation, advises Andersen Windows and Doors. Keep pets and children away from work areas.

Replacement windows can be a smart investment. New windows can improve the look of a home, reduce heating costs and can keep interior spaces comfortable.
Options abound when shopping for home siding

Home improvement projects run the gamut from minor repairs to complete overhauls. Replacing exterior siding is one of the most significant home improvement projects homeowners can undertake. Such a project can give homes a completely new look, which is why choice of siding is such an important decision.

Homeowners have many siding options to choose from, and the following guide can help them make the best choice for their homes.

Vinyl siding
Vinyl siding is easily maintained and among the more budget-friendly siding options. According to the home improvement resource HomeAdvisor, vinyl siding is made from a PVC plastic that does not rot or flake. Siding professionals note that the technology used to create vinyl siding has changed considerably in recent years, making this option more diverse than traditional vinyl siding. So homeowners turned off by the potentially plastic look of vinyl siding might be surprised at how different modern vinyl siding looks compared to the vinyl siding of yesteryear.

Fiber-cement siding
The home improvement television network HGTVC notes that fiber-cement siding has grown in popularity among homeowners in recent years. This material does not require much maintenance and it’s non-flammable and resistant to termites. HomeAdvisor notes that fiber-cement siding can create the look of wood, stucco or masonry, making it a versatile option capable of creating various looks. In addition, fiber-cement siding is known for its durability, with some products coming with warranties lasting as long as 50 years.

Wood siding
Homeowners have many choices if they prefer wood siding on their homes. Cedar, cypress, fir, pine, and spruce are just a handful of the many wood siding options homeowners can choose from. HomeAdvisor notes that cedar shingle siding offers a natural look that blends well in wooded and waterfront landscapes. Wood clapboard siding is another popular option, though it tends to require more maintenance than cedar shingle siding. Homeowners who want wood siding should discuss their options with an experienced siding professional, as many factors, including the choice of wood, must be considered before making a final decision.

Stone and stone-veneer siding
Many homeowners fall in love with the natural appeal of stone, but the price tag, which tends to be costly, may not be as awe-inspiring. HGTVC notes that stone can be difficult to add to an existing home, and doing so may drive the price up even further. Stone siding is durable, and there are many options, including solid stone and natural stone cladding, that make this an option capable of providing an array of looks. Stone-veneer siding is less expensive than natural stone and also comes in an array of styles. As is the case with wood, stone siding options are so extensive that homeowners are urged to discuss each one with a siding professional before making their decisions.

These are just a handful of the many siding options homeowners can choose from. Siding can give homes a completely new look, making the choice of siding a significant decision worthy of careful consideration.

How to remove mildew from your home’s exterior

Homeowners want their residences to look inviting inside and out. Part of keeping an attractive property involves addressing issues that can compromise not only the appearance of a home, but even its integrity.

People who live in regions with high humidity may find their homes are vulnerable to exterior mildew growth. Mildew is a kind of mold. Molds include all species of microscopic fungi that grow in the form of hyphae, which are multicellular filaments, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. Mold thrives on any organic matter and surfaces with moisture management problems. Mildew, in particular, lives on shower walls, windowsills and other places where moisture levels are high. Mildew also can grow on home siding as well as fences and other exterior structures. While typically gray or white, mildew can be various colors.

Experts recommend various cleaners to help combat the issue of mildew on a home. One of the first products that homeowners tend to reach for is sodium hypochlorite, which is a standard bleach used in laundry and pool sanitation. While sodium hypochlorite seems to make mildew vanish, those at This Old House say that chlorine evaporates too quickly to get to mildew’s roots on porous surfaces, such as wood or vinyl siding. Bleach also can stain clothing and damage foliage around the house. Hydrogen peroxide, or oxygen bleach, is less volatile, will not affect foliage and can clean mildew, algae and dirt on and below the surface.

Trisodium phosphate is another effective cleanser. Commonly known as TSP, it often succeeds where other solutions fail in regard to stubborn stains and mildew. TSP also works well on various exterior surfaces. TSP needs to be used with extreme caution. When using TSP, wear long sleeves, gloves, goggles, and a respiratory mask, says Today’s Homeowner. The product also requires adequate ventilation. There also are some environmental concerns, as TSP can damage foliage. In addition, if the product ends up in lakes and streams, it can trigger an overgrowth of algae that results in the depletion of oxygen levels in the water. Eco-conscious homeowners may want to try oxy cleansers before TSP.

Mildew shies away from bright sunlight, so it tends to grow on the north side of homes. Removing trees or other foliage that can further block sunlight to areas of the house can help eradicate mildew growth and stop it before it starts. Another tactic is to clean out gutters regularly and thoroughly to reduce moisture and to prevent decomposing debris from running over the edge of the gutters. This runoff can drip down the home’s siding and spread the mildew to other areas. Mildew can be problematic any time of year. Clean up mildew when the weather cools down to spruce up the look of a home.

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Signs your gutters are in need of repair

Fall is a great time to tackle projects around the house. The weather each fall allows homeowners to make improvements to their homes’ exteriors without worrying about extreme heat or cold, while interior projects like painting are made easier because homeowners can open the windows to allow for proper ventilation.

Fall also marks a great time to prepare for upcoming projects that can make winter work that much easier. For example, fall is a great time to take stock of your gutters so you can address any issues before leaves begin to fall or the first snowstorm touches down. Compromised gutters can contribute to water issues in basements and adversely affect a home’s foundation if not addressed immediately, so it behooves homeowners to learn the signs that gutters are in need of repair or replacement.

Gutters hanging off the home: Gutters were once installed predominantly with spikes. However, many industry professionals now install gutters with hanger brackets. Why the change? Spikes loosen over time, leading to the gutters hanging off the home. That can contribute to serious issues if left untreated. Gutters hanging off the home need not necessarily be replaced, but rather secured to the home, ideally with hanger brackets instead of spikes. Brackets hook into the front of the gutter and are then screwed into the fascia of a home. A professional who specializes in gutter repair can perform this task relatively quickly, and it’s an inexpensive yet highly effective solution.

Gutter separation: Gutters that are no longer fastened together can leak and contribute to issues that affect the home’s foundation, siding and appearance. Clogs and the accumulation of debris can cause gutters to separate because they are not designed to hold too much weight. Replacement of separated gutters may or may not be necessary depending on how big the problem is and the condition of the existing gutters. If replacement is not necessary, separated gutters may be remedied by securing the joints, another relatively simple and inexpensive fix.

Peeling exterior paint: Paint that appears to be peeling off of your home may indicate that water is seeping over the edge of the gutter closest to your home. When that happens, water is coming down the side of the house, causing the paint to peel. In such instances, replacing the gutters is often necessary.

Basement flooding: Not all signs of deteriorating gutters are outside a home. Many a homeowner has been flummoxed by flooding in their basements, and such flooding can be caused by aging, ineffective gutters. That’s because deteriorating gutters sometimes allow water to leak near the foundation of a home, contributing to basement flooding.

Fall is an ideal time to inspect gutters and have any issues fixed before leaves begin to fall or harsh winter weather arrives.

Laundry room renovations you’ll love

Does it seem like your hamper is always full and the washing machine is running constantly? You may not be imagining it. Laundry Butler for You, a wash, dry and fold service, says the average household washes 50 pounds of laundry a week and 6,000 articles of clothing every year. Families with children at home are doing laundry most often, and those with pets may find there is ample laundry to wash as well.

With so much laundry being generated, homeowners may want to consider paying extra attention to the space in the house where their clothing is being cleansed. Laundry room renovations may not top homeowners’ priority lists, but it may be time to give these rooms another look.

Assess your equipment
If your appliances are aging, a laundry room renovation can start with an investment in new appliances. New models have large capacity loads, tend to be energy-efficient and could have innovative features that help fit with your laundry lifestyle. Purchasing front-loading models also can free up design space, as you can install a counter directly above the units, saving room for other items like drying racks.

Figure out your room needs
A laundry room need not be limited to laundry only. Many homeowners make large laundry rooms catch-all spaces that can serve as utility or mud rooms, pantry overflows, or off-season storage areas. Consider the functions you want the room to serve and include those ideas in your designs.

Add some natural light
If possible, include a window in your laundry room. Natural light can help make the room more enjoyable. It also can help you identify stains on clothes that need to be addressed and make it easier to fold matching items like socks.

Think about a utility sink
Many washing machines drain out directly to waste pipes in the floor or wall, but you also can opt to have them empty into a utility sink. This sink also provides a convenient place to handwash items, clean tools or paintbrushes, or store items that perhaps you do not want to bring into a bathroom or kitchen sink.

Include some flair
This utilitarian space need not be boring or bereft of design elements. Mirror your home’s style in the laundry room, and include wall hangings, plants, accent items, and even task lighting. Play up certain features with a bold floor tile or brightly colored walls.

Updating laundry rooms can be a great way to make doing laundry more enjoyable and efficient.
People have been spending more time at home in 2020 than in years past, and certain projects around the house have become a priority. One home improvement idea that serves the double benefit of creating organization and making cooking at home more efficient is to reimagine the kitchen pantry.

A pantry is a room or closet where food, beverages and linens or dishes are stored. Pantries can be highly useful spaces that provide ancillary storage in kitchens. Many modern homes are equipped with pantries, but older homes may require some modification to create more useful pantries. Whether starting from scratch or modifying an existing pantry, these tips can help projects go more smoothly.

Maximize vertical storage. Utilizing vertical areas can help increase storage capacity. Build in extra nooks by investing in undershelf storage baskets. These baskets can instantly create designated areas for different types of ingredients. Homeowners also can look for ways to use the inside of cabinet doors or add extra shelves on walls or in eaves.

Consider your needs. Figure out which items you would like to store in the pantry and then shop for corresponding storage systems. For example, storage solutions may feature wine bottle racks, baskets for potatoes and other produce, shelving for small appliances, and even pull out racks for baking pans or cutting boards.

Use clear storage. Put ingredients in clear, airtight containers of similar dimensions so that you can easily find items you need. Transfer bulky items, like cereals and baking supplies, to storage containers for uniformity.

Store bulk items elsewhere. Bulk shopping can be cost-efficient, but bulk items can quickly eat up real estate in the pantry. Designate another area for non-perishable bulk products, like paper goods or canned items, such as in a garage or utility room.

Pull out drawers are convenient. Pull-out drawers can reduce the need to seek and reach for items. These drawers conveniently roll out so items in the back can be accessed without disturbing foods in the front. Drawers can be custom built for any pantry space.

Make it accessible. Think about who will be taking items from the pantry. Put children’s snacks on the bottom pantry shelf where they can reach them, and then organize other shelves for adults in the home.

A pantry remodel can add valuable storage space and make one of the busiest rooms in the house operate more efficiently.
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Get ahead of chimney repair this season

Woodburning fireplaces or fuel stoves can add warmth and ambiance to a home. These appliances are particularly coveted in the cooler months when people spend more time indoors. Maintenance is necessary in order for fireplaces and stoves to function safely, and that upkeep must include paying close attention to the functionality of the chimney.

Start from the inside and ensure that dampers are working properly. When using fireplaces and other appliances, dampers need to be open to allow smoke to vent outside; otherwise, smoke will be trapped in the home and could lead to carbon monoxide buildup. Dampers need to be fixed or replaced if they are not operational. Replacement fireplace dampers should be snug and not have any gaps, states Vertical Chimney Care.

Chimneys are designed to last for decades. Cracks and spalling in brick chimneys are common concerns that can cause significant damage if left unchecked.

Chimney maintenance involves more than cleaning the flue. Rather than running the risk of costly repairs, which can cost several thousand dollars, homeowners can take some simple steps to keep their chimneys in tip-top shape. Certain components of chimney maintenance are do-it-yourself tasks, while others may be better left to the professionals.

Conduct a visual inspection of the chimney to check for any cracks or spalling. Spalling is the wearing away of masonry due to water, weather and time. If enough of the material erodes, that erosion can adversely affect the structural integrity of the chimney. Some repairs can be made by patching up cracks or replacing missing bricks. Chimney tuckpointing is the process of repairing mortar.

Think about waterproofing the chimney to prevent damage. A water sealant applied to the outside of the chimney can prevent moisture from breaking down the masonry.

Inspect and replace the chimney cap if it is worn out. A chimney cap is a contraption that sits atop the chimney to allow the smoke to vent while also preventing critters and water from going inside the flue, helping to extend the flue life. The chimney cap attaches to the flue liner, so outside dimensions should be taken to ensure the cap is the right size for the chimney.

Have the chimney swept. Sweeping helps remove the soot and debris that clings to the inside of the flue, known as creosote. The amount of time the fireplace is used will determine how often the chimney must be cleaned. Generally speaking, the chimney liner needs to be cleaned if it has 1/8-inch or more of soot.

Regular inspection and maintenance can help keep a chimney working safely for decades. For those who do not like working at such an elevation, leave exterior chimney repair to a certified professional.
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What to do to prepare your garden for winter

Gardens provide an idyllic escape from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. In fact, many gardening enthusiasts typically cannot wait for the spring thaw so they can spend the next several months tending to their plants under the warm sun. But a gardener’s work is never truly done, and the work to make gardens stun in the spring actually begins during the preceding fall.

Preparing gardens for winter is an important step that can help homeowners ensure their gardens return to full strength in the spring.

The tasks necessary to prepare gardens for winter may depend on what homeowners are planting, but the following are some general maintenance suggestions that can keep gardens safe this winter.

**Remove weeds and debris.** Weeds and debris are unsightly and detrimental to plant life in spring, but they also can be harmful in the winter. Weeds and debris left to linger in gardens through the winter provide overwintering spots for insects and can contribute to disease. So it’s imperative that weeds and debris are removed before the ground hardens in winter. Don’t wait until the ground hardens, as that can make it hard to remove the roots of weeds, adversely affecting the garden as a result.

**Prepare the soil.** The Farmer’s Almanac advises homeowners to gently till the soil in their gardens so they can expose any insects before they settle in for the winter. Once garden soil is exposed, add a layer of compost, leaves, aged manure, and, if necessary, lime, gently tilling it into the soil. According to the North Carolina Cooperative Extension, the only accurate way to determine if lawn or garden soil needs lime is to test it. Lime makes soil less acidic and reduces soil pH. Low soil pH makes it hard for certain plants to grow, but acidic soil is ideal when growing blueberries. Test the soil for lime and amend it depending on what you hope to grow in the spring so it’s ready to thrive when winter ends.

**Remove dead or diseased plants.** Dead or diseased plants should not be left in the garden through the winter. These plants can attract insects and are vulnerable to disease, which can make it hard for the garden to thrive in the spring.

**Protect fruit trees.** If you have fruit trees, install mouse guards around the base to prevent mice and voles from killing the trees over the winter. If left to their own devices over the winter, mice and voles may eat the bark of fruit trees, killing the trees as a result. The Farmer’s Almanac notes that mouse guards made of fine mesh hardware cloth can effectively protect fruit trees from hungry mice and voles over the winter.

Homeowners who don’t look forward to dusting off their rakes each fall might be happy to learn that mulching fallen leaves with a mower may be a healthier and less labor intensive way to confront a yard covered in leaves. For 20 years, turfgrass specialists at Michigan State University studied how lawns reacted to having ground up leaves left on the lawn and the results were overwhelmingly positive. Researchers found that tiny pieces of mulched leaves eventually sifted down through the turf and provided the lawn with essential nutrients. Mulched leaves also served to control future weed growth by covering up bare spots between turf plants. Such spots typically provided openings for weed seeds to germinate and ultimately infect lawns. In fact, researchers found that mulching leaves for just three years could produce a nearly 100 percent decrease in dandelion and crabgrass growth. Homeowners with mulching mowers that also have bags can even help their gardens by alternating using the mower with and without the bag on once leaves begin to fall. When mowing with the bag on, mulched leaves can then be used as mulch in landscape beds and vegetable gardens.

The value of mulched leaves

Homeowners who don’t look forward to dusting off their rakes each fall might be happy to learn that mulching fallen leaves with a mower may be a healthier and less labor intensive way to confront a yard covered in leaves. For 20 years, turfgrass specialists at Michigan State University studied how lawns reacted to having ground up leaves left on the lawn and the results were overwhelmingly positive. Researchers found that tiny pieces of mulched leaves eventually sifted down through the turf and provided the lawn with essential nutrients. Mulched leaves also served to control future weed growth by covering up bare spots between turf plants. Such spots typically provided openings for weed seeds to germinate and ultimately infect lawns. In fact, researchers found that mulching leaves for just three years could produce a nearly 100 percent decrease in dandelion and crabgrass growth. Homeowners with mulching mowers that also have bags can even help their gardens by alternating using the mower with and without the bag on once leaves begin to fall. When mowing with the bag on, mulched leaves can then be used as mulch in landscape beds and vegetable gardens.
How to recognize when you can stop mowing

Each weekend in spring, summer and fall, millions of homeowners fire up their mowers and cut the grass in their yards. A few hours spent mowing the lawn can be a great time to get some sun and some exercise in the great outdoors.

As fall gradually transitions to winter, homeowners may wonder when to stop mowing their lawns. Each lawn is different, and when to stop mowing may depend on a host of factors, including local climate and the type of turf. In addition to climate and turf, homeowners can keep an eye on these conditions to determine when the time is right to put their mowers away for the winter.

Frost: Warm-season grasses typically go dormant after a couple of significant frosts. Homeowners can jot down each frost during fall. Frosts are most noticeable in the early morning hours, so be sure to check lawn conditions each morning as the weather begins to grow cold. Frost may be noticeable without even going outside, but homeowners may need to go outside to check on chilly mornings or on days when the previous night was especially cold. If you must go outside, stay off the grass to protect it. Two or three frosts might be enough to make warm-season grasses go dormant for the winter. Cool-season grasses may keep growing and require moving even after a few frosts, so it’s imperative that homeowners determine which type of grass is in their yards.

Soil temperature: If it’s hard to determine if frosts have occurred, homeowners can try checking the temperature of their soil to decide if they need to keep mowing. The lawn care experts at Pennington recommend homeowners continue mowing warm-season grasses so long as they keep growing. Lawns may not grow as quickly in fall as they do in spring or summer, and growth may not be as visible to the naked eye during this time of year as it is in other times. Homeowners can routinely check soil temperature to determine if their grasses have stopped growing. Warm-season grasses tend to stop growing once the soil temperature is consistently at 55 F or below, while cool-season grasses tend to stop when temperatures are 45 F or lower.

Falling leaves have long been a barometer used by homeowners to determine if they need to keep mowing their lawns. That’s not necessarily a reliable metric, as grass can still keep growing even if leaves have been falling for weeks. In addition, using a mulching mower when leaves begin falling is a great way to provide the lawn with nutrients it can use throughout the winter. Some trees shed their leaves more quickly than others, but it’s a good rule of thumb that lawns will need to keep being mowed if trees are still retaining more than half their leaves.

A host of factors can help homeowners determine when it’s safe to put their mowers away for the winter.

Tips for planting fall vegetables

Ending to backyard vegetable gardens can fill many hours of enjoyable downtime in the great outdoors. What’s more, the bounty produced by such gardens provides healthy, fresh foods to gardeners and their loved ones.

Although spring and summer are widely seen as the peak of gardening season, the mild temperatures of autumn can be a prime time for planting vegetables as well. Certain late-season treats like carrots, kale, spinach, and turnips can thrive in fall gardens. Many different foods are quick crops that can go from seed to table in about six weeks. When sown in early fall, these vegetables will be ready to put on the table for mid-October feasts. Beets, green onions, broccoli, and cabbages can be planted in late summer for fall harvest. Gardeners who live in hardiness zones eight through 10 (the southern portion of the United States) can plant fall vegetables as late as December. Many of these plants can tolerate light frost, which may even help sweeten the vegetables.

A handful of unique factors need to be taken into consideration when planning fall vegetable gardens.

- The summertime location of the garden may still be adequate, but be sure to choose a location that gets eight full hours of sunlight per day.
- If using an existing garden site, clear out any detritus from summer plants and any weeds that have sprouted. If you are planting a new garden, remove any turf before tilling the soil.
- Amend the soil with sand, compost, manure fertilizer, and any other nutrients needed depending on the types of vegetables you intend to grow.
- While fall vegetables can be grown successfully from seeds, it may be more time-friendly to work from larger transplants, advises the Texas A&M Agrilife Extension.
- Some plants may need a little protection as they grow if temperatures begin to dip. Cover with a blanket, cardboard box or plastic tunnel to insulate.

Remember to water according to the vegetables planted and to keep an eye on readiness for vegetables. Turnips, beets, rutabagas, and carrots can be dug out when the roots are plump and crisp. Vegetable gardens need not cease when the last days of summer vanish. Fall produce is delicious and can be easily planted and harvested even after the first frost.
A beautiful deck is both a valuable addition to your home and a prime place to enjoy socializing, dining or spending time with family outdoors. In many homes, the deck is a focal place, a second kitchen for relaxing gatherings and conversation, morning coffee solitude and convivial weekend barbecues.

If your home doesn’t already have one, building a deck can be a simple, do-it-yourself project (if you’re handy with basic construction) or a full-blown project that requires plans and professional installation. Before you begin, decide on what your needs and desires are then investigate your options. Here’s what’s involved.

Safety and regulations
Before you start any project, it’s important that you know how to do it safely and follow any applicable rules for construction projects in your area. Make sure you know and follow the safety instructions for the tools you’ll be using, including using protective equipment like safety glasses and gloves when needed. You should also check with your city or county’s building department to make sure you’ve got the right permits and know the requirements for your deck. Many municipalities regulate the footing depth, materials and location of your deck, including setback distances from utilities or property lines.

Planning
Once you know the rules and have an idea about the deck you want to install, you can start making more concrete plans for turning that dream into reality. Start with basic measurements and a materials list. Every deck will need joists, decking and some type of footing to keep it anchored over the ground. You may also need rails, steps, low-voltage lighting or other accessories depending on your vision for the project.

A good home improvement store can make your plans much easier. They’ll have an experienced staff happy to help you make the right choices and estimate your total costs for the project.

The foundation
Every great deck starts with a strong foundation, but the exact requirements for it can vary greatly depending on your soil, climate and local regulations.

Some cities require deep footings to be dug to help it withstand the soil movement that results from freezing temperatures in the winter. While it’s more work to dig deep footings, it’s worth it to have a deck that lasts longer and is safer for carrying weight. Other sites may only require pre-cast concrete blocks with minimal surface prep. Local building codes — along with smart local practices that you can learn by asking the pros — will determine the type of footings and piers needed for your project.

Joists
Pressure-treated beams will form a frame for your decking, and it’s important that they’re all straight and cut precisely in length. The more precision you achieve at this stage, the better the finished project will look.

Decking
Before you attach your decking to the joists, it’s a good idea to waterproof the bottom side. You won’t be able to fully coat the bottom surface any other time, so take advantage of the opportunity if you want your deck to last.

Lay the decking planks with the waterproofed side down, then attach them to the joists with screws or nails designed for outdoor use. Small spacers can help to keep the gaps consistent.

Once the planks are all in place, install end caps — typically 1x6 wood — to give it a finished appearance.

Staining
Finally, to get the longest life out of your new deck, you should stain and seal the deck surface. The process of staining is fairly easy and can add beauty and value to your home with a carefully chosen, tasteful color. The hard part is often the prep work, including sanding and cleaning the wood before you apply it, something that can make a big difference in applying a consistent color and getting a lasting, weatherproof surface. Carefully follow the instructions for the stain and seal products you selected, including all the preparation steps.

Decorating
Once your deck is in place, the fun part begins: getting it ready for family get-togethers and parties with your friends. A new deck is the perfect chance to get a new grill, outdoor furniture set, lighting and other accessories that help you make the most of your investment. With a little work, you can turn your backyard into a fun oasis that adds value and enjoyment for years to come.
How to Choose a Window Treatment Store

Both windows are boring. Worse, open bare windows offer no privacy or protection. Window treatments from shades to drapes come in a huge variety of styles, colors and textures designed to suit almost any decor or personal style.

You can shop online for window treatments, but nothing beats visiting a store to see and touch treatments presented to give you the best idea of how they’ll look in your home. Follow these simple guidelines to get the best results when looking for a window treatment store:

Window treatments come in a variety of price ranges. If you are outfitting multiple windows with blinds, valences and drapes, then you will likely pay a significant amount of money.

The best window treatment stores offer quality products at many price points. Don’t expect inexpensive vinyl blinds to look good or last as long as their wooden counterparts.

Each store should also have a large array of fabrics, either in stock or shippable within a few days. It will give you plenty of combinations to consider for your decor.

Look for decorating ideas in magazines, on TV or websites. You will likely find many suggestions that will work in your own home. Keep in mind that large prints and bright colors will overpower smaller spaces.

Sample books in stores will also give you a good idea about the finished products. These publications will also have price charts so you can budget your money.

Conventional shapes such as square or rectangular shades and blinds are often less costly than specialty shapes. Deluxe fabrics will add to your total cost. But if you need a trapezoid, triangle or semi-circle shape and it works well with your decor, then investing in that is money well-spent.

Hardware is another factor in the final cost. The materials used for installation need to be durable and made of heavy-duty components. Blinds’ mounting rails, sliders and opening mechanisms will likely be used frequently, perhaps even several times a day. Drapery rods should consist of heavy-gauge steel, including sliders, hooks and pulls. This construction should withstand years of use without falling apart.

Your product needs to have a warranty against defects, materials and installation. Even high-quality treatments can be damaged if they are installed incorrectly. Familiarize yourself with the terms of the warranties.

You should understand the vendor’s return policy. Excellent return policies mean you can return the products for a refund or exchange. You could be charged a restocking fee. If you had your window coverings custom-made, you will probably be unable to return it. Ask anyway. You might be surprised. Professionals should guide you on trends that will remain stylish for years to come. They should also assist you with ideas and recommendations. Let’s face it. There are a huge amount of fabrics, options, sizes, combinations and manufacturers to consider. Having a knowledgeable and helpful staff will save you time and money.

A quality window treatment store will make a tremendous difference in your final results. Think about all the factors, ask professionals and research your options. After all, you will live with the results for many years.

How to Choose Granite Countertops

Fitting your design
Depending on where it comes from, granite can range in color from black to white, and every shade of brown, blue and red can be found in granite slabs. There is also tremendous variation in the veining and crystal composition of each slab.

While picking the right stone can be a matter of personal choice, there are some basic rules to follow.

Just like with paint colors, lighter stone colors can make a small room look bigger and more open. Likewise, dark colored granite can make a small kitchen feel even smaller.

If your kitchen is big, roomy and well-lit, your choices are almost endless because any slab has the potential to look good in it. But for smaller, darker kitchens, your choices will be a bit more limited because dark countertops can make the space feel gloomy and hemmed-in.

You should also look for a color that contrasts and pairs well with your cabinet materials. Depending on the look you’re aiming for, dark colored granite can look amazing when paired with lighter stains of wood cabinetry.

The other colors in your decor will play a role in your choice, too, from the flooring to the paint on the walls and even the kitchen hardware and appliances you’re using. Some countertop companies will even offer the experience of a decorator to help you make the right choice.

If you think you might sell your home in the near future, you should think about what potential buyers might think about the countertops you select. You wouldn’t want to choose something that could fall quickly out of style or be a particularly strong, polarizing color if you might be selling the house soon. Conservative choices should win out in this case.

Be careful with your selection and educate yourself about the wide variety of granite styles and products on the market, and you can add beauty and value to your home for years to come.

Durability and almost limitless options in color and style make granite countertops a popular choice for new or replacement counters.

Real estate agents often cite granite counters as a major selling point for homes and it remains an almost-standard surface for both kitchens and bathrooms in new and remodeled homes.

If you’re in the market for new countertops, you should definitely consider granite. Here are some things to keep in mind.

Educate yourself
All granite is not created equal. While all granite around the world is produced naturally from the same geologic processes, resulting in a variety of colors interspersed with quartz crystals, there is quite a wide variation in the material itself.

Choosing your granite purely from pictures in a catalog or from small samples could result in disappointment. So you should visit a home store in person. Seeing the selection in person can inform you about all the types of granite available and how they vary in color and mineral composition.

Is it granite?
The popularity of granite has skyrocketed in the past decade; so have the alternative products that are designed to have a granite-like look.

The countertops you assumed were granite in a hotel or at a friend’s house could have actually been a man-made material. Some of these materials are designed to be less expensive or more durable than natural stone, but a good countertop company can help you understand the strengths and weaknesses of every type of material on the market.
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