



Mulching Mistakes To Avoid

Landscape features vary significantly from house to house. Some homeowners may prefer water features on their properties, while others focus on flowers that would be the envy of a botanical garden. Regardless of those preferences, lawn and garden enthusiasts who want to make their properties as idyllic as possible may eventually look to mulch to help them accomplish that goal. Mulch helps soil retain moisture, which promotes strong, healthy



flowers, plants, trees, and shrubs. And because soil beneath mulch retains more moisture than soil that's not pro-

tected by mulch, homeowners won't have to spend as much time watering mulched landscapes. That saves time and conserves water, which can be a big benefit in areas prone to drought and/or especially hot summers. Mulch also helps to suppress weed growth, which can ensure all that hard work needed to create an eye-catching garden won't be compromised by the presence of unsightly, thirsty weeds.

Mulching seems like a simple task, and it can be. But that does not mean homeowners cannot make mistakes when mulching. The following are some common mulching mistakes to avoid as lawn and garden season hits full swing.

- Not enough mulch: Mulch is ineffective when spread too thin. The Virginia Cooperative Extension at Virginia Tech and Virginia State University recommends applying mulch no less than two inches in depth. Anything less than that will prove ineffective at preventing weed growth and helping the soil retain moisture, and that means you will need to water more often.

- Poorly located mulch: Mulch should not be placed too close to plant stems or tree trunks. When it is, tissue is so wet that it makes for a perfect environment for disease and insect infestation.

- Failing to mulch to the drip line: The drip line of a tree refers to the outermost circumference of the tree's canopy from which water drips onto the ground. The VCE recommends mulching to the drip line of a plant or tree, which ensures the plant or tree will get the most out of the mulch. Mulching to the drip line also minimizes competition from the grass, leading to stronger plants and trees.

- Failing to weed before mulching: Weeds should be removed prior to mulching. If they're not, the mulch can provide the same growing environment for weeds that you're trying to create for your plants and trees.

Mulching benefits a landscape in myriad ways, especially when homeowners avoid some common mulching mistakes.

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Tips When Planting Shade Trees

Beautiful landscaping can add instant curb appeal to a property. But beauty isn't the only thing that makes idyllic landscaping attractive to homeowners. Some landscaping features, such as shade trees, save homeowners money while adding aesthetic appeal. The U.S. Department of Energy notes that shading is the most cost-effective way to reduce solar heat gain in a home. Shading also cuts air conditioning costs, which tend to be expensive in areas with warm, humid climates. In fact, the DOE notes that well-planned landscapes can reduce unshaded homes' air conditioning costs by anywhere from 15 to 50 percent.

When planting shade trees, one of the first decisions homeowners will need to make is which type of tree, deciduous or evergreen, they want to plant. Deciduous trees are those that seasonally shed their leaves, while evergreens are trees that keep their leaves throughout the year. Deciduous trees can help keep homes cool in the summer by blocking sun, and those same trees can be beneficial in winter after they shed their leaves by letting the sun in and keeping homes warm. But evergreens also can be beneficial in winter by blocking wind, potentially preventing cold air from making its way into a home through cracks in walls or around windows.

When planting shade trees, techniques vary depending on which type of tree homeowners ultimately choose to plant. **PLANTING DECIDUOUS TREES:** The DOE says that deciduous trees that are between six and eight feet tall when planted will begin shading the windows of a home within a year of being planted. Depending on the species of the plant and the home, those same deciduous trees may begin shading the roof within five to 10 years of being planted. When planting deciduous trees, homeowners should keep these tips in mind. **• PLANT TREES TO THE SOUTH OF THE HOME.** When planted to the south of the home, deciduous trees can

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screen between 70 and 90 percent of the summer sun while still allowing residents to feel summer breezes.

- **CONSIDER SUN ANGLES.** Homeowners who want to shade their homes from low afternoon sun angles should plant trees with crowns that are lower to the ground on the west side of their homes.
- **Cool air before it reaches your home.** Shrubs and groundcover

plants can be planted to cool air before it reaches a home.

EVERGREEN TREES: Planting evergreens to block wind is known as "windbreaking," which lowers the wind chill near a home. Wind also can be used to cool a home in summer. But these benefits can only be realized when evergreens are strategically planted.

• LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION: The DOE advises planting evergreen trees to the north and northwest of the home to stop wind. In addition, to get the most bang for your windbreaking buck, the distance between the home and windbreak should be two to five times the height of the mature tree.

• PLANT TREES ON EITHER SIDE OF THE HOUSE. Planting trees on either side of the house will direct cooling winds toward the home in the summer.

Shade trees can help homeowners reduce their energy bills, making them valuable and attractive additions to any landscape.



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7 Things To Consider When Buying A Shed

Backyard sheds can be useful assets. Sheds can create storage space in the garage, basement or other areas of the house that have become gathering spots for gear typically used outdoors. Sheds are ideal for housing mowers, tools and even pool-care equipment. But they can be put to other uses as well, such as being key spots to engage in hobbies or even as a child's clubhouse. Various factors should be considered before building or buying a shed. A storage shed can be a significant investment. Once placed, sheds may remain in their dedicated spots for years to come. That means careful thought should go into the planning process.

1. Check your local building codes first. Before you accumulate building materials or order a shed, be sure to know the ins and outs of shed codes. The codes may impact the shed's placement, construction, the materials used, size, and numerous other factors. It's much easier to amend plans beforehand than to face the hassle and expense after learning you did things incorrectly.
2. Choose placement wisely.

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Spend several days assessing the yard and thinking about the uses for the shed. If you plan to store pool floats and chemicals inside of the shed, it should be located close enough to the pool to be convenient. Look at the lay of the land. If there is a soggy patch of land that can turn swampy under the shed's foundation, that is a poor location choice. If you need access to electricity, placing it far away from the house could necessitate running expensive wiring.

3. Consider the design. Just because a shed is for storage doesn't mean aesthetics should be overlooked. Choose a shed style that complements your home. You may also want to match certain architectural features, like arched doorways or dormers. Design also may relate to practicality. For instance, storing a riding mower inside may necessitate dual doors that open widely.
4. Invest in quality materials. Spending a little more and using quality materials can ensure it lasts long enough to be cost-effective. The right materials will be resistant to splitting, cracking, decay, and insect damage.
5. Prepare the site well. A proper foundation for the shed is almost as important as the shed itself. You cannot just drop the shed on the lawn and leave it, as the shed can sink or structural issues may arise if it is placed on a weak base.
6. Blend into the environment. Surround the shed with shrubs or plants so that it blends into the yard and complements the space.
7. Deck out the interior. Use every storage tool at your disposal to maximize floor, wall and even rafter space for storage. Plan where items will be kept and customize the storage options around those locations. Sheds can be an asset and improve storage capability in the backyard.

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5 Outdoor Projects That Add Value

Exterior renovations can enhance the appearance of a property and make it more enjoyable for homeowners. Certain renovations have the potential to add value to a home, while others may do the opposite. Learning which one have the largest return on investment can help homeowners select features that will have the most positive impact. Curb appeal goes a long way toward attracting potential buyers. According to the National Association of Realtors, first impressions of a property have a

strong influence on buyers. Landscaping and external features can do much to influence such impressions. . .

- **LAWN CARE PROGRAM:** Investing in a lawn care program that consists of fertilizer and weed control application and can be transferred over to a subsequent home owner is an attractive feature. NAR says such a care program can recover \$1,000 in value of the \$330 average cost, or a 303 percent ROI.
- **LOW-MAINTENANCE LIFE-STYLE:** When choosing materials

for projects, those that offer low-maintenance benefits can be preferential. These include low-maintenance patio materials, composite decking, vinyl fencing, and inorganic mulched beds.

- **FIRE PIT:** A fire pit can be used for much of the year. In the spring and summer, the firepit is a great place to congregate to roast marshmallows or sip wine and gaze into the fire. In the fall, the fire pit can make for a cozy retreat. A fire pit that has a gas burner is low-maintenance, and the National Assn. of Landscape Professionals says that most can recoup about \$4,000 of their \$6,000 average price tag.
- **SOFTSCAPING:** Hardscaping refers to structures like outdoor kitchens or decks. Softscaping involves the living elements of the landscape. Hiring a landscape designer to install trees, shrubs, natural edging, and rock elements can do wonders toward improving the look and value of a home.
- **POOL OR WATER FEATURE:** In certain markets, particularly hot

climates, a pool or another water feature is a must-have. However, in other areas where outdoor time is limited, a pool or water feature can actually lower the value of a home. Speaking with a real estate professional can give homeowners an idea of how a pool will fare in a given neighborhood. Outdoor improvements can improve the marketability of a home, as well as enhance its appearance and function.

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Best Methods To Repair Damaged Driveways

Asphalt and concrete driveways are common throughout suburban neighborhoods. They are as much a part of a home as lawns, decks and other exterior elements. Regardless of how they're utilized, driveways need to be cared for and maintained to retain their appearance and function.

Even the most durable driveways can suffer from cracks and pits over time. As cracks form, they pave the way for more deterioration if they are not addressed. Water infiltration can break down the integrity of the driveway during freeze and thaw periods, and any little hole or crack can promote weed growth. Driveway repair can be a do-it-yourself project, but pay attention to the details to ensure the job is done right.

ASPHALT: The home improvement resource The Family Handyman says it is key to first repair cracks and pits in an asphalt driveway before planning to topcoat it, which is generally done every year or so to maintain its appearance and durability. A variety of topcoat products are available at various price points. Experts recommend investing in a quality product that will not shrink and crack. A melt-in material that is similar to products used by highway crews can be purchased for around \$100. This product also will require use of a propane torch. Caulk-style crack repair products may not require as many tools, and are much easier to apply. They may not last as long, however. Homeowners must weigh the pros and cons to each before beginning. The experts at Popular Mechanics say that there also are other asphalt patch mixes available at home supply retailers. Serious holes, rather than cracks, can be addressed with a coarse-aggregate filler commonly referred to as cold patch.

After cracks and holes are filled, use a sealer to lock everything in place and create a smooth topcoat appearance. Speak with a store employee if you are unsure which product is needed for your application.

CONCRETE: The process is similar with concrete driveways, yet the products differ. Small driveway cracks can be repaired by scrubbing out the crack to remove debris and then filling using a mortar repair compound, suggests the repair advice site Home Guides. Larger cracks and potholes should be cleaned. Once that's done, apply a painted-in border to the crack or hole, followed by a dry concrete patching product mixed with water. The material can be worked into the damaged area with a trowel, and then leveled using a wood board. Afterward, a liquid concrete sealer can be applied to help prevent future cracks and holes.

Homeowners who are hesitant to fix their driveways can contact masons or asphalt specialists to perform the job. Keeping up on driveway repair can prolong the life of the surface and help delay a complete driveway replacement for several years.



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Time To Replace Old Wiring?

Old homes can be charming and contain architectural elements not often seen in many modern housing developments. But what older homes may have in design appeal, they may lack in updated features.

While cosmetic changes are not necessarily difficult, one area of concern in historic homes - and sometimes even in houses built 40 or 50 years ago - is archaic wiring. Wiring provides power to every room of the home. In today's electronics-driven society, electricity that works is an essential component of daily life. Over time, wiring can be compromised through simple aging, pest infiltration, weather, or other conditions. Deteriorated wiring can present a shock hazard and also a serious fire hazard, warn the home renovation experts at The Spruce. Furthermore, the home improvement site This Old House advises that the amperage of old wiring may not be able to meet the needs of the devices used in homes- overpowering the circuits. This can cause breaker blowouts and other problems, such as overheated wires that may spark and cause fires from within the wall.

Wiring often falls into the "out of sight, out of mind" category. Homeowners may make allowances for inadequate electrical systems, such as running extension cords or using multi-plug connectors to increase their wiring capacity. However, they may not be diligently keeping on top of upgrades needed to stay safe. Confirming that a home's electrical system is safe is a necessary part of home maintenance.

For those who haven't already done so, schedule an inspection with a licensed electrician to go over the home's wiring. He or she can determine if any areas pose a safety risk and/or do not conform to local code requirements and the National Electrical Code. Failure to meet code can lead to difficulty obtaining permits to make other home renovations, or difficulty selling a home later on.

The electrician can also go over improvements that can improve safety and function. Additional outlets, including GFCI outlets in kitchens and bathrooms, may be part of the plan, as well as rewiring a fuse box or circuit panel to allow for better flow of power around the house. Frayed wiring or underinsulated wiring also may need to be replaced. Owners of old homes should recognize possible electrical system dangers that require attention. Plus, considering electrical codes change quite frequently, it is always in a homeowner's best interest to work with a qualified electrician to keep wiring inspected and up to date.



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What Is A Sweating Pipe?

Copper plumbing long has been a standard in home construction. Anyone who has a home with copper pipes should have an understanding of how to make repairs in the case of a leak or if modifications need to be made. "Sweating pipes" is one term homeowners may hear when maintaining their pipes.

Sweating a pipe refers to soldering a pipe or the joint. Sweating seals a new joint or mends a fault. When sweating a pipe, it is important to do the job correctly so that a soldered pipe can last for years and years.

PlantDIY, a source for how-to advice, says that sweating pipes involves some key steps.

- Cut the pipes to the right length using a copper tube cutter or hacksaw.

- Use a file or wire brush to remove burrs and smooth down the ends.

- Clean the end of the copper pipe with a cleaning brush until the surface is bright all around. In addition, clean the inside of all fittings.
- Brush plumbing flux on the brushed surfaces and assemble the joint. The how-to resource Hunker says flux is an acidic paste applied to all of the pieces of copper that you want to connect together. The flux paste will draw in the solder after the pipe is heated using a blow torch. The acid in the flux attracts the solder into the seam between the two copper pieces and fills the gap while creating a semi-permanent bond between the pieces.

- To create the seal, move the flame around the joint to heat it evenly. The copper will get shiny, and the flux will melt. When the pipe begins to dull and the flux sizzles and smokes, it is time to apply solder. Touch lead-free plumbing solder to the joint and apply more heat.

- The sweating process is finished when the solder bubbles out of the end of the seam. Let cool and the joint should now be water-tight. Sweating pipes gets easier with practice. DIYers who are nervous about plumbing projects that involve sweating can be reassured there are connection products available that are used in lieu of flux and solder. These push-to-connect fittings seal joints as well. Individuals can speak with experts at hardware and home improvement stores to find the best products for their needs and skill levels.



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When It Can Be Smart To Hire A Painting Pro

Few things can revitalize a home more readily than a fresh coat of paint.

It is estimated that residential interior paint only lasts around three years before it needs to be updated. Exterior paint can fade, chip and peel due to various environmental factors. As a result, many homes can likely use a fresh coat of paint in at least one room.

As DIY-friendly as painting can be, when attempting to paint the interior or exterior of their homes, homeowners may learn that some painting projects are best left to the professionals. Painting requires skill, patience and a knowledge of how various paints - including finishes for particular applications - will hold up. Novice painters may do more harm than good by dripping paint on expensive carpeting or floors or fail to recognize the nuances that indicate a spot-on painting job.

Professional painters have spent hours upon hours learning the ropes of what works - and what does not. Painters often understand that painstaking preparatory work is crucial to getting pristine finished results. Walls and ceilings must be properly repaired and prepared even before a base coat is applied.

Professional painters also have an eye for details. And because professional painters make a business out of doing interior and exterior surfaces, they understand which techniques can improve efficiency. That means a professional job can typically be completed much more quickly than a DIY project.

Even though some people think they'll save money by painting their own homes, that's not necessarily true. Professionals already have all the equipment necessary, unlike novices who may need to make repeated and potentially costly trips to the hardware store for supplies. Plus, if mistakes happen, DIYers have to spend additional time and money fixing them.

Safety can be a large motivator for turning painting over to a pro. Navigating exterior areas or tall interior ceilings can be challenging and may require scaffolding or tall ladders DIYers do not have. Risk of falls or other injuries increase with lack of experience.

Painting can give a home a facelift, and oftentimes it is smart to turn the work over to professionals to ensure the job is done just right.

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Essentials For A Bathroom Remodel

What began as a utilitarian space for personal sanitation has, in modern times, transformed into one of the most coveted rooms in the house. Bathrooms have become a place to relax and unwind, and new bathrooms are on the tops of many homeowners' wishlists.

Bathrooms can be as lavish as budgets allow. Wish lists can include everything from luxurious soaking tubs to rainfall showerheads to chaise lounges to televisions or home entertainment systems contained in the space. Those contemplating their own bathroom renovations may draw inspiration from the following features.

- **HOT WATER RECIRCULATION SYSTEM:** Few things can be as disappointing as desiring a hot bath or shower only to find that the hot water tank has been drained. The home remodeling company Normandy Remodeling says that water recirculation systems provide on-demand hot water. In such systems, hot water may continuously run through the pipes or there may be a pump underneath a sink. Either way, one needn't wait for the water to warm up any longer.
- **DOUBLE UNDERMOUNT SINKS:** Bathroom time is at a premium, especially when people must prepare and leave the house together. Rather than jockeying for position around a single sink, dual sinks enable more breathing room and time efficiency. Undermount sinks are easy to clean because there is no lip around where the sink meets the vanity, preventing the accumulation of grime and gunk.
- **GLASS-FREE SHOWER:** Soap scum and water deposits can form on shower doors, even for homeowners who are diligent with cleaning. A sizable shower prevents water spray and affords the ability to forgo glass doors or curtains, thereby cutting down on cleaning and making the room feel more modern.
- **MULTIHEAD SHOWER:** When

redoing the shower, account for various shower heads so that the water can cascade across the body more completely. This provides a spa experience at home.

- **TOUCHLESS FAUCETS AND SOAP DISPENSERS:** These aren't just for public bathrooms anymore. Touchless faucets and dispensers are more sanitary and convenient.
- **SEPARATE TOILET ROOM:** A shared bath almost necessitates this type of set-up. The toilet is housed inside its own small space and closed away from the rest of the bathroom. It's more private and convenient this way.
- **HEATED FLOORING:** You need not worry about stepping out of a warm shower onto a cold floor when heated flooring is part of the equation. This option is available in various flooring materials as well. Remodeling a bathroom boils down to certain coveted features that can really set a space apart.



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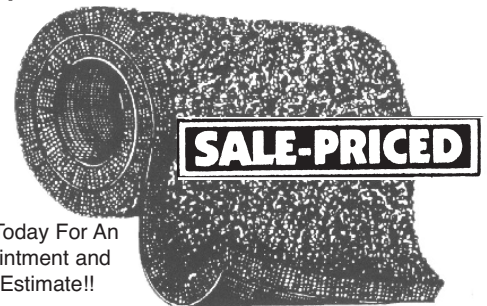
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Exterior Renovations That Can Improve Home Value

Renovating a home to improve its value can be a smart investment. Interior improvements, such as updating kitchens and baths, offer good return on investment, but there are plenty of exterior renovations that can add value to a home and give it that coveted "wow" factor.

LANDSCAPING: Abundant and well-planned landscaping can instantly boost curb appeal. According to the landscaping company Lawn Starter, 71 percent of prospective home buyers say a home's curb appeal is an important factor in their buying

decisions. As buyers use the internet to look for their dream homes, there's no denying a beautifully landscaped, nicely photographed property can entice buyers to click and read more about a house.

ADDRESS INSECTS AND MINOR REPAIRS: Improving home value may come down to fixing areas of the home that can negatively affect its appeal to buyers. Hire an inspector to look at key components of the house and recommend what needs to be fixed. This way it is discovered before home buyers come in and



do their own inspections. Termite infestations, deteriorating roofs and hidden water leaks are some things that might need fixing.

IMPROVE THE ENTRYWAY: The front door is the focal point of a home's exterior. Invest in a new door or paint it a striking color to add appeal. Remodeling maga-

zine's "Cost vs. Value Report 2019" indicates changing an entry door to a steel replacement can offer 74.9 percent ROI. Such a door provides visual appeal and added security — things buyers look for. In addition to the front door, make sure that the entryway has a level walkway, steps

that are in good repair, accents that are free from rust or tarnish, and decorative plants.

OUTDOOR LIGHTING can add to the ambiance of a property and serve as a security feature. Utilize different lights, such as a bright light by the entry, uplighting in trees and shrubs for drama, a light-lined path to the door to improve visibility, and motion-detection lights to improve the security of the property.

REPAINT (OR RESIDE) THE EXTERIOR: A fresh coat of paint or new (or cleaned) siding can instantly give homes a facelift.

Neutral, warm and inviting colors tend to have the widest appeal. Adding manufactured stone veneer to the home can offer a 94.9 percent ROI, says Remodeling. And after doing the front door and siding, investing in a garage door replacement offers the highest ROI of all exterior projects listed on the "Cost vs. Value Report 2019." This improvement returns 97.5 percent when selling. Knowing which improvements add value to a home can help homeowners tailor their efforts to those that are most financially beneficial.



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