

Spring Home



YOUR GUIDE TO LAWN, GARDEN & OUTDOOR PROJECTS

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The time is now

Here's how to spruce up the exterior of your home **PAGE 20**

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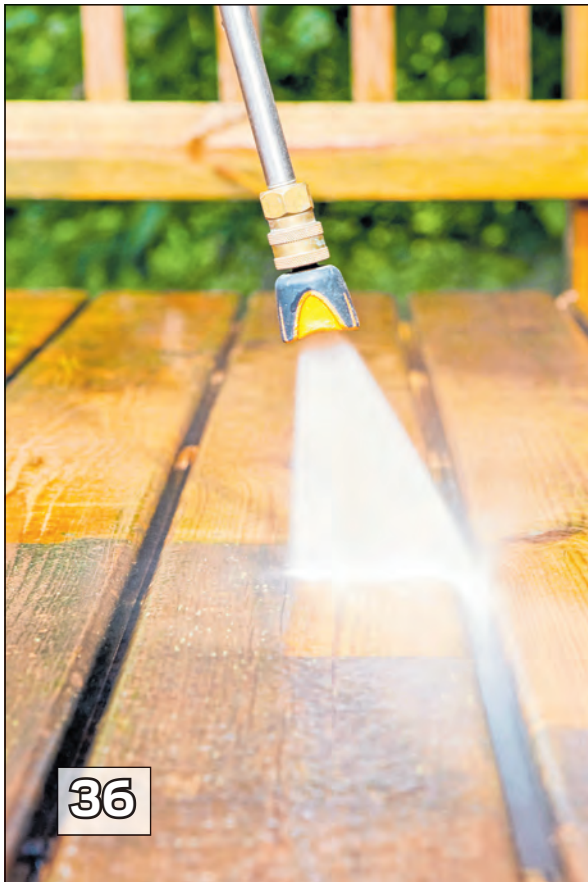
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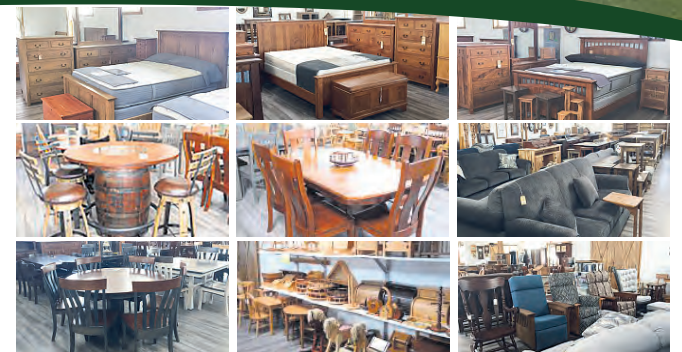
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GARDEN

April is Lawn and Garden Month, so get outside and enjoy

By Daniel Morris
fireandsaw.com

The arrival of spring marks a time when the beauty of nature begins to unfold, inviting us to engage with the outdoors. April, designated as Lawn and Garden Month, celebrates the art and craft of gardening.

It was also created to encourage more people into their gardens.

As we enter this month, get ready to don your gardening gloves, breathe in the fresh air and embark on a journey of creation and care in your outdoor spaces.

We're sharing tips on how you can celebrate the month and get others involved, as well.

The tools of the trade

While gardening can be a fun pastime, it is also a science that requires patience, precision and the right equipment. Whether a seasoned gardener or a green-thumbed newbie, the proper tools can make all the difference in cultivating a thriving garden.

Back to the basics

Specific tools are the backbone of every gardener's arsenal. Equip yourself with a sturdy shovel for digging, a dependable rake to clear debris and spread soil, and durable gloves to protect your hands from unexpected thorns and injuries. For those with a lawn, a high-quality and reliable lawn mower is essential to maintain the length of your grass and keep a neat, well-manicured garden.

For those seasoned gardeners with a basic toolkit ready to go, consider National Garden Month the encouragement you need



PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO EDITORIAL SERVICES

Plant, water and watch your masterpiece grow.

to upgrade to more specialized tools tailored to your garden's specific needs and gardening goals. For instance, if you hope to sculpt beautiful hedges or cultivate perennials, a high-quality pair of pruning shears can make all the difference. As your garden goals evolve, further research will help you identify the right equipment to support your gardening

journey.

Safety first

While the fun of gardening is undeniable, it comes with a set of safety concerns. High-risk equipment like chainsaws, while efficient for trimming branches and shaping trees, demands caution and respect for safety precautions.

For example, chainsaw

accidents are not uncommon. The consequences can range from minor cuts to life-threatening injuries. This reality highlights the need to adhere to safety measures, equip yourself with the appropriate protective gear and understand all manufacturers' safety guidelines and instructions. Importantly, this holds true for all power equipment you

use in your garden, ensuring a safe start to this gardening month and continued well-being for practiced gardeners.

Involving children in family gardening

Lawn and Garden Month is a perfect opportunity to introduce children to gardening. Gardening is a great way to

connect children to nature, teach them about the environment and help them develop a sense of responsibility. And while there is a wide range of spring activities for kids, gardening can be one of the most rewarding.

Starting simple

At the outset, it is important to prioritize the child's interest rather

than their skill or the garden's needs. Having this designated month to promote gardening is a great way to build anticipation and excitement.

Start them off with simple, enjoyable and rewarding tasks.

Planting seeds, for example, can be an enriching and high-yield activity. Children can quickly see the fruits of their labors as their plants grow. Similarly, watering plants is another easy task that teaches accountability and helps them understand the importance of consistency.

Kristen Wood of the gardening site Schisandra and Bergamot shared: "For me, Lawn and Garden Month is a great time to plant a new tree in the yard. It's an excellent way to contribute to a healthier environment, enjoy the outdoors and leave a lasting legacy that will grow for years to come. What better way to celebrate?"

Fostering ownership and responsibility

As children become more comfortable and confident in the garden, you can gradually involve them in more complex activities. Allowing them to support you in the planning and management of the garden, like developing the garden's layout or choosing the plants they would like to grow, can be stimulating and educational. Moreover, this will instill a sense of ownership and investment in the garden's success.

Taking it a step further, creating a dedicated space for them to tend to, whether a raised bed or a few pots on the balcony, can make the experience more personal and engaging. This space can foster experimentation and skills development, acting as a blank canvas for their creativity.

Enjoying outdoor spaces

Your gardens and lawns have the potential to be more than just patches of green. They can be private oases for relaxing and entertaining. Take advantage of this monthlong gardening celebration to level up your garden and create an outdoor sanctuary for relaxation

and socializing.

Laying the groundwork

If you are contemplating landscaping, consider a variety of plants and flowers, incorporating varied colors, textures and heights to create an exciting gardenscape.

Adding personal features

Once you're happy with your garden's natural foundation, start thinking about your goals for the space and add elements to achieve them. Patio furniture is a versatile staple, creating a multi-purpose area for dining, lounging and entertaining.

Fire pits have also become a popular outdoor addition, adding warmth and ambiance to your lounging area. Importantly, while cozy and aesthetic, fire pits can damage your green spaces. Use a heat shield or a non-flammable surface under your fire pit. This measure ensures you can enjoy your space without compromising your lawn's health.

Make the most of the month

Gardening can be more than just a hobby. It is an opportunity to create a living tapestry that reflects your personal style, supports the environment and provides a space for relaxation and enjoyment. Make the most of Lawn and Garden Month this April to embrace the joys of gardening and outdoor living — maybe you'll even find a new hobby that takes you through the springtime.

Whether you're planting a new flower bed, revamping your lawn or simply enjoying the tranquility of your garden, remember that every effort contributes to a greener, more beautiful world. So, get ready, grab your gardening gloves and get growing!

Daniel Morris is the founder of Fire and Saw, a blog that focuses on chainsaws, wood stoves, fireplaces, axes and related topics. Along with his wife, Naomi, Daniel operates the site, where he shares his passion for these subjects.



PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO EDITORIAL SERVICES

If you hope to sculpt beautiful perennials, a high-quality pair of pruning shears can make all the difference.

GARDEN



PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO EDITORIAL SERVICES

Tomatoes top the list of vegetables to grow, with cucumbers in second place and sweet peppers in third.

As food costs rise, more Americans are looking to their yards to save money

By Adriana Copaceanu
Wealth of Geeks

Food prices across the board are predicted to increase by 1.3%, according to the latest consumer pricing analysis from the United States Department of Agriculture. Restaurant dining will see the largest increase — an average of 4.7% and

may go as high as 6.2%.

As food costs rise in 2024, even more pennies are squeezed from our monthly budgets. More and more Americans are turning to their own backyards to offset the cost of eating. Planting a garden can save you hundreds of dollars, and for some families, that adds up to thousands of dol-

lars in savings annually.

New gardener success

A recent study from Axiom showed that 69.7% of people polled said they would plant more and expand their gardens in 2024.

70.8% of novice gardeners felt their garden activities in 2023 were successful. As a result, they plan

to increase their efforts for 2024. How much money can growing your own food save families?

Growing savings

According to Garden Pals, growing at least some food can save approximately \$600 annually. The average garden starts with just \$70, giving the average

person \$530 in net savings. Not bad for a humble patch of dirt.

While many people might feel intimidated by produce propagation, there are plenty of guides for growing vegetables, fruits and more.

Katy Willis, a writer for Wealth of Geeks, says: “I save around 70% on my

fresh produce from my food garden, but that includes chicken and quail eggs, and some foraging. I also barter some excess and preserved produce for fresh game meat. I started on a smaller scale around 18 years ago, and it's slowly grown. I like knowing the food I'm feeding my family

is natural and healthy, and being so self-reliant saves me money and gives me food security.”

Anna Chesley of Salt In My Coffee shares: “Growing up, my mother grew an impressive percentage of the vegetables that fed our family in a 40 feet by 40 feet backyard garden. So when I started my homestead and had kids of my own, it was only natural for me to garden, too. Most years, I save more than \$1,500 on our yearly grocery bill by growing most of our fresh summer vegetables and filling my shelves for winter with jars of home-canned tomato sauce, green beans, beets, and more. It’s hard work, but we eat well, and it’s very rewarding.”

Small beginnings

Gardening doesn’t have to take up a whole backyard to help support your food supply; new gardeners can start their modest harvest in a pot or small plot of dirt.

The report found that the average American vegetable garden is 600 square feet. However, most people start with a much smaller plot. According to Garden Pals, the average garden is just 96 square feet.

The average 600-square-foot garden will produce about \$600 of produce per year. Despite these savings, only 35% of U.S. households grow vegetables, fruits, and other food. Builder reports that about 70% of Americans live in houses, while approximately 17% live in condos or apartments. Even those living in apartments can grow something as simple as tomatoes in a pot on a balcony. Tomatoes top the list of vegetables to grow, with cucumbers in second place and sweet peppers in third.

One of the driving factors in growing produce at home is ensuring the quality of produce. 69.6% of novice gardeners indicated that growing food organically was essential, and another 69.6% placed high im-

portance on enjoying local produce.

Despite the lack of experience, rookie gardeners know what they want when they shop for seeds and plants. If their local stores do not carry the variety or kinds of plants they want, 40.8% said they would travel up to 10 miles to obtain their ideal plant, with 46.8% of males indicating this willingness and only 35.9% of females.

Knowing where to start

To start growing your food, you need basic knowledge of what you want and a place to start planting.

Beginner gardeners should start with the decision of what to sow and research your selection. Each type of plant has its own needs and requirements, so it’s best to be aware of these before you begin planting.

Choose your spot well. A fruitful garden relies on sun exposure, so seek a site that receives around seven or eight hours of direct sunlight.

Container gardening is an excellent option for those with limited space. Compact planters allow growers to move plants around to get the most sunlight, and movability adds an element of customization that a conventional garden may not.

Seeding savings

While growing produce may include new costs, in the long run, you’ll save more. And home gardens don’t have to be extravagant to be fruitful. Home horticulturists don’t need all the latest and greatest gardening gadgets. Start with what you have and contribute to your plot over time. With some dedication, growers will harvest their crops — and savings — in no time.

This article was produced by Media Decision and syndicated by Wealth of Geeks.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF METRO EDITORIAL SERVICES

According to Garden Pals, growing at least some food can save approximately \$600 annually. The average garden starts with just \$70, giving the average person \$530 in net savings.



The common staples to get started with backyard gardening can be found at most major retailers.

GARDEN

Want a healthier garden? Test your soil

By Lauren David

Special to The Washington Post

Whether you're preparing for your first garden, planning next year's plantings after a successful harvest or looking to install a lawn, your first step should be conducting a soil test.

"Soil is one of the basic elements for plant growth," says Pamela J. Bennett, a professor and the State Master Gardener Program Director for the OSU Extension in Clark County, Ohio. "If we don't have good soil, plants aren't going to grow as well."

Farmers, who depend on cultivating the land for their livelihood, always do a soil test before planting, but it's a critical step for home gardeners as well, to avoid wasting time, money and resources. Healthy soil equals thriving plants that will be more resistant to pests and diseases.

"A soil test is important so you know what to add to your soil to make your plants grow successfully, whether you're a farmer, gardener or landscaper," says Jason Reeves, a research associate at the UT Gardens at the University of Tennessee. A standard test checks for soil pH, organic matter and minerals, including calcium, phosphorus, potassium and magnesium.

"I had someone this week that I was able to tell: 'You don't need any limestone. Your pH is just where it should be,'" says Stephanie Murphy, the director of the soil testing laboratory at Rutgers.

Unnecessary fertilizers and other treatments can have negative effects on

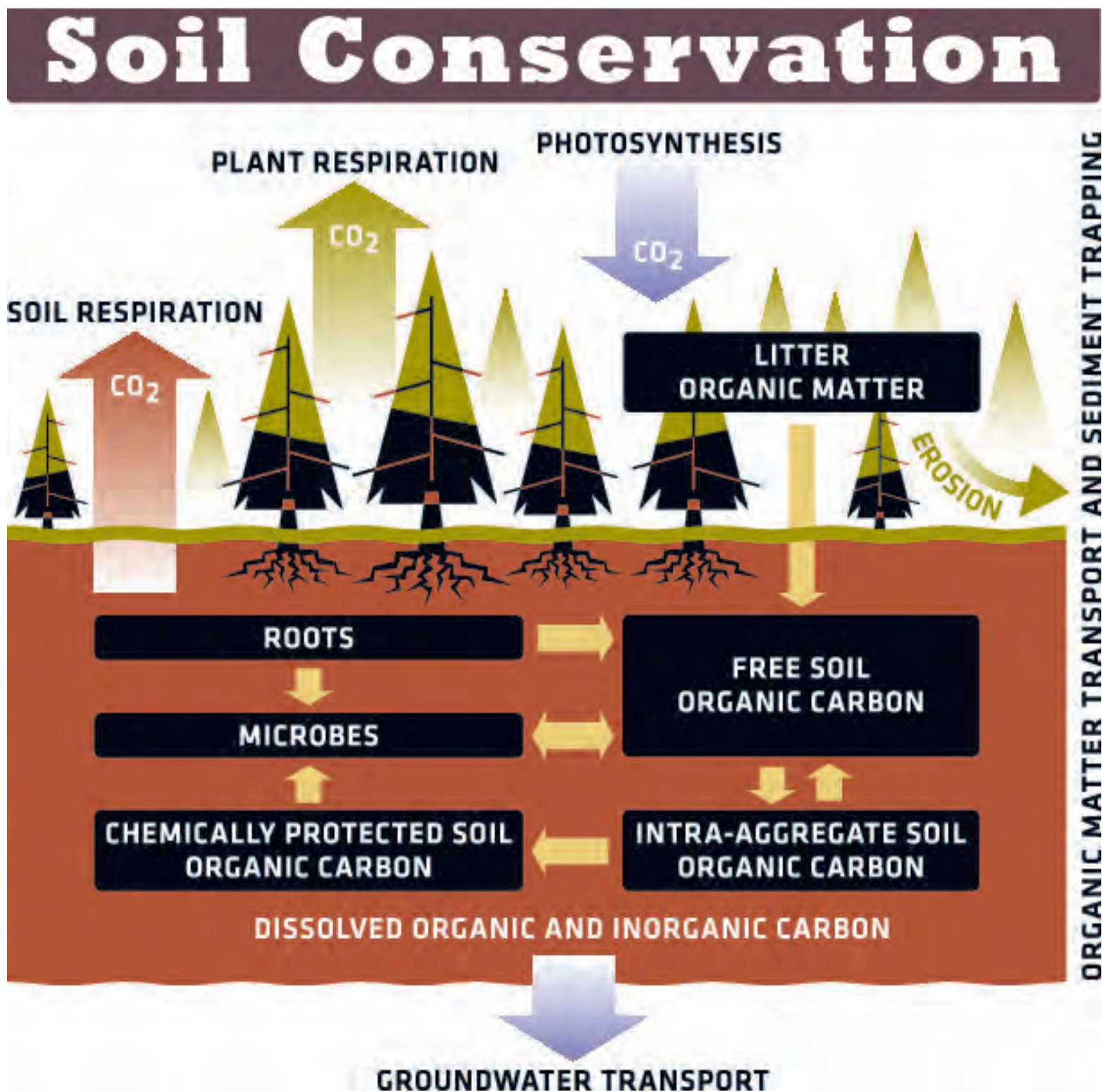




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Whether you're preparing for your first garden, planning next year's plantings after a successful harvest or looking to install a lawn, your first step should be conducting a soil test.

both your garden and the environment. Nutrient pollution increases when there is "too much of a nutrient in the soil that can risk polluting our waterways, whether it's through leaching to the groundwater, runoff, or erosion carrying nutrients and applications, like pesticides," Murphy says, "so we never want to exceed what's optimum."

Here's what to know about testing your soil:

What you're testing for

A typical test will look at organic matter, nutrient levels and the soil's pH. Tests do not usually measure nitrogen. A soil pH that is too high (basic) or too low (acidic) means nutrients aren't available to the plants, even if they are

in the soil, says Shannon Alford, the director of the Agricultural Service and Fertilizer laboratories at Clemson University.

The desired pH depends on what you're growing and the type of soil. "Most plants grow well in a neutral pH of 6.0-7.0," Alford says. Some plants, such as blueberries, azaleas and camellias, prefer more acidic soil.

Most soil tests don't look for contaminants, such as lead, but some places, such as the lab at Rutgers, offer it as an additional service. This test isn't critical if you're growing trees or shrubs, but if you're planting fruits and vegetables, you want to know if there is lead in the soil, says Bennett. For detailed contaminant testing, including heavy metals such as arse-

nic, cadmium or mercury, Murphy recommends going to a certified environmental testing laboratory.

Where to get testing

Many state university extension offices or cooperative extension programs offer soil testing, with prices typically between \$10 and \$30. "It's a very small investment for a big return," Reeves says. To find a lab near you, search online for your state and soil testing.

Although DIY kits are easy to find at garden centers or online, experts say they aren't necessarily less expensive than sending it to a lab, and the results aren't as reliable. "The accuracy of the lab and the recommendations are going to be tailored to your area and what you're growing," Alford says.

How to gather your sample

Tests come with detailed instructions. Typically, a lab needs about two cups to perform the test. A sample needs to be reflective of the whole area where you plan to grow, at the root level, which varies for a vegetable garden, shrubs, flowers, trees or a lawn.

"We recommend about 15 to 20 subsamples to 6-inch depth, so you don't want to rely on just one spot in that area," Murphy says. "Get an average for that whole area [and] mix them together to create a composite sample. That's what you send to us."

If you're growing trees, Bennett says, you'll want to go as deep as 12 inches; for a lawn, a soil sample 4 inches down is ideal. Once you have collected samples

where you intend to garden, you'll mix them together and send the composite to the lab.

When — and how often — to test

Alford recommends annual testing at the end of the growing season before fertilizer or any nutrients are added. That timing also helps you avoid the spring rush. Results typically take one to three weeks, but may take longer in the busy season.

That said, tests can be done any time of year as long as the soil isn't wet or frozen. Getting a sample of frozen soil is difficult, and wet soil is heavier to send and the moisture could deteriorate the bag or box during shipping and alter the soil, Alford says.

What the lab does with a soil sample

Samples are dried in a soil-drying oven at a temperature of 122 degrees Fahrenheit. Technicians mix the soil and break down any large particles. "Different-sized pieces of your soil could skew results," Alford says.

Then several sample portions are measured for nutrient content, pH and organic matter. Scientists review the data before creating and sending a report specifying whether you need to amend your soil, and if so, with what. Most labs are happy to answer follow-up questions if you have them.

Lauren David writes about gardening and sustainability.

GARDEN

TIME TO DIG IN

How to help plants thrive in spring, the garden's most exciting and perilous season

By **Adrian Higgins**
The Washington Post

Gardening is a year-round treat, but the arrival of spring is special because it's the moment when both the gardener and all the plants in the yard are bursting with excitement.

The next six weeks or so mark not only the time when we launch the growing season, but also the period when plants are at their most vulnerable. Fresh growth is tender and can be damaged by the wild swings in weather in March and April.

In parts of the country, Mother Nature can give us an 80-degree blast followed by a freeze and a punishing hailstorm. There isn't much you can do about hail damage, but there are measures you can take to help the garden survive the weather roller coaster. They also give you a chance to get outside to greet and enjoy the spring.

You will have to get fresh supplies of plants, soil mixes, fertilizers and tools.

Cleanup and bed preparation

In beds free of permanent plantings, such as the vegetable garden and annual flower beds, the tasks

are straightforward.

The first job is to remove weeds. Forget the impending dandelions and violets; I'm talking about established winter weeds, whose roots now go deep, with such interlopers as henbit, chickweed, bittercress and ground ivy.

You rarely need herbicides for this; the weeds will lift quite easily between your fingers in the rich, moist soil of the veggie patch.

They will also surrender to a weeding knife or a sharp, long-handled hoe. Get to them before they go to seed.

Weed seeds will germinate any time the soil is disturbed, so weeding is not an annual event; it is a way of life.

By sowing desired seeds in a straight row, you can more easily spot the gate-crashing weed seedlings for rapid removal.

All the dead carrots, kale stalks and other lingering detritus of last season should also be removed as you work the soil.

The soil will be compacted by snow and rain, and it will need fluffing up. The easy way to do this is with a three-pronged cultivator, though I prefer to turn the bed with a garden fork, which gets deeper. Af-



PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

Fertilizing in spring can help a lawn recover from the previous summer and winter, ensuring it's lush and green when summer entertaining season arrives.

ter scuffing up the soil, add a layer of fresh material to the bed and work it in.

You can use your own screened compost or bags of soil amendments. I like to use purchased composted leaf mold and aged manure, which, in my experience, are reliably free of weed seeds.

Water the newly prepared bed and wait a few days for the soil to settle before seeding and planting.

In permanent plant beds, the cleanup needs a more delicate touch.

When removing weeds, take care not to damage the emerging growth of bulbs and perennials.

Hand-pulling is a good option, or use a small, sharp knife to get into tight spots.

Remove any accumulated winter-blown leaf litter from under bushes and hedges, and cut back any remaining dead stalks of last year's perennials and grasses, again being careful around emerging shoots.

The soil will benefit from a little cultivation and a top dressing of com-

post or leaf mold, which is then scratched into the soil. These beds also should be mulched.

Frost protection

Once trees and shrubs have broken into flower and leaf growth, they are prone to cold damage because the tissues are soft and tender. It pays to keep an eye on nighttime temperatures into early May.

If a frost or near-frost is predicted, you can cover certain plants for protection.

The Hortensia hydrangeas are a good candidate for this, as are Japanese maples.

The blossoms of strawberries and blueberries should be covered against freezing, as well as those of apples, peaches and persimmons if the trees are small enough to wrap.

Seedlings of veggies, herbs and annuals should be covered on such nights.

If you don't have horticultural row fabric, you could use a light sheet.

The challenge is ensur-

ing the covering won't blow off (clothes pins are handy), and don't use anything that will crush small plants.

Seeding and hardening off

We start young plants in two ways: either by seeding directly into the garden or planting small transplants that are a few weeks old. Some seeds can go directly into the ground now, including peas, radishes, carrots, nasturtium and lettuce, but wait until the soil has warmed, until at least early May, for sowing (or transplanting) warm-season vegetables and summer annuals.

The process of conditioning transplants for the spring garden is called hardening off.

If you don't do this, plants will probably wilt and die — or at least fail to thrive. Even if you buy transplants, there's no guarantee that they have been adequately conditioned, so you should harden them off to be sure.

During the day, place the pots outside in a sheltered area, away from the wind and afternoon sun. Bring them in at night. Water them at least once daily, before they wilt. Do this for a week before planting, longer if cold temperatures are in the forecast.

Cold is not the only problem. After planting, transplants should be protected from sun and wind, at least for their first 24 hours, with horticultural row covers or shade cloth. If that is not an option, plant on a cloudy or rainy day.

Transplants of hardier plants, such as cabbages, broccoli, parsley, lavender, cilantro, nasturtium and pansies, are happy to be planted in April. Warm-season transplants, such as tomato, pepper, squash, cucumber and basil, need the warmer soils and temperatures of May. Don't be in a rush to plant them, even if they are available (too early) at retailers.



PHOTO COURTESY OF MELINDAMYERS.COM

Before starting a new garden or planting one that has been struggling, take a soil test to know what, if any, fertilizer is needed to build a healthy soil foundation.

Mulching

A light layer of mulch, no more than 2 inches, is helpful in suppressing weeds and retaining soil moisture. But mulch should not be viewed as a cosmetic covering for our benefit; it is there for the plants' needs. Mulches that are applied too thickly or too often will harm plants and the soil. I prefer fine-textured, organic mulches, such as pine fines. Save wood chips for paths. Avoid mulch volcanoes around trees, which cause harmful root growth and other problems.

If you need acres of mulch every spring, it's because you don't have enough ground-covering plants.

It may be impractical to plant every vacant bed in the yard at once, but you could start this spring by tackling an area that is, say,

10 feet by 10 feet. Plug plants take a couple of years to fill in, but they offer a more affordable way to plant en masse.

Planting

It's best to plant most trees and shrubs in early fall because they are not then putting energy into top growth while dealing with transplant shock. Spring-planted woodies need handling with more care, and the earlier you can plant them, the more established they will be before summer.

Most trees and shrubs are container-grown and may have congested roots that need teasing out and trimming, so there is always a degree of root manipulation and damage when planting. Be gentle and make sure the tree or shrub is set at the correct height

and that the backfilled soil is packed firmly. A good soaking at planting time is in order, and plants should be watered periodically, especially if the weather turns dry, but the roots should not be kept wet.

The principle of handling roots gently applies to perennials and annuals, too.

Lawns

Any lawn will look better after it's given a sharp edge where it meets plant beds. Use a spade or long-handled edging tool rather than a shovel, if possible.

The predominant grass type in the Mid-Atlantic, turf-type tall fescue, grows rapidly in spring, especially a wet one. It is best kept at a somewhat tall three inches to reduce stress but mow it before it gets more than 4 inches in height. This may

mean having to mow twice a week in April and May. Replace or sharpen dull mower blades. Pre-emergent herbicides are available to deal with crabgrass and Japanese stilt grass, but the best way to minimize lawn weeds is to have a thick stand of turf. Dandelions and other weeds can be hand-dug or given a spot treatment of weed killer.

Lawn fertilizer should be applied at half the normal fall rate in spring to reduce nutrient runoff, but check the rules where you live; some jurisdictions limit fertilizer and pesticide use on home lawns.

The optimal time for seeding with fescues is late summer and early fall. Bare patches can be seeded now with proper soil preparation, but the new grass may melt away in summer heat.

Lawn fertilizer should be applied at half the normal fall rate in spring to reduce nutrient runoff, but check the rules where you live; some jurisdictions limit fertilizer and pesticide use on home lawns.

Similarly, fresh sod also needs soil preparation and may not make it through the summer, but it will look good for a few weeks, at least. Consider converting a part of the lawn into plant beds.

Container gardening

Old soil and plant material should be cleaned out; the soil can be spread around the garden, and pots can be scrubbed with a bleach solution to sanitize them and send any slugs on their way. It's best to use fresh potting mix. To make it go further, fill the bottom half of the pot with your own compost. Any weed seeds in the compost will be safely buried. Containers must drain. Make sure the drainage holes are not blocked, and don't put a saucer underneath. The same hardening-off rules apply to container plants.

Fertilizers

Plants get a boost from fertilizer, but check the ratio of key nutrients — nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium — to see if it matches the plant you're feeding. Slow-release feeds are useful in container plants. Granular fertilizer can damage plant tissues. Generally, I prefer organic fertilizers, such as kelp meal, fish emulsion and plant feeds made from livestock byproducts. They are gentle on plants and help to sustain soil biology.

GARDEN

Use your tiny garden to grow big savings

By Michele Brosius

midlifehealthyliving.com

Spring comes in like a lion, with its blossoming trees and chirping birds welcoming the warmer temperatures and bright sunny days. It is the perfect time to join in nature's celebration, rebirth and renewal; from spring cleaning and organizing to stocking the pantry.

April is National Gardening Month and a great time to connect with nature while saving money at the grocery store.

Combat rising food costs

Any opportunity to cut costs by growing your own food is a welcome one. The square-foot gardening plans and victory gardens popular in generations past have been replaced with social media posts touting the benefits of container gardening and installing backyard raised beds.

Growing food is accessible to all, whether you have land or a big backyard or are making it work from a condo balcony overlooking the city.

Incorporating home-grown produce into your meal plans is a great way to offset the cost of rising grocery prices.

In the last year, the cost of fresh produce at the grocery store has risen exponentially.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, food costs increased 2.7% overall between December 2022 and December 2023. Through 2024, that percentage is expected to increase — albeit at a slower rate than previous years — to 1.2%, according to the latest forecast from the U.S.



PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO EDITORIAL SERVICES

Gardening can be a fun, family activity.

Department of Agriculture.

Home garden ideas for all situations

No matter your living situation, there's a garden for that, even if you have limited space or aren't interested in going all out to grow your food.

There are a variety of choices available depending on your space, interest level and needs. A home garden is a great way to ensure you're getting all of your fruits and vegetables

in; imagine having fresh salad ingredients ready to go in an instant.

Container gardening

Five-gallon food-safe buckets provide enough space to accommodate many types of plant roots like tomatoes, peppers, several varieties of squash, cucumbers, lettuces, cruciferous vegetables, onions and a variety of berries.

Containers don't take up much space and are easily buildable with tiered frames that allow for any-

where between 10 and 12 individual buckets/plants. If you don't like the look of five-gallon containers or your homeowner's association has something to say about it, there are plenty of aesthetically pleasing growing containers available online or in your local gardening store.

Tower gardens

Another way to grow food is vertical gardening. Christopher Lowell, a '90s television home decor expert, was known for his

catchphrase, "If you can't grow out, grow up," implying that if you have little surface area to expand for storage and living space, building up along walls and lofts is a great solution.

The same holds true for gardening.

This innovative approach helps maximize space by growing plants on trellises or walls and fences. It's a creative solution for smaller spaces or people with mobility issues.

Ideal plants for vertical gardens include strawber-

ries, herbs, kale and spinach.

Indoor gardens

For those with limited space outdoors; whether that's tiny living or you're just short on time or resources, you can easily grow herbs and smaller vegetables on the windowsill or countertop.

From dill, basil and oregano, to mushrooms and jalapeno peppers, you may have enough space and produce to have a mini pizza or stir fry at your fingertips.



PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO EDITORIAL SERVICES

Involve your children in gardening. The more children are exposed to a particular food — or assist in growing it — the more willing they may be to try it.

Consider which foods work best together to maximize your garden. For example, if you love making soups, carrots, celery and onion — the makings of a mirepoix — are paramount to any good base.

If you find yourself cooking a lot of burgers, consider growing lettuce and tomatoes and of course cucumber, garlic and dill for homemade quick pickles.

Know what you can grow

Before jumping into tiny

gardening, it's important to know what you're able to grow in your climate. So, the first step is to familiarize yourself with growing zones. By following the Plant Hardiness Zone map on the USDA website, you can tailor your garden to your city's weather.

Use your zone information to determine what can be grown in your area.

The Farmer's Almanac planting calendar provides the best planting times based on the final frost dates for the year and weather expectations year-

round.

Grow what you'll use

Be realistic about what your family will eat and only grow those items.

One easy way to do this is to list out what meals are in your family's main rotation. Incorporate the fruits and vegetables in those dishes into your garden.

Of course, if you have a family of picky eaters, you may want to grow that kale and cabbage anyway. The more children are exposed to a particular food — or assist in growing it —

the more willing they may be to try it.

Sunshine and happiness

It's no secret that Vitamin D is a significant player when it comes to our health and well-being. Getting outdoors and tending to a garden is a great way to get fresh air and exercise.

It's a double dose of health; nutrient-dense produce and being outdoors. Each of these factors can have a significant positive effect on your mental well-

being and the satisfaction that comes with knowing you are becoming more self-sufficient, connecting with Mother Earth and reducing your carbon footprint.

If you've wanted to start growing your food or expand what you're currently growing, National Gardening Month is a great time to start. Look for local sales on seeds and gardening supplies.

Seek out opportunities to get together with growers in your community. Small-scale gardening brings people from all walks of life to-

gether toward a common goal. It's also a great way to share your knowledge with the community while connecting and giving back where you can.

Michele Brosius is the creator of Midlife Healthy Living, where she expertly combines her love for cooking with budget-conscious nutrition strategies. Through her blog, she encourages women to embrace a healthier lifestyle with simple recipes and wellness tips.

GARDEN



PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO EDITORIAL SERVICES

One doesn't need a large backyard to start a garden.

How to grow budget-friendly groceries indoors and out

By Sarita Harbour
anoffgridlife.com

Your great-grandparents were on to something — growing budget-friendly groceries is a smart way to save money and enjoy fresh produce right from your home. Recent rapidly rising grocery prices suggest that now might be the time to follow their lead.

Learning how to grow food indoors and out lets you enjoy fresh produce without stretching your budget. But before you start digging, review these tips and tricks for growing the right crops with the best yields:

Start seeds indoors

Start seeds indoors to get a head start on garden-

ing. Make sure you have the proper setup. Invest in trays, good quality soil mix and good lighting.

Seed starting requires durable, lightweight containers with drainage holes and enough depth for root growth. Cardboard egg cartons work well. Keep the soil moist, but beware of overwatering, which can lead to fungal diseases.

Invest in heirloom seeds

According to the USDA Economic Research Service, the price of food prepared at home rose 5% in 2023. This underscores the importance of finding sustainable ways to reduce food costs, including growing food at home.

While growing food at

home requires an investment in seeds, some seeds offer better value than others. Cost-effective heirloom seeds allow gardeners to harvest them from the fruits, vegetables or herbs at the end of each season for replanting. This eliminates the need for repeated purchases.

Resilient and flavorful, heirloom seeds support bio-

diversity and adapt to specific local growing conditions. They may even need less water and fewer pesticides. This saves gardeners more money and contributes to a more sustainable garden.

Choose low-maintenance crops

Certain vegetables and

herbs are low maintenance and particularly easy to grow, making them good choices for beginner gardeners.

Longtime freelance gardening writer Janet Loughrey of Garden Design suggests new gardeners start small to help avoid feeling overwhelmed.

“Start out with a few easy crops like carrots, radishes and greens such as lettuce, spinach and kale,” she says. “These crops are easy to grow from seed, which is less expensive than buying plant starts.”

Starting with these crops will boost confidence in your gardening skills while reducing grocery bills. Tomatoes, radishes and basil are also excellent choices for new gardeners.

Choose the right crops

Not all crops do well in all areas. Soil conditions, sun, wind and temperature can impact your plants' growth.

When planning your first garden, choose plants that thrive in local conditions to reduce the effort and resources needed for their care. Get advice from local gardening groups or area agricultural college extension offices.

Next, choose plants best suited to your available space. For example, snap peas, beans and cucumbers grow on trellises in vertical gardens.

Parsley, basil and peppers grow well in pots in warm, sunny corners of patios or balconies. However, don't plant anything you won't eat.

“Make a list of edibles you are most likely to eat, whether it's fresh herbs, tomatoes, peppers or beans,” says Laughrey, adding that doing so will reduce food wastage and be easier on your budget. “Some edible crops such as tomatoes or strawberries can be expensive to buy fresh at the grocery store or farmer's market, so it will save you money to grow them your-



PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO EDITORIAL SERVICES

Growing your own budget-friendly groceries can help to reduce your food expenses.

self.”

Learn about companion planting

Companion planting boosts a garden's health and yield by maximizing the natural relationships between plants. For example, planting basil with tomatoes can help deter pests. Growing marigolds among vegetables can ward off nematodes. Beans, squash and corn grow so well together that Indigenous North Americans called the trio “the three sisters.”

Use a garden planner to experiment with different layouts using companion planting principles based on the size and location of your garden containers, raised beds or pots. After

transplanting your seedlings into their final locations, water regularly and apply natural fertilizers to encourage healthy growth.

Try container gardening

Some fruits, vegetables and herbs do better in containers than others. Grow leafy greens, root vegetables and herbs in large planters or pots indoors or out.

Focus on high-yield plants like tomatoes and peppers to maximize your garden's output, especially if you are working in a small space.

Loughrey says even people with limited space can grow food crops on a patio or apartment balcony, and herbs and greens can grow

indoors in pots on a sunny kitchen window sill.

“Choose a spot that gets 6 to 8 hours of direct sunlight per day,” she advises, explaining there are varieties of vegetables or fruits with a compact habit suitable for container gardening. These include patio tomatoes, bush cucumbers, bush beans, dwarf blueberry bushes and alpine strawberries. “And make sure containers are large enough and have adequate drainage holes.”

Make the most of microgreens

Microgreens offer a nutritious and space-efficient option for indoor gardening. Growing microgreens or sprouts is simple and just

requires a shallow tray or mason jar, soil or soil alternative and seeds.

The whole process can take as little as 7-14 days. Keeping the soil moist but not soggy to prevent mold is a common challenge with indoor microgreens.

Succession gardening for a steady food supply

Succession gardening ensures a continuous supply of fresh produce. By planting crops every few weeks, gardeners harvest vegetables throughout the season.

This approach helps maximize yield and extends the gardening season in backyard gardens and indoors for microgreens and herbs.

Grow your own food and save

Growing your own budget-friendly groceries can help to reduce your food expenses. Start heirloom seeds indoors. Try growing a container garden or even a vertical garden on balconies or patios. Choose climate-appropriate crops, employ companion and succession planting and experiment with growing microgreens indoors. When you start small and plan carefully, your garden will flourish, providing a steady supply of fresh produce right at your doorstep.

Sarita Harbour is a long-time business and finance writer. She created An Off Grid Life to help people become more self-reliant.

GARDEN

Dirt-cheap gardening secrets

By Laura Sampson
littlehousebigalaska.com

Gardening doesn't have to break the bank.

Discover effective and budget-friendly gardening secrets to grow more plants on less green.

From savvy seed starting to top-of-the-line zone-specific plant advice and swaps with other budget-minded gardeners, learn how to cultivate a thriving garden without spending a fortune.

Like everything else these days, the cost of growing vegetables and flowers is on the rise. That doesn't have to stop you from enjoying them, though.

These thoughtful and innovative cheap dirt gardening techniques will see you through it:

Getting started

Sometimes, the simple act of getting started is the first big hurdle. If you're looking to save some green, plan now for the things you want to harvest later.

When you choose plants native to your area, you choose plants that can survive your region's weather. These plants need less water, which saves time and money.

Visit the Co-operative Extension Service for free advice

Did you know you can get free help? Contact your local cooperative extension service and learn about free or low-cost gardening clinics or classes. Beyond their advice on food preservation, you can tap into them for extra information about growing the right kinds of plants for your area. Your extension agent is a wealth of knowledge; their job is to



PHOTO COURTESY OF GROWING PONTIAC

Pontiac Public Library's Seed Library is part of Growing Pontiac's Garden Resource Club program.

share that information with you. There may also be master gardeners available to come and take a look at what you're working with.

Save on the tools

Buying starter plants can be costly. Consider starting your garden from seeds. The price alone in savings might convince you all you need are containers, pots, soil and seeds. More and more

Buying starter plants can be costly. Consider starting your garden from seeds. The price alone in savings might convince you all you need are containers, pots, soil and seeds. More and more public libraries have seen libraries where you can swap or take seeds for free.

public libraries have seen libraries where you can swap or take seeds for free.

Many recycling centers and gardening clubs will recycle plant supplies and of-

fer them to the public for free. Also, check your local buy-nothing and yard sale groups on Facebook for free or cheap supplies. Thrift stores can be fantastic places to find growing supplies. Get creative with what you have on hand — yogurt containers, old cups and mismatched food storage containers can be used to grow plants. Be sure to clean anything you plan to grow plants in before us-

ing it to keep diseases from spreading.

Swapping is in

If you haven't heard, swapping is a great way to get more bang for your buck. Here are some great swap ideas:

- Swap your extra seeds and plants with friends. If you want to grow many plants, flowers and vegetables, consider getting together with friends and having a seed swap. Seed packets come with many more seeds than you need, so swapping the extras is a great way to get more variety for less money.

- Too late to swap seeds? Swap plants instead. Grow extra vegetables and flowers, get together with friends and swap them. Again, the benefits are more variety for less money. Plus, time spent with new and old friends is well spent.

- And if seed or plant swaps are too late, try a crop swap. Find a specialty crop that you grow really well. Trade your extras with friends and neighbors. Dan Morris of Fire and Saw explains how he makes this tip work for him: "Grow what works and swap for what doesn't. I'm known as the potato, tomato and chili man in our community because I never fail to produce a massive harvest of these crops. However, I can't grow a strawberry, a cucumber or an onion."

Be sure to check out seed libraries. Often housed at reading libraries, seed libraries help reduce monoculture and increase biodiversity by offering free seeds.

Check with your local library to see if they offer a seed library or if there is one in your area.



PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO EDITORIAL SERVICES

Plants prepare to sprout in the field.

The next level

Dirt-cheap gardening doesn't just end once seeds are planted and growing. Take it to the next level if you dare.

- Learn to compost at home for better soil health. Chat with your extension agent at the Cooperative Extension Service; chances are they are putting on a composting clinic in your area sometime soon.

- Instead of buying pesticides, use natural pest deterrents. Consider compan-

ion planting to keep pests in check. You can plant marigolds to repel pests in the garden or onions to drive out root maggots. Soapy water in a spray bottle can kill and remove bugs. Hand-picking is also a great way to remove bigger pests.

- Make your own traps for pests like slugs and snails using beer or a mixture of water and sugar. Dig a small hole in the dirt, lay in a shallow bowl or saucer, fill it with beer at night and pick out the slugs in the morning.

- Use grass clippings, leaves or straw as mulch to retain soil moisture and suppress weeds. This saves water and the effort of frequent weeding. This can be an invitation to slugs, so use this cautiously.

Perennial happiness

If you're looking for more flowers year in and year out, opt for perennial plants over annuals. Perennial plants live longer than one season of summer flowers, so you don't need to buy new plants each sea-

son. These plants don't last forever but grow for a long time. Plus, you can divide them when they get older and get more plants for free.

Get savvy

If you have to buy plants, buy them later in the season.

As greenhouses close for the season, they start to discount plants.

This is a great time to get plants, either perennials or annuals, that were too expensive to afford earlier in the year.

The more you learn about your specific garden conditions — soil type, sunlight, local pests — the more you can adapt your strategies without spending money. This is where taking classes locally comes in handy.

Time to get growing

To wrap up, embracing dirt-cheap gardening secrets can significantly reduce your gardening costs while allowing you to enjoy a vibrant garden.

These tips save money and foster a more sustain-

able and environmentally friendly approach to gardening.

Making it more accessible for everyone interested in gardening.

Laura Sampson of Little House Big Alaska is on a mission to teach modern family-oriented home cooks how to make old-fashioned foods new again. She shares her passion for home cooking, backyard gardening and homesteading on her website and blog.

GARDEN

The case for a (somewhat) messy spring garden

By **Monica Cardoza**
The Washington Post

With temperatures reaching the 60s in some places, landscaping crews already returning to properties and spring cleaning on the horizon, it's tempting to tidy up the garden alongside the house. Proceed with caution here, though.

Any leaves or spent perennials left from the fall served an important role over the winter, providing shelter and food for insects. And resisting the urge to wipe the garden clean can continue to foster a wildlife habitat for those beneficial creatures.

"We create nectar gardens to attract butterflies, then rake the garden and literally throw them all away," says Randi Eckel, an entomologist and owner of Toadshade Wildflower Farm, a mail-order native plant nursery in Frenchtown, New Jersey. "We need to think about all the life stages of these insects instead of focusing only on the beautiful adults. We also have to feed their children."

Now, young stages of butterflies, moths and other beneficial insects are nestled in last year's leaves, some of them munching on decomposing duff — leaves, twigs, bark and other plant litter. By waiting to clean up your garden until day-

time temperatures are consistently above 50 degrees for at least seven consecutive days, and approaching the chore with a light touch, you can keep giving those youngsters a head start on life.

That's not to say, though, that you can't start yard and gardening work.

Here are suggestions for how to approach spring cleaning in the garden, without going overboard:

Match insects to their host plants

Many people know the common names of the native plants in their gardens. Fewer can match each plant to the insect that relies on it for its dietary and reproductive needs. For example, Baltimore checkerspot overwinter as caterpillars at the base of white turtlehead (*Chelone glabra*), and swallowtail butterflies attach their chrysalises to Hubricht's bluestar (*Amsonia hubrichtii*). Knowing which plants support which insects, and how, will make you less likely to want to disturb your garden too early.

Remove leaves from hard surfaces and pathways

Neaten the yard while also preventing slips and falls by clearing paths, pa-



PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO EDITORIAL SERVICES

Keeping a garden a little dirty and messy can help attract insects.

tios, decks and driveways of leaves.

While you're at it, thin out thick, moist piles of leaves in the yard, which can attract ticks.

If possible, relocate the leaves on the property — perhaps to woods, if you have them.

Or spread them around the base of trees to create garden beds.

When fall arrives, these areas will serve as what Eckel calls “soft landings” — places where butterflies and moths that have been feeding on your trees can drop into a garden to overwinter instead of onto a lawn. But, she says, “do not pile the leaves up like a volcano. No tree likes anything volcanoed up around the bark.”

If you have room in your yard, consider mixing the leaves with fallen twigs to create a brush pile. Adult mourning cloak, question mark and comma butterflies may overwinter next year in these piles. They are “some of the first butterflies we see in spring,” says Eckel, who is also president of the Native Plant Society of New Jersey.

Jennifer Brunelle, owner of Greenleaf Designer Gardens in Littleton, Massachusetts, discourages her clients in the Boston suburbs from having brush piles because her area is overrun with rabbits, which tend to nest in them. But Eckel is a fan. “A brush pile is so much simpler than a compost pile. It’s where you stack sticks and excess leaves. Over time, it settles and breaks down some, and you put more things on top of it.”

Edge the beds

Few things neaten a naturalistic garden like fresh edging around beds. Use a spade with a straight edge or a half-moon edger with a semicircular blade to cut into the ground along the existing edge. “Edging gives a nice, sharp look that makes these gardens



PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO EDITORIAL SERVICES

look very classy,” Eckel says. If plants are hanging over into the lawn, create an edge farther out and enlarge the size of the bed at the same time.

Address storm damage

Perennials that have bent or broken because of wind or snowstorms can be left alone.

But if you want order, cut the stems where they snapped, leaving about 18 inches of intact stem if possible. Lay the cut pieces near the plant, where they can decompose and the insects inside can eventually leave. Another option is to bind multiple cut stems with twine into bundles and lean them against a tree or place them in the back of the garden.

Install a wildlife habitat sign

With more native plant gardens popping up in front yards, a wildlife habitat sign can mean the difference between sidelong glances and the faces of excited children and curious parents interested in installing such a garden themselves. “Passersby, relatives and neighbors will understand that this is an intentional choice and is being done to benefit wildlife,” Eckel says.

You’ve probably already seen such signs. They might announce Certified Wildlife Habitat, Plants for Birds or Certified Monarch Garden. But they all serve the same purpose of making known that there’s a method to the perceived madness. Some signs can be purchased, while others require certi-

fication through a conservation group such as the National Wildlife Federation (nwf.org), the North American Butterfly Association (nababutterfly.com) or National Audubon Society chapters (audubon.org).

Plan to replace hardwood mulch with living mulch

Locate bare areas in beds and fill them with low-growing ground-cover perennials, known as living — or green — mulch.

This can reduce or eliminate the need for hardwood mulch.

The plants suppress weeds, prevent erosion and retain moisture like traditional mulch, and over time, certain varieties will spread. “There’s an initial investment for the



plants upfront,” Brunelle says. “But if you’re paying for mulch and the labor to spread it, then over time, it’s more cost-effective to buy the plants.”

Brunelle recommends using low-growing mounds of prairie dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*), as well as blue-eyed grass (*Sisyrinchium angustifolium*),

which she describes as “a mini-iris with cute blue flowers.”

The main thing is to keep your garden in perspective. “It’s not just the plants and flowers that make a garden exciting,” Eckel says. “It’s the butterflies, moths, bees, beetles and birds interacting with those plants and flowers.”

HOME IMPROVEMENT



PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

Aesthetic appeal might be what homeowners most desire from their landscapes, but that appeal is only achieved when the right plants are chosen for a space.

Transforming the exterior of your home this spring

By Rob Kobylasz
For MediaNews Group

No one is as eager as Michiganders to get outside and clean up their yard after a long, harsh winter. Spring offers the perfect weather to help strengthen your home's curb appeal while preparing for the summer.

There are many different projects that you may decide to take on this spring, but here are a few to keep in mind if you're looking to stand out in your neighborhood.

Clean out and refresh your landscaping

The quickest and easi-

est thing you can do to transform the exterior of your home this spring is updating your landscaping. Whether you just need to refresh your current landscaping or completely replace what you have, landscaping is an easy DIY project you can tackle



Rob Kobylasz

if you choose to do so.

When picking plants, shrubs and trees, be sure to select one good for the zone you live in. A quick soil test can help you determine what, if any, alterations you need to make in order for

your landscaping to thrive.

Doing a soil test on your lawn can also help you understand what fertilizer to use to help give you the lush, green lawn you've been wanting.

Install a new deck or patio

Nothing screams Mich-

igan summers like sitting in the backyard on your patio or deck with your family and friends. Spring is a great time to build a new one before contractors get tied up in their summer jobs.

When deciding on what deck or patio is right for you, take cost into consid-

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PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

Some handy ideas can help homeowners transform landscapes without spending too much.

Exterior

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eration. There are many ways to save while building them, such as choosing a broom finish over stamped concrete, or wood over a material such as Trex decking.

Most decks and patios require permits, so if you're hiring a contractor to do the job, make sure they apply for the appropriate ones to ensure the job is done right.

Adding a shed for storage

If you're like me, lawn equipment stuffed in your garage is one thing that drives you crazy. Building a new shed can allow you to utilize your space more effectively by giving you am-

ple room to place things such as lawnmowers, weed whackers and other messy lawn equipment.

When planning for a shed, be sure to check with your city or township to verify the easements on your property. Easements are areas around the perimeter of your property that prohibit you from adding permanent structures due to city utilities being underground.

Some cities require concrete pads for sheds over a specific square footage. A quick call to your city or township can make sure you don't run into issues later when installing a shed.

Adding fencing for privacy

Fencing contractors can get extremely busy in the spring and summertime.

If adding a fence isn't a job you want to DIY, getting on their schedule early can help ensure your fence gets installed in a timely manner.

Again, be sure to check with your local municipality on permitting your fence and to ensure you stay within your property line.

There are many projects you can decide to take on this spring, and if you have the confidence to DIY them, many can be done in a cost-effective manner to keep your property in tip-top shape.

Rob Kobylasz is a licensed residential builder in Michigan and owner of Cambridge Construction & Remodeling, LLC, a home renovation company in metropolitan Detroit. Contact him at 734-931-0017.

HOME IMPROVEMENT



MEDIANEWS GROUP FILE PHOTO

Jagan Nallani stands in his garage in Troy.

5 garage safety tips

By Family Features

When you throw open the windows, you'll likely be spending more time with the garage door open, too.

Organizing clutter is part of the process, but warmer weather can also serve as a reminder to make sure your garage equipment and features are secure and functioning properly.

Make access to your outdoor equipment safer with these tips to get your garage ready for the warmer months:

- Your garage floor tends to capture grime and grit from the outdoors, especially where your car sits. Take time to thoroughly sweep and mop, but also take stock of the floor's

condition for any chips or other damage that may grow worse over time and pose a risk for tripping or other safety issues.

- Check your garage door performance. Ensure doors are rolling smoothly with no hitches. If you notice any abnormalities, it's a good time to investigate. In some cases, a little grease or a minor adjustment is all you need to get things back on track.

- Don't forget to check your garage door sensors, too. Warmer weather means animals and children (and their toys) are more likely to find themselves in an automated door's path when it begins to lower. Ensure sensors are operating properly to prevent injury or property

damage.

- Verify all outlets, lights and other electrical features are in proper operating condition and all wires are intact and free of damage or fraying.

- Ensure any poisonous materials, such as paint, garden pesticides, cleaners and automotive fluids, are safely stored out of reach of pets and children that may have increased access to the garage during warmer months. Also check for spills or leaks of any potentially hazardous or flammable materials.

Taking time to safety-proof your garage can provide your family months of stress-free use. Find more tips for getting your garage in order at elivingtoday.com.



JEFF GRITCHEN — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

The backyard of this Haunted Mansion-themed Airbnb features a cornhole game.

HOME IMPROVEMENT

7 backyard improvements that make a difference

By **Outdoor Power Equipment Institute**
opei.org

The housing market always has its ups and downs, and home renovations appear to be hitting some record highs in the last few years.

With more people staying home to work, relax and play, many homeowners have chosen to renovate rather than move to a new home to obtain their dream house and have it work better for their family. But what about extending those enhancements outside, into the family backyard?

According to a recent poll commissioned by the TurfMutt Foundation and conducted online by The Harris Poll, more than three-quarters of Americans who

have a yard (76%) say the family yard space is one of the most important parts of their home.

When it comes to design, it makes sense family backyards are being taken as seriously as the interior of the home.

“Backyard improvements can impact your home’s value should you decide to sell someday, but we think it’s also important to make changes that enhance your experience and enjoyment of your yard today,” says Kris Kiser, president & CEO of the TurfMutt Foundation, which encourages people to care for and utilize the green space around them, including our own backyards and community parks.

He adds, “Mulligan the TurfMutt and I are lov-

ing our newly renovated backyard as we’ve brought some of our indoor living, outdoors. It feels like we’ve added onto the house by just utilizing the outdoor space more effectively.”

Maybe you’ve already completed the improvement projects inside your home such as adding a fresh coat of paint, putting in new flooring, or updating appliances and furniture. But how are home improvements taken to the backyard so the “outdoor living room” works better for your family and at the same time makes your home feel new?

Here are seven suggestions from the TurfMutt Foundation for turning home renovations “inside out”:

- Replace flooring inside = cleaning up the yard and



PEG MCNICHOL — MEDIA NEWS GROUP

Curtis Edwards and his son, CJ, survey a newly landscaped backyard after volunteers from Rebuild Together and Home Depot helped the family.



PHOTO COURTESY OF OUTDOOR POWER EQUIPMENT INSTITUTE

Many homeowners have chosen to renovate rather than move to a new home to obtain their dream house and have it work better for their family. But what about extending those enhancements outside, into the family backyard?

improving its turfgrass.

Grass is the canvas for your outdoor living room. Improve existing turfgrass by overseeding or aerating, or start fresh with new sod. Clean out flower beds and remove debris from all parts of your yard, and then build the other elements from there. Remember, outdoor power equipment like a lawn mower, hedge trimmer, or leaf blower can help make even big jobs easier.

- Repaint inside = planting flowers to attract and support backyard wildlife.

A fresh coat of paint can transform a room, just like planting flowers outside does for a yard. Choose native plants that have

evolved to thrive in your microclimate (they are better for the ecosystem and require less input from you). Selecting native perennials over annuals means only having to plant once to enjoy their beauty for years to come. Plus, pollinators and other backyard wildlife will thank you as these types of plants are natural habitat and food for them.

- Replace household appliances = freshening up your cache of outdoor power equipment.

Getting the right equipment for your lawn size and type customizes the experience of caring for your yard. Good news is there are lots of options available

for all needs and tastes. Robotic mowers that act like a Roomba for the lawn and battery-powered leaf blowers that are lightweight, powerful, and portable are good choices. For larger lawns, zero-turn mowers and even a UTV might be helpful.

- Swap out furniture inside = creating high-value spaces outside.

Spending time outside is all about connection with nature and others. Really think about what you need for your lifestyle, and buy outdoor furniture accordingly to create spaces that support your family's lifestyle. Things like a picnic table for backyard study

sessions, an outdoor sectional for connecting with others, a hammock for swinging away stress, or even an outdoor office to strike a better work-life balance are all ways you can create high-value outdoor spaces.

- Kitchen renovation = adding an outdoor kitchen.

The sky is the limit when adding an outdoor kitchen. You can certainly create full set-up complete with a sink, refrigerator and built-in grill and cooktop. Or keep it simple with a beverage cart or cooler and spend a little more on a quality grill to cook meals on.

- Add on to your home =

creating a true outdoor living room.

Go all out and add a deck, hardscaped area or screened-in porch if you have the time and budget, or simply make the most of the yard you have. Create a soccer or croquet field on a grassy flat area. Add a fire pit and use string lights in trees to enhance enjoyment in the wintertime. For warm summer days, a pergola covered in colorful vines that attract butterflies might be just the ticket.

- Add a game room inside = creating activity zones outside.

Make your backyard the neighborhood gathering

hot spot by creating activity zones that are fun for the whole family. Cornhole, soccer, bocce ball and a giant checkers board game can help parents more easily manage their kids' screen time.

A patio or deck is a great setting for family game nights. Or go all out and add a swimming pool to lock in your backyard as the place to be for your kids and their friends. Involve your family in the planning and keep in mind that shrubs and hedges are a great way to distinguish the different activity zones you create in your yard.

For more information, visit turfmutt.com.

HOME IMPROVEMENT

How to find a storm door that will keep bugs — and intruders — away

By Laura Daily

Special to *The Washington Post*

A beautiful front door crafted with hardwood or decorative glass — or both — can amp up your curb appeal and welcome guests in style. But sometimes you need an added layer of protection, whether it's from weather and insects or potential intruders.

Enter the storm door.

Depending on where you live, you may see advertisements for security doors, storm doors, security screen doors or security storm doors.

Fundamentally, they're the same: an aluminum- or steel-frame door with a mesh screen or glass panel (or both), mounted in front of your entry door. A security door adds bars that can prevent entry, even if the glass is broken.

Chetan Hira, owner of Artistic Iron in Westminster, Colorado, says that most customers want an extra exterior door for one of two reasons. "They are worried about people breaking in, or, if they aren't worried about security, they want to allow for fresh air and ventilation, but still have a locked front door."

To get started, find a door specialist.

Look for a company that walks you through the process, from the initial consultation to post-installation.

Get recommendations from friends and neigh-

bors, read reviews and confirm that the company is licensed, bonded and insured, says Joe LeVecchi, co-owner of Exterior Medics, an exterior remodeling company in Springfield, Virginia.

Typically, a company will come to your home, assess your needs, show you options for colors and styles, take measurements and quote a price for the door and the installation.

Steel grades are measured in gauge. The smaller the gauge, the thicker the steel, so 22 gauge is easier to bend or dent. Look for 14- to 16-gauge hollow tubing for the main door components, and around an 11-gauge for the frame, Hira says. (Solid steel bars would make the door so heavy that you couldn't easily open or close it.)

Take your time during the interview to ensure you get what you want.

Ask whether the company does the installation or out-sources to subcontractors. And be sure to determine whether the doors are manufactured in-house or elsewhere. If it's the latter, ask where. "Because we specialize in installation, we partner with outside manufac-

turers. But all of our doors are made in the U.S., so if anything goes wrong, we can get it replaced right away," LeVecchi says.

Also consider these factors to find the door that best meets your needs:

- Custom or off-the-shelf. Hira says a custom door is built to within 1/16 of an inch of your door opening. Standard models, on the other hand, come in about three or four sizes; installers tweak the door to make it fit the door frame.

- Steel vs. aluminum. Although you can find aluminum- and steel-frame options at home improvement centers, all custom-fabricated doors are steel-based. Experts say steel is the way to go, especially for a security door. In climates with a high salt content, though, aluminum has an edge, because it doesn't rust, says Paula McKain, sales manager for First Impression Ironworks in Gilbert, Arizona. Steel grades are measured in gauge. The smaller the gauge, the thicker the steel, so

22 gauge is easier to bend or dent. Look for 14- to 16-gauge hollow tubing for the main door components, and around an 11-gauge for the frame, Hira says. (Solid steel bars would make the door so heavy that you couldn't easily open or close it.)

- Hardware. Custom doors come with brand-name hardware, including locks and handle sets, which can



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make it easier to find replacement parts. Also, ask what type of hinges will be used; for instance, a barrel hinge is sturdier and can bear more weight than an H-hinge.

- **Finish.** Almost all security storm doors are finished with a powder coat rather than paint. According to McKain, manufacturers clean the steel, hang it on a rack, spray on a powdery substance (the spray comes in a variety of colors), then bake the door

to harden and cure the finish. "Powder coating is incredibly durable, resistant to weather and preferable to paint," she says. If it's properly applied, the powder coating should last about 15 to 20 years.

- **Cost.** Prices for doors vary based on where you live, upgrades such as arches or digital locks, and whether there are iron fabricators in the area or whether the doors have to be shipped in. Bottom line: The higher the quality

and the more complicated the design, the higher the price. A basic, lightweight aluminum storm door with screen panels from a home improvement store may be found for as little as \$300 or less; a standard-size steel version would be about \$400 to \$500. These doors don't include hardware or installation, so factor in at least another \$250 to \$350. Because security doors contain more steel, expect to pay more for one. An off-the-shelf

model is about \$600 to \$1,000. One customized specifically for your home can run about \$2,000 to \$3,000. Yes, that's a hefty price tag, but custom doors purchased through a specialist typically include installation.

- **Minutiae.** Small things can make a big difference. For example, for the clips that secure the glass or a screen panel to the door, you want metal. Over time, plastic ones can become brittle and may break.

Some fabricators skip clips altogether and use removable screws to secure panels. Also pay attention to weatherstripping. Thin stripping makes for a poor seal, so make sure your installer is using a product thick enough to keep out the cold or heat.

- **Warranty.** Hira, whose company not only fabricates but also powder coats in-house, says a good door warranty from the fabricator and/or installer should cover at least five years for

anything that breaks or for structural defects. Moving parts such as handles and locks should be covered by a one-year manufacturer's warranty. You may also want to ask about a finish warranty in case it flakes or peels.

- **Maintenance.** A well-constructed door doesn't need much maintenance. Once a year, you may want to lubricate the hinges. Spray a product such as WD-40 on a soft cloth and wipe them down.

HOME IMPROVEMENT



PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO EDITORIAL SERVICES

Use every inch of space to add purpose to your shed.

Get a clean and organized shed in 9 steps

By Nevin Martell

Special to The Washington Post

Many sheds are catchalls, simple structures intended to store gardening supplies, lawn care equipment, outdoor furniture and that oversized custom-built cornhole set you bought on

Etsy and only used once.

They may start out organized, but over time many descend into chaos and clutter.

As these systems break down, the filth and grime build up and it becomes an eyesore inside and out. But figuring out a game

plan for cleaning it up can feel overwhelming. So, you let it marinate in its disarray, dirtiness and disrepair, telling yourself again and again, “I’ll get to it someday.”

With the calendar still full of sunny days, now is a great time to “carpe she-

dem” and tackle this long-overdue project, which will probably only take a weekend or two to complete, depending on how much work there is to do and whether you have a helper.

Here are nine simple steps to help you transform your grungy shack packed

with bric-a-brac into a well-organized, functional space:

1. Call a friend

If cleaning the space feels overwhelming, Meghan Jackson, owner of Joyful Spaces, an organizing business based in Colorado

Springs, recommends partnering with a friend. “Offer to exchange helping each other out,” she says. “Having another person will also bring a whole other set of ideas and suggestions to the process, and it’s just a little more fun doing such an arduous task.”

2. Empty and assess

“The first step is to get everything out, so you can see what you have,” says Amy Bloomer, owner of the organizing company Let Your Space Bloom in Lutherville, Maryland. “This is almost always the most uncomfortable and overwhelming part of the process, but it’s the most necessary.”

Group everything into piles of related items, such as yard tools, gardening supplies and lawn games. “This makes it easier to make decisions about what you need, what you want to replace and what to dispose of,” says Jackson. “You have to be honest about your needs now and if you can really see yourself using the item in the future, and you’ll also see if you have duplicates of anything.”

Bloomer advises donating anything in good condition to a nearby thrift store or charitable organization to give it a second life helping someone in need and keep it from clogging up a landfill.

3. Deep clean

Bloomer’s tool of choice for cleaning sheds is a leaf blower, because “it’ll get out all the creepy crawlies in all the corners.” Then give the space a vacuum or brisk sweeping, dust the shelves, scrub the floor and clean the windows. Moving outdoors, power wash or pressure wash the exterior. Make sure to check under awnings and in other crannies to remove empty nests, squirrel stashes, or blown leaves.

4. Prepare for the elements

If you plan to use the structure year-round, you should insulate the building to regulate moisture and create a temperature-controlled environment. Jay Shafer, author of “The Small House Book” and a tiny house designer, recommends lining the structure between its studs with 1- to 3-inch thick polyisocyanurate (also called simply polyiso) foam board. “It will create a vapor barrier,” he says, “so you don’t have to worry about mold.” If you’d like to put in a heater or air conditioning, lighting or power outlets, be safe and hire a professional electrician.

5. Paint

The quickest way to make an old structure look new is to give it a fresh coat of paint inside and out. Bloomer suggests painting the interior a light, bright color. This will make the small space look larger, while allowing items stored in the shed to stand out, even in corners or on shelves. The exterior can be brushed with a color that

blends into the natural environment, making it feel like an organic part of your landscape. Bloomer suggests adding personality and pizzazz by painting the door a poppier, eye-catching color. Or paint the whole structure a vibrant shade if you want it to stand out.

6. Maximize horizontal space

There are some items that must be stored on the floor, such as lawnmowers, grills and patio furniture. Everything else should go on the wall. For tools that can be hung, Bloomer recommends the customizable Rubbermaid FastTrack rail system. Use adjustable shelving for everything else. Narrow shelves are good for smaller items, such as seeds and sprays. But for bulkier things, such as a seed spreader or bins of seasonal goods, wider shelves are best. Bloomer prefers Seville’s steel wire shelving or Origami racks for everyday storage, and either Husky or Gladiator heavy-duty shelving for heavier items. Consider storing smaller, related items in stackable bins. “Labels are really helpful, because they quickly remind you of how you organized everything,” says Jackson.

7. Move these items inside your house

Two items commonly stored in sheds should be moved indoors: batteries and paint. “Batteries degrade more quickly if they’re not in a climate-controlled environment,” says Jackson. “And paint goes bad if it freezes.”

8. Don’t forget outdoor storage

Jeanie Stiles, co-author of “Sheds: The Do-It-Yourself Guide for Backyard Builders,” suggests building an awning on one side of the shed. Underneath it, you can place trash cans and recycling bins, stack firewood and install a wall-mounted bike rack.

9. Maintain it

To prevent things from getting out of hand again, do a yearly cleanup. “Don’t worry, it’s easier to clean a shed if it’s organized,” says Jackson, who adds that organization systems will need to evolve over time. You will need to adjust things, for example, when your kid gets older and gets a bigger bike or you buy new lawn furniture that needs to be stored during cold weather. She also advises doing a mini-purge every couple of years. “Scan your shelves to see if there’s anything you no longer need or want in there,” she says. “And toss out anything that’s past its expiration date, such as seeds or pesticides.”

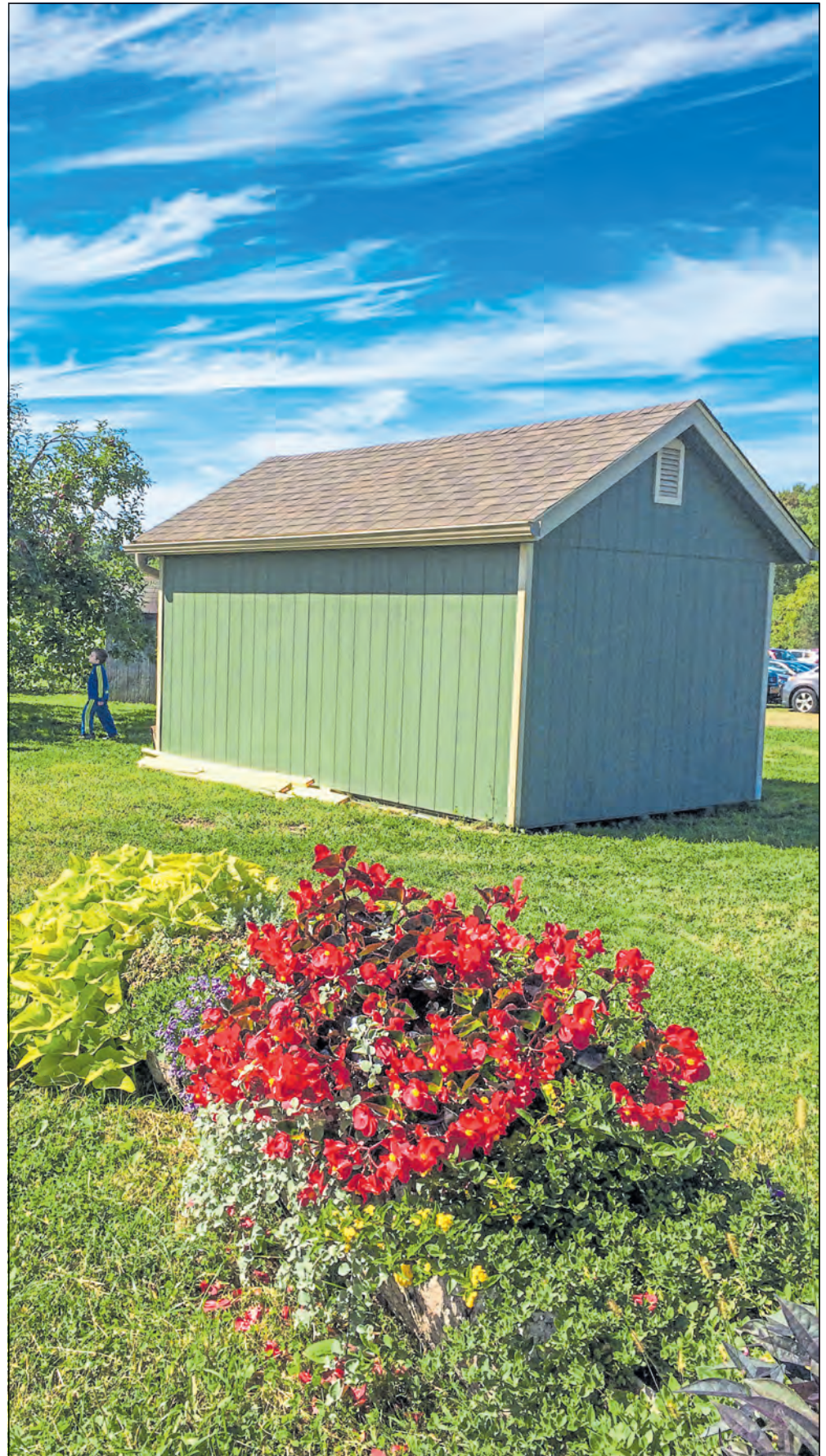


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HOME IMPROVEMENT

8 tasks for your May home maintenance checklist

By Jeanne Huber

Special to *The Washington Post*

May is too wonderful a month to stay cooped up indoors.

But if you play all month, you'll pay come summer, when the itch to relax gets even stronger. There's a simple way to resolve this quandary: Focus this month on chores that get you outside.

Get the grill ready

If you cleaned the grill before stowing it for the winter, you might just need to dust off a few cobwebs. But if not, the interior is probably covered in crud.

To clean, you'll need a new or at least perfectly clean wire grill brush, a bucket, gloves and some dishwasher detergent, which is more alkaline and cuts through grease better than hand dishwashing detergent.

Remove the grates and soak them in the bucket filled with warm water and some of the detergent. Meanwhile, clean the grill. Start with the tubing where gas flows out and makes flames because the wire bristles need to be cleaned for this step. (You might need to lift off heat-distribution bars to access the tubing.)

Scrub across the tubing, not side-to-side, to avoid moving dirt into neighboring holes.

Then scrub the rest of the grill's interior, including the inside of the lid.

Wipe off the surfaces with a rag. By this point, the grates should be nicely soaked.

Put on gloves and scrub with the wire brush.

Rinse thoroughly and put everything back in place. Slide in a new drip pan, wipe off the exterior of the grill and you're ready to go.



PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO EDITORIAL SERVICES

Wash and inspect the house

Near the end of May, you're likely to notice a big drop-off in pollen, the majority of which comes from trees.

That's a signal that it's

time to clean the exterior of your house.

Use a hose with a nozzle, not a pressure washer (the idea is to take off dirt, not paint). A soft-bristle brush with an extendible handle whisks away spider eggs and minimizes the need for

a ladder.

The process makes a house look fresh and gives you an up-close look at other issues that might need attention.

If you find a bare paint spot, for example, wait for the wood to dry, lightly

sand to remove weathered wood fibers and touch up the paint. (Avoid sanding if the underlying paint might contain lead.)

Shrubbiness growing too close to walls is also a problem; the branches can nick paint and all the greenery

keeps walls damp, inviting mildew and rot. Bring clip-pers while you clean so you can tidy up as you go.

Wash windows

You can wash window interiors any time, but for the exteriors, wait for a

rain-free day after the pollen eases.

Hire a professional if the windows are hard to reach and you're not comfortable working on a ladder.

If you tackle the job yourself, use warm water with a little hand-dishwashing detergent — about a teaspoon of soap to two gallons of water.

Wipe off the window frame and sill, then clean the glass with a non-scratch scrub pad, sponge or washcloth and plenty of the cleaning solution.

To remove mineral deposits or other stubborn bits, scrub with superfine bronze wool. Use a squeegee to dry the glass rather than paper towels or a cloth. Inspect the blade first and replace it if it's nicked. Wipe the glass in vertical passes, top to bottom, angling the blade a bit so excess water drips onto the glass you will cover in the next pass.

Fix and clean screens

Before you open your house up for fresh air, wash and patch window screens. Remove the screens and clean them in a bathtub or on a lawn. Use a soft brush or a sponge and warm, soapy water. Rinse with clear water, allow to dry, then reinstall.

If you spot small holes in the screens, get patch material that you can stick on by blasting it with hot air from a hair dryer for one minute. If you need a bigger patch, make one from screen material about a half-inch oversize in all directions. Sew it on with a needle and either a standard thread or fishing line. If it's a big rip, get the screen replaced, either by a hardware store or a window or screen shop.

Install an outdoor clothesline

Celebrate spring by getting set up to enjoy the scent and texture of air-dried sheets and towels — and the satisfaction of taking a small step toward us-



PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO EDITORIAL SERVICES

Cleaning your gutters is a chore that may warrant doing in the spring, not just in the fall, especially if you have evergreens, which shed needles year round, or trees such as oaks that take a long time to drop leaves in the fall.

ing less energy.

If you have a tiny outdoor space, or if you live where condo or subdivision rules prohibit outdoor clotheslines, invest in a foldaway stand or a retractable clothesline and use it toward dusk. If you have more flexibility, consider an umbrella-style clothesline that folds up and lifts out for storage. Or, for a larger option, you can install a retro-style clothesline with wooden or metal T-posts at each end. Old Farmers Almanac recommends cotton clothesline over plastic or nylon.

A polyethylene-coated stainless steel cable is another good option.

Clean gutters and deal with the water

This is a chore that may warrant doing in the spring, not just in the fall, especially if you have evergreens, which shed needles year round, or trees such as oaks that take a long time to drop leaves in the fall.

One difference about gutter cleaning in the spring, though, is that any drainage issues related to gutter water are far more pleasant to deal with now than when the weather is getting colder by the day.

During a rainstorm, watch how water flows from gutter downspouts. If it puddles by the founda-

tion, divert the water farther away, ideally at least 10 feet. You might need underground piping that leads to a dry well (an underground pit filled with round rocks), which a landscaper can install. Or you can pipe the water to a rain garden, a bed with fluffy soil and water-loving plants.

Spring clean outside

“Spring cleaning” is a term usually applied to interior chores, but an outdoor cleanup makes a lot of sense, too.

Hauling away piles of branches, half-rotted wood and other debris can go a long way toward making your yard more inviting for

summertime barbecues — and less hospitable to rodents.

Check with your local solid waste agency or company to find out how to deal with yard waste, bricks, concrete and other construction and demolition materials. Piling bricks or other reusable items at the curb with a “Free” sign might also work.

Get the dehumidifier ready

With humid summer days on the way, now's the time to make sure you have an operating dehumidifier to combat musty odors. Dehumidifiers operate most

efficiently when their coils are clean. To clear dust and other debris, remove screws on the cover, lift the casing and go over the coils with a soft brush.

If the unit has an air filter, wash it in warm water with a little hand dishwashing detergent or white vinegar, rinse and let dry. Also wash out the bucket. Cleaning coils is usually an annual chore. Wash the filter monthly and the bucket every week or two — or even more often if mildew is a problem. If you need to buy a dehumidifier, you can find a good overview of features and options through the federal Energy Star program.

HOME IMPROVEMENT

IS YOUR BACKYARD BIRDHOUSE A DEATH TRAP?

How to give birds safe shelter

By Michael J. Coren
The Washington Post

I wanted to build a first-class home. Small enough to be cozy, but big enough to raise a family. I needed an ideal location, near a wooded area, with a natural supermarket nearby. And the design should be simple, crafted entirely out of wood. While I was worried about the cost, I needn't have been. I finished building mine for about \$5 in materials in an afternoon.

Soon, I hope, my new home will host a family of pygmy nuthatches, tiny songbirds with slate gray wings and a high-pitched call reminiscent of squeezing a rubber ducky.

Humans are known for destroying the habitat of our wild neighbors. But we can excel at creating it. My new birdhouse is just one example.

After decades studying their avian subjects, ornithologists have designed structures catering to the needs of hundreds of species ranging from box homes for barn owls to simple baskets for mourning doves tucked into tree branches.

Birds, as you might have heard, are in trouble. North America's birds have seen a staggering loss of 3 billion breeding adults, or nearly 30% of the population, over the last half-century, according to eBird, a crowdsourced database of bird observations managed by the Cornell Lab of Orni-



MIKE COREN — THE WASHINGTON POST

The author builds a new nest box out of scrap wood for nuthatches in the garage of his home in San Francisco.

thology.

Humans have stripped the landscape of large, dead trees where cavity-nesting birds make their homes. That's left many birds homeless in habitats otherwise suitable for them. While finding shelter is not birds' only challenge — pes-

ticides, introduced predators, habitat loss and glass collisions rank highly — more and better homes can slow losses and help declining populations rebound.

"Nest boxes are especially important in habitat where lots of trees are missing," says Jack Dumbacher,

curator of ornithology at the California Academy of Sciences. "Most urban and suburban areas could definitely use them."

But things can go wrong. Nest boxes and structures designed poorly can entice predators, overheat baby birds or encourage over-

crowding. That leads to birds ignoring and abandoning potential homes or, worse, entering death traps.

Here's a guide to creating first-class bird accommodations:

What is a nest box?

Nest boxes or birdhouses

recreate habitats provided by cavities in dead trees for nesting, roosting and perching. Not all birds need nest boxes. In North America, only about 85 species, less than half of those typically living in natural forests, use cavities. But for many, these shelters can be

essential to their survival.

Hundreds of other bird species that don't nest in cavities can still use structures of some kind, from shelves mounted on the side of your house to raised platforms hundreds of feet up for birds of prey.

The poster child for the birdhouse success are Eastern bluebirds, a species similar to robins except with blue plumage and rusty-colored throats. By the mid-20th century, populations of this songbird were on the decline across the country, crowded out by European starlings and house sparrows, aggressive introduced species. But campaigns to build nest boxes in the 1960s, often designed to deter the larger European starling with slightly smaller openings, eased this competition. Ever since, Eastern bluebird numbers have been recovering, and the global breeding population now stands at 23 million.

Today, if you erect a box for bluebirds in the morning, the birds may fly into it the same day, says Robyn Bailey, who manages research and education for the Cornell lab's NestWatch program.

But mimicking natural habitats — tree tops or hollows that can take more than a century to develop — is not always easy. Even minute differences — as little as one-eighth of an inch in the width of the entrance hole, less than the thickness of two quarters — can spell the difference between excluding one species and welcoming another.

Materials also matter. Early designs were sometimes made from plastic, chemically treated wood or other harmful materials. Some can overheat, while others offer easy access to pests or predators such as feral cats, snakes and mammals. At worst, these become "ecological traps," structures that attract species with the promise of a safe home to nest, but ultimately

harm animals' survival.

Dumbacher recalls one row of evenly spaced, exposed Eastern bluebird nest boxes along a farmer's fence line that became easy pickings for a bear. The animal wiped out the entire row. He recommends not placing nest boxes too close together, and offering more natural camouflage.

Doing it right doesn't have to be hard — if you know how. Luckily, there's NestWatch.

The bird monitoring program uses volunteers to track more than 282,000 nests, offering ornithologists essential information about where birds lay their eggs and how successful they are at raising their young. It also offers a tool for you to find the right home for the right bird in your neighborhood, even offering blueprints so you can become a master architect for the avian world.

How to build a nest box

I started with a virtual tour of the idealized birdhouse's features, such as a sloped roof, recessed floors, drainage and ventilation holes, and entrances protected against predators. Then I fired up NestWatch's interactive tool, adding my ZIP code and local landscape, to generate a list of suitable birds and their ideal housing.

I started simple. I chose one of my favorite birds, the mourning dove, whose melodic triplet, coo-oo, coo-oo, coo-oo, is the soundtrack of my childhood. The species, also called turtle doves, are on a mysterious decline, but they're easy to host.

Using this blueprint, I cut out a simple wire-mesh circle from hardware cloth (available in any hardware store), then snipped out a pie-shaped piece. By bringing the ends together, I formed a cone serving as a nesting basket.

To finish the home, a



PHOTO COURTESY OF QUALITY OF LIFE ADULT DAY HEALTHCARE CENTER IN AUBURN HILLS

Birdhouses come in all shapes and sizes.

male dove brings twigs, pine needles and grass stems to the female, who weaves a flimsy nest out of the materials. Parents spend about a month incubating the eggs and feed the hatchlings before they fly off on their own.

I placed it in the crotch of a tree branch, securing it with wire (though doves will nest amid foliage, gutters, eaves or on the ground). If I wanted to invite them to nest on the walls of my house, then I could attach this nest shelf, beloved by robins and swallows, as well.

But I had grander visions. For my next project, I chose a classic nest box: A wooden enclosure with four walls and a roof that can host a variety of species. Using a

single 4-foot piece of scrap lumber left over from a remodel, I sawed and nailed six pieces to make an 11-by-8-inch redwood palace. The entrance hole, precisely one inch in diameter, can welcome wrens, chickadees, titmice or nuthatches, but exclude larger house sparrows, a competitor European species.

I plan to mount this on a pole for extra protection, although any live or dead tree will do, and install bird-friendly glass films or markings to avoid bird strikes. (You can read about the finer points of birdhouse placement and predator protection here).

Move-in-ready

How hard was it to build a nest box? Pretty easy. The

whole process took a bit over an hour.

How much did it cost? Around \$5. Everything I used was either in my garage or borrowed.

Tool libraries are also excellent. If you buy everything you need new, it can get pricey. But if you team up with neighbors and divide the costs, the project can be a cheap weekend adventure, especially for kids.

What's next? I wish I had built my bird starter homes years earlier. But with most species just starting to nest this spring, it's perfect timing to build out an avian real estate empire.

First, I'll see who moves into my two existing homes, join NestWatch to contribute my findings and perhaps even install a cam-

era to watch generations of birds hatch.

Having furnished shelter, I'll focus on food. In many places, birds suffer from a dearth of edible plants and insects. Climate change is making plants bloom and fruit earlier, shifting the timing of the food supply and potentially hurting migrating and late-nesting birds.

My ongoing tidy wildlands project, converting a portion of my yard into a riot of native plants, should help attract bugs and stock the buffet. Raising a single brood of chicks can require 9,000 caterpillars.

If I still need more projects, I'll graduate to advanced bird architecture: the spacious accommodations of a barn owl.

HOME IMPROVEMENT

The best eco-friendly home improvements you can do for less than \$100

By Michael J. Coren
The Washington Post

What if you only had \$100 to invest in a cheaper, cleaner home? Or \$10? Or even just \$1?

The conversation about cutting your emissions is often about big-ticket items: stoves, furnaces, cars and other changes. But millions of people are neither ready nor able to spend thousands of dollars. What if you didn't need to?

I asked energy experts, efficiency engineers and readers about how to get the biggest climate bang for your buck, whether you rent or own your home. I wanted investments that turned a few dollars into a fistful of them while cutting emissions within a few months or sooner.

I was not disappointed. There's money just lying around your house squirreled away in floor joists, behind air ducts and even under the bedspread. You just need to know where to look. I've cataloged the best ideas to invest in the climate — and your comfort — by price, from \$100 down to zero. And I'm sure there are many more. Send me your best at climatecoach@washpost.com.

Here are 10 improvements you can make for under \$100:

Install storm windows

Cost: Starts around \$80 per window.

Why it works: Millions of homes still have inefficient, single-pane windows. Replacing them with double-paned windows is cost-effective — but pricey, as much as \$1,000 each to



PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

Converted space is only livable if the climate within the attic can be controlled so it's cool in the summer and warm in the winter.

buy and install. Storm windows let you achieve similar results at one-third the cost.

Storm windows are aluminum frames with high-efficiency coated glass that permanently fit over your existing windows, either inside or outside, and blend in with your home's existing architecture. They can be fixed or slid over your window so you can open and close them. They can save you 10% to 30% in heating and cooling costs, says Christian Kaltreider, a researcher at Pacific Northwest National Laboratory

(PNL), one of the Energy Department's research centers. This can deliver \$100 to \$300 in annual savings.

Push your lawn mower

Cost: Starts around \$70.

Why it works: Stuck cutting grass behind a belching engine? First, plant a tidy wildland — a mostly natural yard with only a small area of grass you have to mow. Next, try a push reel mower. Lauren, a Climate Coach reader, bought hers for \$70 in 2017 and hasn't spent a dime since.

"Every time I use it I

think to myself, 'If only more people knew how great these things are!'" she wrote. "It is great exercise and takes care of the lawn without using any fuel. My kids and all of the neighborhood kids love using it. ... It does the job!"

I was hard-pressed to find one on Google Shopping that didn't have four- or five-star reviews.

Have an attic? Pitch a tent

Cost: \$60 to \$150.

Why it works: The sim-

ple devices are usually made of nylon, insulation and Velcro, and fit over the attic opening. They cover the drafty space created by a poorly sealed ceiling access to your attic, usually with stairs.

Every time your heating or cooling system turns on, you're pushing pressurized air out of your home. If there's a gap where your stairs enter the attic, air will rush out there. A simple insulation cover cuts heat loss dramatically by stopping leaks while keeping out insulation and dust

particles that might drift down.

Close your chimney

Cost: \$30 to more than \$200.

Why it works: Fireplaces and old furnaces vent outdoors. If your chimney or flue isn't sealed off when not in use, says Kaltreider, it's a clean shot for all your warm air to leave your home. A simple and inexpensive fix is rigging up your own seal by inserting a well-fitted piece of insulating material or buying one of the many options of chimney seals or dampers available online. These can range from cast iron plates or doors that sit inside your chimney to top-sealing ones that cap the top. There are also draft stoppers made out of flexible material.

You won't be able to burn anything in your fireplace while the damper is in, but it will prevent air from leaving your flue and eliminate drafts to keep things warm.

Manage phantom loads

Cost: Starts around \$30.

Why it works: Your house is filled with vampires, devices that suck power even when they're not turned on. The average home has about 40 of them, from plasma TVs to printers. They consume 5% to 10% of the nation's energy, according to Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, and generate 1% of global carbon emissions.

How do you know what's sucking power? Lawrence Berkeley has a chart of all the appliances' standby electricity consumption

from about seven watts for a TV set-top box to four watts for a stereo. You can also measure it yourself using a plug-in power consumption meter or Wi-Fi smart plugs. While not much on their own, these loads can be like adding an extra week or month to your utility bill.

Smart strips or plug-load controllers can help fix that. These power strips — essentially regular power strips with timers or digital controls — ensure power is cut when the device isn't in use overnight or during other periods. The devices can save you as much as \$2,000 over a decade. That's a much better return than investing in the S&P 500.

Electric blankets are hot

Cost: Start around \$35.

Why it works: A \$500 “micro-heat pump” — an ultra-efficient free-standing or window unit — can keep you warm while saving money by heating or cooling one room rather than the entire home. But if you want something cheaper to stay warm after turning down the central thermostat at night, try heated blankets and mattress pads. You won't know they're there, and you'll sleep toasty through the winter. Since these draw 50 to 200 watts, similar to an old incandescent lightbulb, the cost to run them will be less than \$20 a year at average U.S. electricity prices.

Switch to LEDs

Cost: Starts at \$1.

Why it works: The latest generation of LED bulbs are 90% more efficient than incandescent bulbs, and they're cheaper and more reliable than earlier versions. You'll have plenty of hues to pick from including amber and daylight.

“If you're not sure if a fixture can be replaced [with an LED],” says Edward Louie, an energy-efficiency engineer at PNNL, “the an-



PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO EDITORIAL SERVICES

A push mower is a great way to get your kids involved, too.

swer is yes. For pretty much every single fixture, there's a way to do it.”

Declare war on drafts

Cost: A few bucks to several hundred dollars.

Why it works: If you're heating or cooling your house, drafts are your enemy. Heating and cooling typically consume 30% of your utility bill. “If you only have \$100 to apply for home improvement, that might be the place,” says Louie. Luckily, it's cheaper if you're willing to put in a little elbow grease.

▪ Start with door sweeps. A three-foot length of vinyl, rubber or foam (\$9.93) can pay for itself in one month by preventing air from es-

caping under your door.

▪ Window weatherstripping — a strip of insulation for leaky windows — delivers similar benefits with rubberized v-strips, felt or self-adhesive foam tape. A \$5 window insulation kit — a transparent shrink film between the frame and the window panes — can increase window insulation values by 90% for out-of-the-way windows, or if aesthetics aren't a top concern.

▪ A can of spray foam and tape are your friends if you're willing to get your hands dirty. You can apply metal tape (\$6.99) to leaky ducts and FilterLock plastic (\$9.99) to stop the furnace's hot air from leaking out and pollutants from getting in.

Under your ground floor, look for leaky rim joists, the foundation's wooden framing that supports your floorboards where cold air and moisture enter your home. Insulating these joists as the Energy Department recommends with rigid or spray foam can slash heat loss from the house's cold, drafty underside. Spray foam cans start at around \$10. You'll pay more for a big job, but the savings should more than cover your costs, says Louie.

Shut your dryer vent

Cost: Free.

Why it works: Your dryer vent blows hot air outdoors. The duct's backflow preventer can get stuck in the

open position allowing cold air back into the house. If so, flip it back. If broken, a new one runs at just a few dollars.

Turn down your water heater

Cost: Free.

Why it works: It took me three years to realize I was incinerating hundreds of dollars by not turning down my water heater to 120 degrees, as the Energy Department recommends. It not only lowers the risk of scalding — 140-degree water leads to serious burns within three seconds — it can save more than \$400 annually. While hotter temperatures were once advised

to reduce the risk of legionella bacteria, which can lead to pneumonia, the risk is considered “very slight.”

If you have a suppressed immune system or chronic respiratory disease, the Energy Department says you may consider higher temperatures. But water temperatures of 120 degrees are “considered safe for the majority of the population,” according to the agency.

“It's the best home improvement I made this year,” Geoff Fowler, The Washington Post's technology columnist told me. Turn the knob on your water heater's thermostat setting to 120 degrees or the “hot” setting on some older models.

HOME IMPROVEMENT



PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO EDITORIAL SERVICES

It's hard to get a concrete resurfacer to stick well for years to old concrete, and coating old concrete with paint is even riskier.

Can I patch and paint my damaged concrete porch?

By Jeanne Huber
Special to The Washington Post

Q: When we added handrails to our front entry last summer, the contractor had to extend the bottom steps to meet code requirements for the rail supports. The new concrete isn't the same color, so I would like to paint the entry. The older

concrete was resurfaced a few years ago with what looks to be a softer material. As I was power washing the walkway, pieces of the resurfaced material gave way, exposing the original concrete. Should I patch where the power washing pulled up the resurfaced material before painting, or should I resurface all of the concrete to one color?

A: It's hard to get a concrete resurfacer to stick well for years to old concrete, and coating old concrete with paint is even riskier. So patch the holes and evaluate the color — then determine the best next step. If the patches dry to a color that's similar to the previous resurfacing material, you might want to simply resurface the lower step and con-

sider the job done.

You could use a concrete patching product to fill the divots, but in this case, it's smarter to use a resurfacing material. Patching with a resurfacer allows you to evaluate how well the color matches. It's possible to tint resurfacers, but to achieve a good color match you would probably need to prepare numerous test samples, then fig-

ure out an accurate way to scale up from a test sample of just a few tablespoons to make the same color with a much larger amount. So just patch with the resurfacer in the color that the manufacturer created.

Concrete resurfacers are basically Portland cement, sand and polymers. You add water, as with any concrete mix. The poly-

mers make the new layer more durable and better at bonding to the old concrete. The size of the sand grains determines how thin the coating can be; a general rule with concrete is that the largest particles should be no bigger than 1/5 the thickness of the final layer. Most resurfacers contain very fine sand because they are designed for applications as

thin as 1/16 of an inch. But for patching holes, where the edges help contain the patch, the material can be up to ½-inch thick.

Before you patch, scrub the divots with a wire brush to remove any loose sand grains and grime, then rinse thoroughly. While the concrete is still wet (or after rewetting it if it has dried), mix a small amount of resurfacer with just enough water to make a clay-like putty that you can push into the divots. Use a plastic putty knife or even a gloved hand. Scrape the patches flush with the surrounding concrete. To make the texture match the surrounding surface, lightly brush with an old toothbrush or other tool.

Read the instructions on whatever product you buy; some resurfacers need to be misted with water for 24 hours or more to harden well because the chemical reaction that cures concrete stops when the mixture dries. For a small job like yours, a spray bottle would work well. For larger projects, use a hose with a nozzle that has a mist setting.

Once the patches dry completely, evaluate the color. If they blend in fairly well, you might want to skim-coat just the whole lower step with the resurfacer. It would save you from having to deal with tricky details, such as masking around the door trim and what appears to be a drain in the center of the entryway.

But if the patches don't blend in, decide whether to resurface the entire entryway or paint. There isn't a significant reason to resurface everything and then paint. Just do one or the other.

You mention that the earlier resurfacer seems to be softer than regular concrete.

That's an anomaly as resurfacing products typically achieve strengths equal to or even slightly

above standard concrete mixes.

The power-washing might be the culprit; using a nozzle on a hose is safer, especially on exposed edges.

Or the installer might have added too much water to the mix to make it easier to spread or let the topping dry out too soon. The weird thing about water and concrete is that too much at the beginning is bad — it makes the finished concrete too porous because the excess water leaves little tunnels as it evaporates. But premature drying is also a problem because it stops the chemical reaction that makes concrete hard.

Whether you opt to resurface just the bottom step or the whole entryway, work on a warm day. The concrete needs to be at least 50 degrees, but not more than 90 degrees. Use no more water than the label recommends, or even a little less, depending on how much of the dry powder you used for patching. Apply with a squeegee. When the coating begins to harden, lightly sweep in one direction to add a little texture.

If you decide to paint, beware that it is likely to stick fine where there is a roof overhead, but it could peel where it is exposed to rain and snow (for example, on the lower step, if that's not under a roof).

When paint doesn't stick well to concrete, sometimes it's because moisture is coming up through the concrete from below. Test for that by tapping down a piece of relatively thick, clear plastic, such as a 3-inch square cut from a reclosable plastic bag. If moisture droplets appear over the next day, avoid painting.

Painted concrete can be very slick, so use paint with anti-slip ingredients. Follow all steps listed on the label, including etching and priming.

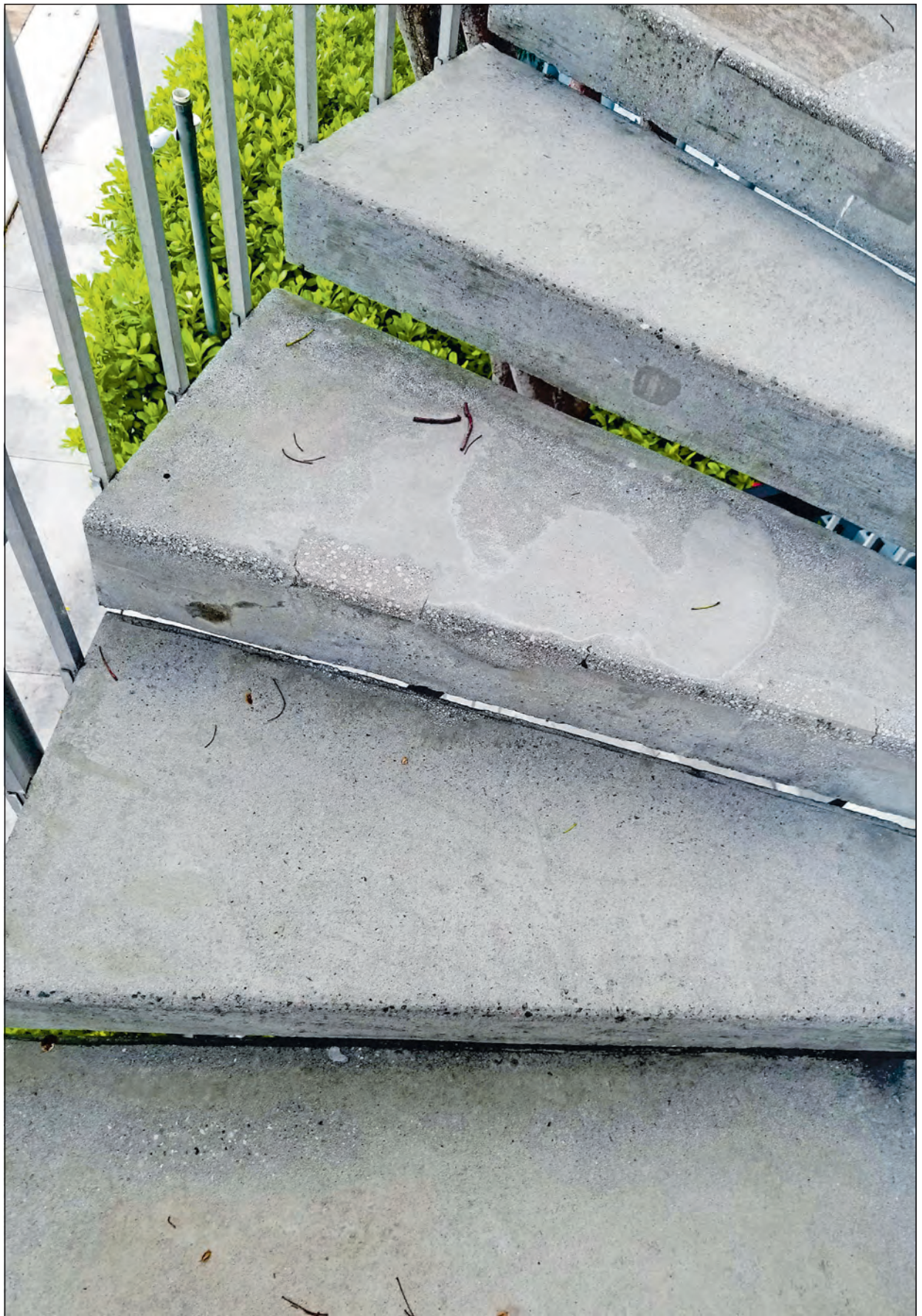


PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO EDITORIAL SERVICES

HOME IMPROVEMENT

Pine tree sap is damaging my deck. What can I do?

By Jeanne Huber

Special to *The Washington Post*

Q: We cut back our pine trees and sap dripped everywhere. It is now dry and staining the deck. Any suggestions?

A: Sap from trees — pines or others — is a real problem on decks, especially after it dries.

All trees produce sap. It's been called "the blood of trees" because it's what carries water and minerals from the roots to the tips of branches and distributes the sugars that the leaves produce. Some sap is sweet and edible — think maple syrup. Other sap is known mostly because of the thick, sticky resin it contains. The tree uses this resin to seal off insects and other damage. Some trees, especially pines, produce sap so rich in resin that harvesting and processing it for the adhesives, paper and pulp, and printing ink industries generates billions of dollars in revenue each year.

On a deck, though, sap of any kind is a pain. The sugars can feed the growth of mildew, and they become sticky and grab dirt. Resin-rich sap, including pine sap, is particularly sticky. It holds tenaciously to decks and other surfaces and hardens as it dries, becoming very difficult to remove.

Regular cleaning goes a long way toward removing sap from decks when it's easiest to dislodge. A bit of clear hand dishwashing soap in water and a fine-bristle brush or a sponge mop is safe on all kinds of deck surfaces, provided you rinse thoroughly with water from a hose. If you want to use a deck cleaner instead of dishwashing soap, check the label to make sure it's suitable for the type of decking you have. Products that work on wood or composites of wood and plastic may damage decking made or capped with PVC plastic. The opposite is also true. Work in sections so the

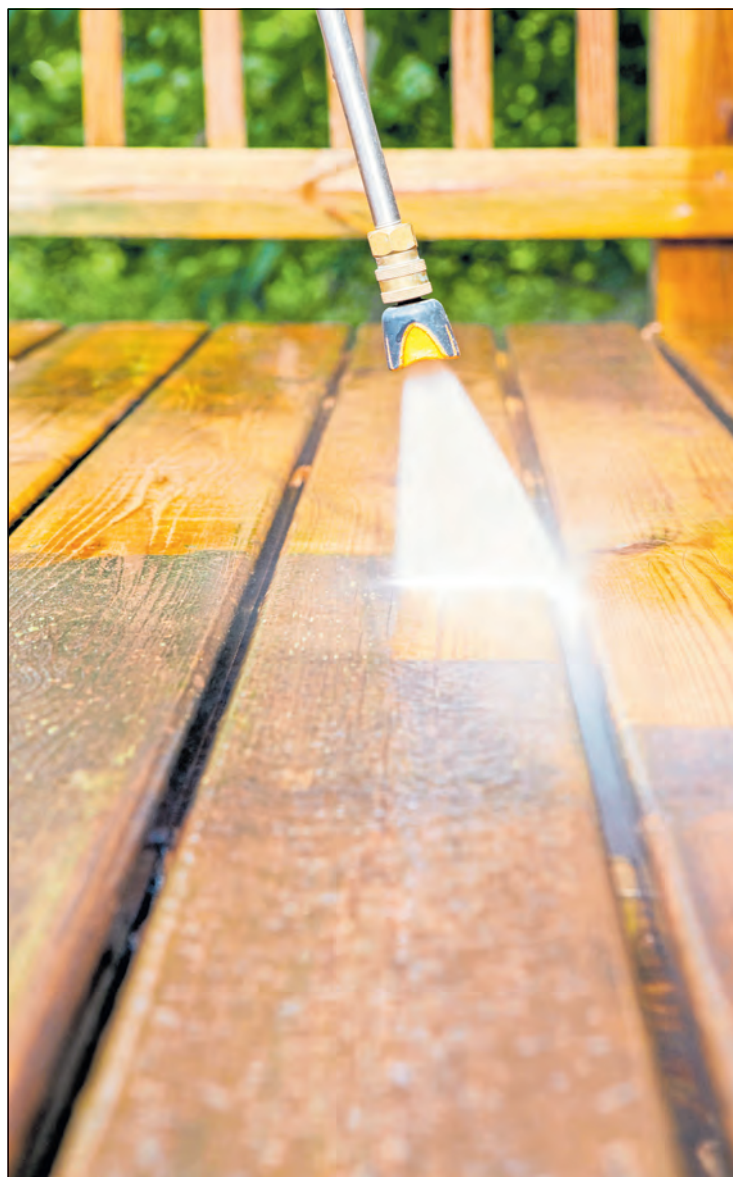


PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO EDITORIAL SERVICES

Regular cleaning goes a long way toward removing sap from decks when it's easiest to dislodge.

soapy water doesn't dry before you rinse, and have some old towels handy to sop up standing rinse water.

But with hardened sap — and even fresh sap from pines — this probably won't be enough. Your best option depends on the type of decking you have.

If you have a wood deck, try using a little turpentine to dissolve the resin, suggested a customer care representative for Olympic, a brand of PPG Archi-

tectural Finishes. Turpentine should not damage any of the finishes, she said, but she cautioned to always test first in a small, inconspicuous area to make sure.

You'll find advice online about using denatured alcohol to dissolve sap on wood decks. Olympic does not recommend that, both because it's less effective than turpentine and because it can soften some deck finishes, the customer service representa-

But with hardened sap — and even fresh sap from pines — this probably won't be enough. Your best option depends on the type of decking you have.

tive said.

Other advice online says to use undiluted Murphy Oil Soap because the oil in it will dissolve pine pitch. Not so, said a customer service representative for Colgate Palmolive, which owns that brand. She said the soap can be diluted in plenty of water and used to clean a deck that has a finish or has been sealed within the last five to seven years, but the soap should never be used undiluted. Also, the company debunks the idea that oil in the soap dissolves pitch. In the FAQ section of the Murphy Oil Soap website, the answer to the question of whether there is oil in the soap is: "No, there is no oil in Murphy Oil Soap. Although Pine oil is used as the raw material, once the ingredients are transformed into soap, no 'free oil' remains in the final product."

For a composite deck, the best approach depends on whether you have something made of a mixture of wood fibers and plastic that has the same consistency throughout or capped decking, which adds a plastic shell around the wood-and-plastic mixture. Formulas vary, so if you know the specific brand you have, check with the manufacturer. Otherwise, always test an inconspicuous place first.

Trex, which switched to making only capped decking around 2010, recommends Citra Solv to remove hardened sap on its capped decks. Moisten a sponge with a diluted solution, rub until the sap dissolves, then thoroughly rinse until the water runs clear, a customer-service representative said.

For older decks with uncapped composite boards, Trex doesn't have any fail-safe suggestions. You could try placing a bag of ice over the dried pitch,

which may make it possible to peel off the pitch without damaging the boards, the Trex representative said. Or try using a little GooGone Goo & Adhesive Remover to see if it softens the sap enough so you can scrape it off. "Use a very light application," she said. "Just on the sap and not the surrounding boards. But test it first in an inconspicuous place." It might not work, though, or it might be too time-consuming if you have extensive sap deposits.

In that case, your only option is to figure out a way to scrape off the deposits without damaging the decking. Plastic razor blades sold by Lee Valley are soft enough to use on nonstick surfaces and automobile paints and would be less likely to dig into composite decking than a metal scraper would be. The plastic blades come in orange or yellow — the orange style being softer and more flexible.

And if you have a PVC deck — all plastic, without any wood fibers? Use a deck cleaner that's labeled as safe on PVC, said Jeronimo Ramirez, who sells TimberTech's Azek PVC and capped composite decking through Advantage Lumber.

If the sap is fresh, wait 15 minutes after diluting and spreading the cleaner as the label advises; if the sap is more than a few days old, wait longer, Ramirez said. He then rinses with a power washer. Or use a natural fiber scrub brush and a hose for rinsing, as instructions for TimberTech Composite Deck Cleaner suggest.

Above all, Ramirez said, do not use vinegar — a sap-softening remedy that works well on car windows. Vinegar eats into PVC and makes sap stains on this kind of decking permanent, he said.

HOME IMPROVEMENT

Why is the paint peeling on my wood siding, and how do I repair it?

By Jeanne Huber

Special to *The Washington Post*

Q: We had aluminum siding removed in late spring 2021 and found most of the wood siding underneath was good. We replaced some and had the house painted. But the paint is already peeling — mostly on the older wood, which I suspect was not properly prepared. We need to repaint. What is the best way to prepare the wood? How many coats? And do we need a primer? The house is about 1,200 square feet and has one floor with an attic. Is this a possible DIY project?

A: You're right: Inadequate preparation probably is what caused the paint to peel.

Paint can fail for numerous reasons: The surface and paint were too hot or too cold. The siding was too wet. The surface was dirty. A first coat of paint wasn't dry before a second coat was applied. The list goes on.

When paint peels from the faces of siding boards, sometimes the cause is moisture from the interior working its way to the exterior to evaporate. The pressure of the water vapor pushes paint off the wood. If a steamy bathroom lacks ventilation, it's sometimes possible to outline the shape of the bathroom on the exterior wall by where the paint peels.

In your case, with paint peeling mostly along the lower edges of the boards and, to a lesser extent, along the ends. Paint typically begins to peel first in these areas partly because they are most prone to staying wet. Gravity carries moisture in a board to its lower edge, and the ends of boards soak up moisture because wood fibers are like straws, running lengthwise in the boards and open at the ends. But peeling paint that's just

a few years old also points to poor preparation, said a customer service representative for paint manufacturer Sherwin-Williams. The new paint probably didn't stick well to those areas because older paint there was already peeling, or paint there had worn away and left weathered wood as the base for new paint. Or the lower edges of the boards, which are prone to collecting dirt and harboring mildew, weren't completely clean and dry.

So what to do now? First, fix any underlying problems. For example, if the peeling is worse on a wall with a bathroom, add a fan vented to the outdoors. Or, if it's peeling where gutter water splashes onto the siding, channel the water farther from the house. If it's most noticeable on the north side of the house, where the siding is in the shade and doesn't dry as quickly between storms, trim or remove shrubs and vines close to the wall.

If your house was built before 1978 and you don't know whether the paint contains lead, either assume it does or hire a certified inspector to test for it. Homeowners who love DIY projects are comfortable working on ladders and have the time to devote to a big project can certainly paint a house, but dealing with lead paint that's peeling is a tipping point: Hire a contractor certified in lead-safe procedures.

For paint to stick to a surface where previous paint is peeling, all of the loose paint needs to be removed. "Scrape or sand whatever is willing to come off," said the Sherwin-Williams representative. If the paint has lead, that task needs to be done in a way that keeps the worker from breathing dust and spewing lead-laden dust into the yard or neighborhood. Some contractors invest in sanders with vacuums to capture virtually all of the dust.

The siding also needs to be



PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO EDITORIAL SERVICES

Paint can fail for numerous reasons: The surface and paint were too hot or too cold. The siding was too wet. The surface was dirty. A first coat of paint wasn't dry before a second coat was applied. The list goes on.

clean. Some painters start by power-washing the walls, which dislodges a lot of the loose paint. However, too high a pressure can erode the wood and make it harder for new paint to stick. It also pushes a lot of water into the wood, meaning more sunny days are needed to dry the wood before repainting. Other painters remove the loose paint, then wash the siding with a soft brush or sponge, a bucket of diluted detergent and a rinse from a hose.

Once the surface is scraped and clean, you can see what's left. If there is still intact paint or primer, you can probably just wait a couple of sunny days for the siding to dry and then repaint. To test whether the new paint will grip sufficiently to the old paint, researchers at the U.S. Department of Agriculture's

Forest Products Laboratory, in "Finishes for Exterior Wood," recommend painting a few small sections representative of the different exposed paint layers with exterior, water-based paint. Let them dry at least overnight. Then press an adhesive bandage onto each area and yank it off. If the sticky back is clean, you're good to go: Just repaint. If the new paint stuck to the tape, you should apply a primer before repainting. If the old paint also came off, strip all of the paint before proceeding — definitely a job for a pro, especially if there's lead paint.

Often, cleaning and scraping leaves patches of exposed wood. In this case, you should take additional steps. Paint does not stick well to weathered wood, but a little hand sanding removes the

loose fibers. Then coat the surface with a paintable water-repellent preservative, which will slow down moisture absorption in the wood and make the paint last longer. Be sure to use a product labeled as paintable, and avoid getting it on any adjoining surfaces that still have finish. Let the repellent dry for at least three days, then apply a primer to at least those areas and let that dry before repainting.

Another detail that can make a big difference is rounding over any sharp edges, such as borders between patches where paint peeled and the lower corner of siding boards. Paint on abrupt transitions and sharp corners is likely to be thin, so it cracks easily and lets in moisture. But feathering the edges and rounding over corners helps ensure that the new paint is uniformly thick, thus resistant to cracking.

If you need to prime, you can do just the problem areas or the whole house. In most cases, exterior water-based primer works fine. Oil-based primer is better, though, if you're dealing with a lot of weathered wood or if the siding has a lot of tannin and hasn't been painted or has tannin stains that seeped through the earlier paint, the Sherwin-Williams customer service agent said. Western red cedar and redwood, which are often used in siding, are high in tannins, which dissolve in water-based finishes and cause brown stains on the surface. An oil-based primer blocks this movement. (Tannin stains are a cosmetic issue; they don't cause paint to peel.)

Two coats of paint will last about twice as long as one, researchers at the Forest Products Laboratory found. That's a great deal, considering that the prep work needs to be done just once — provided you don't wait too long to finish the job.

LAWN

‘Backyarding’

Moving the party to the patio – with safety in mind

By Outdoor Power Equipment Institute

opei.org

“**B**ackyarding – the art of taking indoor activities to the outdoors – is a trend that has caught on. As winter begins to wind down, thoughts of playing in and working in our yards often kick into high gear.

Perhaps you are already dreaming of family gatherings, grilling and eating in your backyard. Or maybe you wish to add a yoga zone, design an outdoor movie theater, or build an agility course for your pet this year. Or perhaps this is the year you wish to add a pollinator garden or plant a vegetable or flower garden. Or are you hoping to get that outdoor office setup with extended WiFi?

Knowing the purpose of your yard and how it will meet the needs of your family and pets is a great start to getting “backyard ready” for these warmer weather activities. Also, knowing your climate zone and the mix of trees, shrubs, grass and flowering plants that will grow sustainably is key to designing a dream yard. After all, our yards are not only an oasis for family but also for wildlife and important pollinators such as birds, bees and butterflies.

Now is the time to start planning. Visit your nursery, plant centers, outdoor power equipment service dealers, and/or contact a landscaper, according to the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute.

“Think about how your yard can work best for you, your family, pets and community, but do it now,” says Kris Kiser, CEO and president of OPEI. “And while you’re getting it in top shape for warm weather, remember to

keep safety top of mind especially with your equipment and tools.”

Here are some tips from OPEI to get your backyard ready, safely and efficiently:

- Take stock of your outdoor power equipment to help you maintain your yard and make big jobs easier. A lawn mower will trim the grass, but perhaps you might need a cultivator for a garden, a chain saw to take down dead tree limbs, or a leaf blower to clear debris. Having the right equipment on hand can help you save time and effort if you don’t want to hire a professional.

- Follow equipment manufacturer’s guidance for safety and usage of all outdoor power equipment. Look over the manual for your equipment for a refresher on how to safely use it, and read the safety information on equipment manufacturer’s websites. Review how to shut on and off equipment and make sure safety features are working and have not been disabled. Never disengage or disable manufacturer-installed safety equipment.

- Remember to keep children and pets away from outdoor power equipment. No children on mowers.

- Do not mow in reverse, and avoid starting, stopping or turning a mower on a slope. Follow manufacturer guidance to the letter on mowing on slopes.

- Service equipment as needed and according to manufacturer’s directions. Well-maintained equipment will last longer and run more efficiently.

- Buy fresh fuel for gasoline-powered equipment and be sure you have matched the correct battery with the right charger. Only use batteries that are authorized for your equipment and do not use counterfeits.

- Before working in the yard, clear the area of dead limbs, sticks and debris. Inspect trees for damage and clear the work area.

By keeping this information in mind, you can get your yard in its best shape safely.

Safe equipment check

Spring is coming and homeowners are eager to get outside and spruce up their yards.

The Outdoor Power Equipment Institute (OPEI), an international trade association representing outdoor power equipment, small engine, utility vehicle, golf car and personal transport vehicle manufacturers and suppliers, reminds homeowners to keep safety in mind.

“Before you use a mower, trimmer, blower, power washer, chainsaw, pruner, portable generator or other piece of outdoor power equipment this season, it’s important to be up to date on handling and safety procedures,” said Kris Kiser, president and CEO of OPEI. “We’re all eager to get outside and enjoy our yards, but you also need to take the time to do maintenance to ensure your equipment operates safely for the season and is ready to get the job done.”

— Outdoor Power Equipment Institute

HERE ARE TIPS TO HELP

- Read your owner’s manual. Follow all guidelines for your outdoor power equipment and familiarize yourself with the controls. Review how to shut on, shut off and use the equipment safely. If you have lost your manual, look it up online (and save a copy on your computer for easy reference in the future).

- Inspect equipment. Check the air filter, oil level and the gasoline tank. Also check for loose belts and missing or damaged parts. Ensure all safety guards are in place. Replace any parts needed or take your equipment to a qualified service representative for servicing. If using electric equipment that relies on power cords, make sure cords are in good condition and not damaged.

- Protect your power by only using E10 or less fuel in gasoline-powered outdoor power equipment. With today’s higher ethanol content fuels, most manufacturers are recommending a fuel stabilizer be used, especially if you don’t use up all the gas purchased right away. Some gas stations may offer 15% ethanol (E15) gas or higher ethanol fuel blends, but any fuel containing more than 10% ethanol can damage, and is illegal to use, in small engine equipment not designed for it.

- Store fuel safely. Label your fuel can with the date of purchase and ethanol content of the fuel. Never put “old” gas in your outdoor power equipment. If you don’t know the date of purchase, dispose safely of the fuel

in the can and buy fresh fuel. Always store fuel out of the reach of children or pets and in approved containers. You should never leave fuel sitting in the gas tank of your equipment for more than 30 days as it may cause starting or running problems or damage.

- For battery-powered equipment, recharge your equipment only with the charger specified by the manufacturer. A charger that is suitable for one type of battery pack may create a risk of fire when used with another battery pack. Follow all charging instructions. Do not charge the battery pack or tool outside the temperature range specified in the instructions.

- Store batteries safely. When the battery pack is not in use, keep it away from other metal objects, like paper clips, coins, keys, nails, screws or other small metal objects, that can make a connection from one terminal to another. Shorting the battery terminals together may cause burns or a fire.

- Clean your equipment and store it in a dry place. Remove any dirt, oil or grass. Clean equipment will run more efficiently and last longer. Never store your equipment in a place that is damp or wet.

- Always keep kids and pets away when operating outdoor power equipment.

To learn more, visit opei.org. For information on safe fueling, see lookbeforeyouump.com.

LAWN

Adopt a 'master backyarder' mindset to maximize backyarding benefits when you have a small yard ... or none at all

By Outdoor Power Equipment Institute
opei.org

Even those living in an urban setting with a smaller yard — or no yard at all — can enjoy the benefits of backyarding, according to the TurfMutt Foundation, which advocates for the care and use of yards, parks and community green spaces.

“Thanks to smaller yards, community parks, and neighborhood green space, backyarding big even in small spaces is possible,” says Kris Kiser, president & CEO of the TurfMutt Foundation. “It takes a little planning and adopting what we like to call a ‘master backyarder’ mindset.”

This is terrific news since a recent survey conducted for the TurfMutt Foundation by The Harris Poll indicates that

backyarding is increasingly important to Americans. More than three-quarters of Americans who have a yard (76%) say the family yard space is one of the most important parts of their home, according to the poll. Additionally, nearly a quarter of Americans who have a yard (24%) say they spend more time in their yards now than before 2020.

The TurfMutt Foundation offers this advice for getting outside and enjoying green space when you have a small yard ... or no yard at all.

- Plant with purpose. Plan carefully and creatively to utilize every square inch of living landscape real estate in support of your lifestyle. Need a place for your pet to do her business? Plant a small patch of grass. Long to take work outside? Set up a table in an under-utilized side yard (complete with a living landscape backdrop,

of course) that can double as an outdoor dining area. Love nature? Plant a butterfly bush.

- Use plants to create privacy. Rather than putting up a fence in a small yard, consider a “living wall” of trees or shrubs. It will make your outdoor space feel bigger and offer support to backyard wildlife and insects. Win, win!

- Go vertical. Don't forget to incorporate vertical space into your planting plans. You can hang flower baskets on your fence or railing. A trellis laced with living vines is a gorgeous focal point. Green walls are all the rage and utilize blank wall space to create a living landscape feature.

- Utilize balconies & patios. Even if you don't have grass or any soil to plant in, you can utilize containers to plant flowers, herbs and even fruit and vegetables. There are also many planters available that at-

tach to balcony railings.

- Remember right plant, right place. Selecting the right plants for your lifestyle and climate is key to mastering a small backyard space. Consult the USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map for help selecting the best plants for your microclimate. This will not only ensure you end up with plants that will thrive with minimal upkeep, but they will also be best for supporting local pollinators.

- Enjoy community green space. Take your kids to the park for a study session. Walk the dog through the community green space at the end of your road. Plan a doggie playdate at the local dog park. These are all wonderful places to get a dose of Vitamin N(ature).

For more information, visit turfmutt.com.



PHOTO COURTESY OF OUTDOOR POWER EQUIPMENT INSTITUTE

Even those living in an urban setting with a smaller yard can enjoy the benefits of their backyard.



PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

Do a trial run camping in the backyard to gauge how kids react in advance and plan accordingly to make improvements.

LAWN

Springtime lawn care tips to achieve a landscape you're proud of

By Valerie Smith
Sod Solutions

With spring here, warmer weather signals plants to come out of dormancy and start flourishing again. Even if your lawn and garden never went fully dormant, you can still expect your home landscape to begin thriving with warmer temperatures.

Pretty soon, your lawn and garden will be full of color and activity again.

Consider these tips:

Begin mowing your lawn at the proper height again

The timing for which the first mow of the spring for your mature, established turfgrass widely varies depending on the area you live in. Grasses come out of dormancy differently depending on the environment and temperatures your area encounters.

Generally speaking, mid-March is about the time for you to begin your regimen for spring green-up and mowing. It's important to note that the first mow of the spring shouldn't take place while warm season grass is dormant.

Mowing heights vary for each grass type, but you should never remove more than a third of the leaf blade from any grass type. If you mow less than this, you may risk scalping the grass.

Lastly, a good tip for spring is to make sure your lawn mower blades are sharpened so that the mower blades neatly slice through the grass in place

of ripping them. If the grass blades aren't cut neatly, the mower is ripping them and opens the grass up to the possibility of disease.

Performing regular maintenance on your mower is good practice for the end of the mowing season or before spring takes place.

Start your lawn off right with the appropriate spring fertilizer

Spring is one of the most important times of the year to use fertilizer. Be careful when making your first fertilizer application of the year though. A lot of homeowners see their grass green up and immediately pull out the fertilizer and lawn mower. We advise that you typically wait until the last frost has hit.

If you fertilize your lawn and another frost hits, your grass will go right back into dormancy, and you'll have a harder time getting it to green up again. This does more harm than good.

Set up a spring irrigation schedule

Although dormant grass requires much less water than it would while it is actively growing, it will still need water. Once your grass starts to green up from winter dormancy, you should resume watering your lawn with about 1 inch of water per week including rainfall.

If you aren't sure how to measure how much water your lawn is receiving, an irrigation audit may be beneficial to you. Irrigation au-



PHOTO COURTESY OF SOD SOLUTIONS

With spring here, warmer weather signals plants to come out of dormancy and start flourishing again.

audits provide measurable information about how much water each area of your lawn is receiving within a given amount of time.

The next few tips discuss spring lawn treatment with fungicides, herbicides or insecticides. If any of these control products or fertilizers are granular, you will need to water the product in so that your lawn absorbs it.

When watering granular products in, you will already be watering your lawn with the appropriate amount of water during the week of application.

The same can be said with any liquid products as they are either products that attach to the end of your garden hose or require tank mixing with water.

Above all, read and follow label instructions thoroughly before watering any products in.

Control weeds with a pre- or post-emergent herbicide

Pre-emergents should be

applied during the spring when ground temperatures reach about 55 degrees Fahrenheit. A pre-emergent herbicide functions to prevent weeds from emerging from the surface of the soil, as its name suggests.

The exact dates for these applications differ depending on the area you live in, but generally speaking, pre-emergents should be applied between the beginning and middle of March in the spring.

Apply post-emergent herbicides throughout the spring as needed to control summer annual and perennial broadleaf weeds like crabgrass, goosegrass, sandspurs, dallisgrass, dandelion, chickweed, white clover, knotweed, spurge, dollarweed, doveweed and lespedeza.

Applied during the spring when ground temperatures reach about 55 degrees Fahrenheit. A pre-emergent herbicide functions to prevent weeds from emerging from the surface of the soil, as its name suggests.

Prevent disease as temperatures begin to warm up

If you notice any disease outbreaks, you may need to make applications of a systemic fungicide. Even if you don't have disease in your lawn, it's still good practice to apply it preventively to keep disease from taking over, especially if you've had disease in the past around this time.

Systemic fungicide applications should take place before you apply any spring fertilizer. If you have fungus in your lawn, the nitro-

gen found in fertilizers oftentimes feeds it and helps it spread. Apply a systemic fungicide and wait a few weeks before applying any fertilizer.

Read product labels thoroughly.

There are a few other optional things that can be done to help your lawn thrive in the spring.

Before the onset of summer heat, lawn patchwork and light top dressing with a sand and topsoil mix is a great way to recover any weak areas. Plugs can be purchased to fill in areas of the lawn with bare spots.

Aerating your lawn is also an ideal way to help deliver nutrients and really break up compacted soils. We typically recommend doing this once every couple of years. If you notice thatch that is thicker than ½ inch, dethatch in late May.

Spring maintenance tips somewhat differ from maintenance practices that take place during the rest of the year because the weather is starting to warm up and everything starts to turn green again.

Although cool season grass doesn't usually go dormant during the winters, snow in a lot of the areas up north starts to melt and your lawn will receive more sunlight. It is important to partake in spring maintenance so that you can set your lawn up for success for the rest of the year.

Valerie Smith is a content strategist with Sod Solutions. For more information, visit sodsolutions.com.

LAWN

How to plant grass seed to achieve green glory

By Valerie Smith
Sod Solutions

Seed is often cheaper than a full sod installation; however, the No. 1 issue with seeding is weed pressure since your seed will take time to become established and form a thick carpet of grass.

Our seed planting guide below will ensure that you go through all the necessary steps to provide you with an environment that promotes healthy seed growth and establishment.

Test the soil

The first step we recommend is testing your soil — before you apply chemicals to kill off old grass and before planting new seed. Your soil's health is what determines the overall health of your grass. Working from the ground up is the best way to ensure superior grass quality.

It also helps balance your soil's pH so that when you apply nutrients found in fertilizers, your grass is able to actually absorb them. In other words, if your soil's pH is off, nutrients won't be absorbed as effectively, meaning the fertilizer you apply may be a waste of money.

Taking a soil analysis and sending it to a laboratory is affordable, but typically takes about two weeks to complete depending on where you send it. Keep this timeframe in mind before planting seed so that you have enough time to receive results and determine what your soil needs.

Lastly, this step should be completed before applying a nonselective herbicide in step 2 below. Once applied, the chemicals in the herbicide may alter your soil pH temporarily before returning back to normal. Take a soil test before applying a nonselective herbicide for a more accurate reading.

Choose your seed

Selecting the type of grass seed for your lawn is probably one of the most enjoyable parts of the lawn installation process.

With that being said, be wary of picking grass solely for its aesthetic and beauty. Find the best grass seed for your home and make sure the grass can thrive in your environment

and climate first.

Cool-season grass stays green during the winter, so it's not uncommon to see a bermuda grass lawn overseeded with ryegrass seed.

Also, when selecting a type of grass seed, be sure to ask a professional about how much maintenance goes into the different types of grasses to see how much time, effort and money you'll have to put into it. Here is a list of some things to do and think about before selecting a new turfgrass:

- Research the area and climate you are located in.
- Familiarize yourself with the different grass characteristics.
- Understand the visual differences between grass colors, textures and other physical aspects.

Measure your planting area

The third step involves finding out how much seed you'll need to purchase. We recommend using the Area Calculator Tool (areacalculator.sodsolutions.com) to draw and measure how much surface area you'll need to cover.

- Start by entering your address.
- Draw an overlay shape for where you plan to install new seed.
- You can now move forward with this square footage number to compare seed prices.

Although the tool was originally meant to help homeowners discover how much sod they need, the tool provides you with information about how many square feet you'll need to cover, which can also be applied to seed.

Prepare your soil

When seeding a new lawn

This is one of the more important steps of the process. The success of the seed and new grass directly depends on the conditions in which it is planted. If the soil is bad, the seed will likely struggle to get the nutrients it needs for establishment. This is why it is important to test your soil.

Before installation, clear the area of any currently existing grass or weeds. If the soil is bad, the seed will likely struggle to get the nutrients it needs for establishment. It's almost guaranteed that weeds will compete with the germinating seed until your lawn becomes fully established. We recommend following these steps:

- Begin by making an application



PHOTO COURTESY OF SOD SOLUTIONS

Selecting the type of grass seed for your lawn is probably one of the most enjoyable parts of the lawn installation process.

of a nonselective herbicide or some other glyphosate-based product 10-14 days before seed planting takes place.

- Wait 3-4 days and then make a second application if the grass isn't dying quickly enough.
- Once your grass is dead, use a sod cutter or rototiller to remove the top layer of grass and debris.

When filling damaged or patchy areas

If you are planning on repairing bare spots with seed, rid the area of any problems that may exist first. These issues could include weeds, insects or disease. This can be as simple as pulling the weeds out by hand in the area or as difficult as treating the area with an herbicide, insecticide or fungicide.

Plant the seed and cover

Now that you've created an environment to successfully grow healthy seed, you can begin planting. A broadcast spreader or a drop spreader is definitely needed for larger lawns, but if you're going over smaller areas, a hand-held grass seed spreader will do the trick.

When planting the seed, use the recommended seeding rate on the back of the bag your seed came in. The time spent seeding your lawn depends on the size of your yard.

Another item we suggest using is straw or topsoil coating. If you're going to plant seed on the bare ground, it's smart to keep it somewhat pro-

tected from birds or weather.

You can also lightly rake the seed into the soil after planting to cover it up with a light coating of topsoil. Thin soil coverage helps with germinating. You can use topsoil, straw, mulch or peat moss for this reason.

Water and fertilize

Select a grass seed fertilizer that provides the necessary nutrients your soil may need according to the soil analysis results you should've received by now. Your new seed needs plenty of phosphorus at this time.

Phosphorus helps roots grow so that the new sod can establish successfully.

We recommend using Lawnifi's New Lawn Starter Box, which comes with three bottles of liquid grass seed fertilizer.

Grow, the first and second bottles of the New Lawn Starter Box, is especially useful during the establishment process. It serves to promote healthy root growth of newly planted seed by providing nutrients like phosphorus, potassium and carbon.

Apply the first bottle of Lawnifi Grow at half rate (only use half of the bottle). The soil should be moist 3-4 inches deep.

Post-planting care

For the next 10-20 days, water your newly planted seed about 1 inch deep into the soil's surface every day. Take rainfall into consideration. Use a sprinkler to mist over the surface of the soil so that it is moist, but not soggy.

We also recommend using the remainder of your New Lawn Starter Box in accordance with the application schedule during establishment. Once the seed starts to germinate, keep the top 2 inches of soil moist until grass reaches a mowing height of around 3 inches.

After that, decrease watering to twice per week and soak the soil about 6-8 inches deep. Then transition to a regular maintenance schedule based on the grass type you have selected.

When is the best time to plant grass seed?

The best time to plant grass seed

depends on the type of grass seed you use and where you're located. Generally speaking though, fall is the best time of the year to seed a cool-season turfgrass variety.

When is the worst time to plant grass seed?

The absolute worst time of year to plant grass seed is during the winter and summer. Even if you have a cool season variety of grass seed, the chances of it sticking around and not being washed away in the snow are pretty low.

It's not recommended during the summer either because cool-season grass seed is dormant during the summer. You'll spend a lot of time and money irrigating it.

Final tips

We wish you success on your planting project, but before you get started, here are some final tips:

Timing matters

- If there is a forecast for heavy rains, winds, storms or hurricanes, hold off on seeding until afterward so it doesn't wash the seed out.

- Don't seed too late in the year (December) because the seed won't germinate, and you won't get a lot of growth.

- Seeding too early in the summer is also a bad idea because it'll be too hot. Seeding in temperatures ranging from the 50s-80s is the recommended time.

- Most consumer products will specify the best time to lay seed on the bag.

Things to look out for

- The biggest things you want to keep an eye out for are weeds and diseases. For example, ryegrass placed in humid or wet areas encourages diseases. Rye is more susceptible to gray leaf spot and disease in general.

- If you seeded damaged areas in your lawn caused by diseases in the first place, be sure the disease is completely gone before applying more seed to the damaged area.

Valerie Smith is a content strategist with Sod Solutions. For more information, visit sodsolutions.com.

LAWN

LAWN 101

Common questions answered

By Valerie Smith
Sod Solutions

For homeowners, there are few projects that make more of an impact than fresh, new sod. After all, who doesn't want to highlight their home with a gorgeous, lush lawn? Choosing, installing and caring for new sod isn't foolproof though, and comes with many questions. Here are some of the most asked questions that homeowners have about new lawns:

Q: How much does a new lawn cost?

There are a couple of different factors that play into pricing for a new lawn. Costs depend on who you're buying from, the type of grass you're installing, the size of the pallet and where you live.

Like any other product, grass varieties are not created equal. More expensive varieties often have elevated features while cheaper options may not (think drought and shade tolerance, wear resistance, green-up ability, etc.). You get what you pay for.

Location also plays a role. Sod needs to be trucked to your home, so your proximity to a farm provider also impacts the cost.

Grass is often quoted to homeowners by the pallet, so understanding pallet sizing is the key to the ordering process.

Q: What is the best sod to use on a new lawn?

Believe it or not, there's actually a lot that goes into selecting the perfect grass for your landscape. First and foremost, you should understand the difference between warm and cool-season sod and which varieties grow near you. Certain

grass types only perform so well in specific locations.

Here are some other things to consider when selecting a grass type for your lawn:

- Your lawn's current condition — this includes shade, the type of soil you have or if you have children or pets. Thinking about a grass type that tolerates your lawn's conditions can play a huge factor in the overall success of your lawn.

- The type of "look" you prefer — do you want grass with really wide blades or finer blades? What shade of green are you looking for when the lawn is in its healthiest state?

- Maintenance — the amount of maintenance your grass requires is a huge deal. If you're looking for something that requires less mowing, consider looking for a grass that grows slowly or spreads laterally. If you want to spend less money on your irrigation bill, select a drought-tolerant lawn.

Q: What is the best grass seed to use on a new lawn?

There are a few items to consider when choosing a grass seed for your lawn, but the two most important are probably your home's location and the features you desire in a lawn.

There are warm season and cool season grasses, so depending on where your home falls on the map, it's important to pick a variety appropriate for your home's climate.

Secondly, you'll want to prioritize the features you desire the most in a grass. For example, is a low-maintenance yard more important than the look and feel of the grass? Centipede lawns are called "the lazy man's grass" for a reason — you don't have to do much to keep it alive.

Q: Should I install sod myself or use a professional?

Installing sod yourself is the less ex-

pensive way to go, but a professional will ensure the sod is installed correctly. With that being said, this decision largely depends on personal preference.

If you have the help of friends and family, installing sod yourself can be painless. If you're installing the sod alone and you're covering a large area, a professional might be a better option.

Regardless, we think it's best to always know how to install sod properly, even if you've hired a professional company. That way, you'll at least be able to recognize if the process is being done correctly.

Q: How do I plant a new over older grass?

In short, you don't. If there is old grass in the way of your fresh sod, it is essential to the health of the new sod that you properly remove it before laying the new sod. Otherwise, the new sod won't have a place to establish roots and it'll eventually die.

To remove sod the right way, you'll need to kill it chemically with glyphosate or some other nonselective herbicide and then cut away the remains with either sod cutters or a shovel. It's important to take this step at least 10-14 days before installation takes place. This gives the grass enough time to die so you can remove it beforehand.

Q: How do I remove old sod?

To remove old sod, you have two choices: use a sod cutter for efficiency or a shovel for smaller areas. Before starting, apply a nonselective herbicide like glyphosate to ease removal by killing the grass, but be mindful of its potential to harm other plants. Sod cutters, while initially daunting, are user-friendly and rentable from hardware stores. Shovels are an option for less extensive work, but for larger projects, sod cutters are recommended for their ease and speed.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF METRO EDITORIAL SERVICES

Like any other product, varieties of sod are not created equal. More expensive varieties often have elevated features while cheaper options may not.



PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO EDITORIAL SERVICES

If you have the help of friends and family, installing sod yourself can be painless. If you're installing the sod alone and you're covering a large area, a professional might be a better option.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SOD SOLUTIONS

Like any other product, grass varieties are not created equal. More expensive varieties often have elevated features while cheaper options may not.

Q: When is the best time to lay sod?

Sod can be successfully installed any time of the year, but the best time to lay sod is actually early to mid-fall. This varies slightly depending on where you live. Early fall allows for time for the sod to establish before the hot and often dry summer. You can also install sod in the spring, summer and winter seasons.

Q: When is the best time to plant grass seed?

The best time to plant grass seed depends on if you're planting cool-season or warm-season grass seed. You can plant grass seed any time of the year, but fall is the best time to seed a lawn with a cool-season turfgrass variety.

Q: When is the best time to plant grass plugs?

Like grass seed, the best time to plant grass plugs largely depends on where you live and the climate you live in. Spring is the best time to install grass plugs because temperatures aren't exceedingly high yet. Summer is the worst time because of the amount of water you'll need to use to help the plugs establish during

the hottest time of the year. Overwatering can also lead to disease outbreaks, which is the last thing your newly establishing plugs need to endure as they grow.

Q: What fertilizer should I use on new sod?

Your best bet for nourishing your lawn with everything it needs doesn't have to be difficult. Any fertilizer heavy in nitrogen is usually the wrong answer. Your lawn needs phosphorus more than anything as this nutrient promotes root growth while the new sod establishes in its permanent location. If you know how to read a fertilizer label, you'll have an easier time selecting a fertilizer with a good amount of phosphorus.

Q: When do I mow new sod?

About two weeks after installation, lightly tug on the sod to see whether roots have begun to establish. If little white roots have begun to take, it's time for the first mow. If not, wait a few more days and check again.

Q: What height should my new lawn be mowed at?

It's best to mow at the highest setting your mower offers during the first mow. Once the first 30 days after installation have passed, begin mowing at your grass type's ideal height.

Q: When do I water newly laid sod?

Most lawn care experts recommend that you water your new sod on the first day of installation as this will keep your sod from drying out around the edges. There are a lot of exposed edges along the pieces of your sod that dry out fairly easily, so watering more frequently and thoroughly during establishment is suggested.

Q: When can I apply control products on my new lawn?

For new sod, avoid chemical treatments at first; hand-pull weeds until after 3-4 mows, starting two weeks post-installation. Then, spot-treat weeds with a compatible selective post-emergent herbicide. For lawns previously damaged by insects, pre-treat old sod and soil with insect control products, waiting 3-4 weeks post-installation before treating new sod. If new sod arrives with pests, treat them immediately. For disease, verify it's

not drought damage, reduce watering, and apply a contact fungicide every two weeks, and treat the entire lawn with a systemic fungicide for long-term protection.

Q: How do I care for new sod planted in shade?

It's important to select a shade-tolerant turfgrass variety if you're installing sod in shady locations. Some of the top shade-tolerant turfgrasses include red fescue, tall fescue, St. Augustine and fine-bladed zoysia grasses. Breeders are constantly improving new turfgrass varieties, so there may be exceptions to the above list of shade-tolerant grasses.

Generally speaking, though, we suggest Palmetto St. Augustine, CitraBlue St. Augustine, Innovation Zoysia and EMPIRE Zoysia.

With any shade-tolerant variety, be sure to budget for several applications of systemic fungicide per year. Additionally, note that to avoid disease it is best to water less in shaded areas compared to areas that receive full sun.

Valerie Smith is a content strategist with Sod Solutions. For more information, visit sodsolutions.com.

LAWN

The battle against weeds never ends. Choose your weapon accordingly

By **Tovah Martin**

Special to The Washington Post

Weeding comes with the turf for gardeners. We all spend way too much time wrestling with them, and we all wish for a magic solution to get rid of them. There is none. You have to just pick your weapon (mine is a Korean hand plow) and go to battle.

What makes a plant a weed? That's your call. Basically, it's any plant growing where you don't want it, whether that's an invasive shrub, an overenthusiastic vine or an interloper choking out your daisies.

Sometimes we let weeds remain, but doing so can be dicey. For example, because nettles are the larval host for several butterflies — including the red admiral, Eastern comma, Milbert's tortoiseshell and question mark — I keep a stand of my property, but I draw the line at allowing them to infiltrate the garden (and they certainly try). Yes, allowing it to remain makes more work for me to keep it contained, but I've decided that it's worth it.

Other annoying plants, though, have fewer redeeming qualities and must be dispatched. Rating weeds according to their hassle level is one way to organize your workload and choose your tools. Smartweed, purslane and Canadian clearweed multiply rapidly, but they can easily be removed by hand. Ragweed, lamb's quarters and carpetweed usually come up, root and all, with a little coaxing from a hand tool.



PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO EDITORIAL SERVICES

What makes a plant a weed? That's your call. Basically, it's any plant growing where you don't want it.

Sheep sorrel sends out such a vast network of threadlike roots that you'll need to meticulously tease a colony out of the soil with a weeding tool. Pokeweed and burdock quickly send deep taproots plunging down. A spade or something equally substantial will be required to do the job.

Michelle Beloskur, the coordinator for the Midwest Invasive Plant Network, a nonprofit that educates about nonnative nuisance plants in nine Midwestern states as well as Ontario, deals with the eradication of particularly challenging invasive culprits. For example, Japanese barberry can be dispersed rampantly, both by seeds and by wandering branches that anchor into the soil. A colony can spread quickly and its thick, thorny growth cre-

ates a perfect breeding ground for ticks. Although barberry has relatively shallow roots, eradicating mature plants will require considerable muscle.

Gardeners who regularly combat invasive shrubs often turn to wrench-like tools engineered to provide the leverage to get the whole underground network. Removing the roots in their entirety is the secret to success. Beloskur suggests a battle strategy that works with this and other problematic plants: "Learn to identify these plants and pull them when young."

Getting rid of nuisance shrubs can be a relative cakewalk, though, compared to eliminating an infestation of vining plants such as roundleaf Asian bittersweet, which has a vast root system and stems that

tend to strangle anything vertical. In my experience, small sections of bitter-sweet roots can support a new shoot, followed quickly by a colony. Again, squelching the problem early is the answer. You may be tempted to mow it, but that's not the best strategy, Beloskur says. "Consistent mowing can set the plant back, but it rarely eradicates the problem." Your foe is always lurking underground, waiting for the opportunity to sprout. Instead, remove it root and all.

Japanese knotweed poses similar issues. This plant, with deep and meandering roots, is a notorious bear. A minute node can pioneer a new colony, so Beloskur urges decontaminating your equipment. Spray tools full force with a hose after each use

to prevent spreading plant parts. Similarly, disturbing large sections of soil while dispatching undesirables can expose seeds of other foes, so replant immediately with good guys that have a broad footprint to fill the space. Monitor for unwanted sprouts for several seasons.

And don't rely on barrier fabric, Beloskur says; it's not a practical solution for suppressing weeds. The fabric needs to be in place and fully depriving the plant of light for at least a year to be effective, which is a tall order. "Wildlife can create holes in the barrier," she says.

Safely disposing of weeds presents another issue. James McGrath, a professional estate gardener in Connecticut, regularly battles the biennial weed garlic mustard. In the best scenario, his crew would rid the property of garlic mustard in its first year, before the plants send up flowering growth in the early spring of their second growing season. However, garlic mustard lurks in hidden places and the average plant produces approximately 600 seeds (vigorous individuals have the potential of spreading as many as 7,900 seeds). It also refuses to die. Even if you snap off the top and eliminate the roots, wilted garlic mustard can still flower and set seeds. After weeding, McGrath smothers the plants in black garbage bags and leaves them to bake in the sun before disposing of them. Never send a weed that can resurrect itself or create progeny via viable

seed to your compost pile. It can haunt you.

McGrath studies his enemies' growth habits and persistently digs the plants early. Keeping ahead of things helps him control the troublemakers. For catchweed bedstraw (aka cleavers), he patrols frequently, gathering the crown of the weed in his hand and pulling to remove the entire expansive root system. Mugwort, however, is a trickier nemesis. Young plants are easily removed, which is his method for preventing the expansion of a colony. He has studied mature mugwort's root system and discovered that the rhizomes travel shallowly below the soil surface. "You can actually dig below the plant and roll up a large section, like rolling a carpet," he says. He's considering renting a sod cutter for an eradication project.

In my seven-acre garden, I spend a lot of time removing weeds. Patrolling for nascent issues is key, starting in the spring and checking for young sprouts. Vining plants tend to be my primary challenge. I try not to yank. A gentle, slow tug is more apt to extract the entire transgressor, roots and all. It's sweaty, hard work, but every rogue that I wrestle from the soil is a major victory. I finish the day a hot, but proud, mess.

As McGrath says, "Staying on top of issues is so satisfying; I see weed removal as a challenge that I'm going to win."

Tovah Martin is a gardener and freelance writer in Connecticut.

LAWN WORD SEARCH

E Z E P E S T S T W M O V N W O R B V W
 D R A I N A G E N A O R C S C O C B P M
 I G V S S Y Y L A C S Z I O S C L R T M
 C K E B V G V P C A S V T M M H A M G T
 I B N R R R P D M C F H B O H S P Y L F O
 B I T U M O G A I E A S A C G S O F K L
 R D B P L I F R S R I E I N T U E S P E
 E S E C W N N T E S E R L U T R O C T R
 H O V I N R O A D L R L R D T S M R R A
 E R P K A R G V T G P F K I A H Z F D N
 G G R Z V A G N W I N E L N G O Y M U T
 W A E E W Y N K I K O I P H I A R C P K
 U N V A S N I M N G Z N W T S R T B O A
 K I O H E S D U U E D Z K O L R P I K S
 T C L C L D E L R Y H E C B M W M S O G
 H Z C T O H E C N O I T A D N U O F F N
 U O S A M L S H K K F N O I T A R E A D
 Y A L H I A E Y L A N D S C A P E L O W
 P A M T V P R B S S A R G B A R C S C Z
 W E E D S N T O E U C S E F S E N O S S

Find the words hidden vertically, horizontally & diagonally throughout the puzzle

WORDS

AERATION HERBICIDE
 ANTS IRRIGATION
 BROADLEAF LANDSCAPE
 BROWN MOLES
 CLAY MOSS
 CLOD MOWING
 CLOVER MULCH
 COMPOST ORGANIC
 CRABGRASS OSMOSIS
 DESICCANT PESTS
 DRAINAGE RESEEDING
 DROUGHT SOD
 EDGING SPRINKLER
 FERTILIZER THATCH
 FESCUE TOLERANT
 FOUNDATION TRAMPLE
 GERMINATION TURF
 GRUBS WEEDS

LAWN CARE WORD SEARCH

S W H A V L U P G R H S K H G Y S T T C
 E D C C W U O H V O R R E K P R G H N N
 D K T U L C K P I N D S Y R W R N A A P
 R S A L A A O V D I S E A S E S O L L I
 N H H T U P I G R O W T H E R Y I E P O
 I V T I D M L Y O I T N N V K H T R W Y
 D U L V A M E N D M E N T A R O A M N T
 P Y E A L R P W D N O E V H P K R A W C
 E W G R I K H L R O R I I U K E E D C O
 S A N S R E N N U R N O S S I E A V I M
 T H W G Y A N I L E U A P T M M R A D P
 S U G N D M N A I H G E C R U C C R I A
 G I P I N U T R I E N T S E E R O I C C
 E S D P I I G O I N M S C D N G E E A T
 C D O P C K W D P Y Y N E A U I D T K E
 V M U I L D R R S S A R G E T E L Y U D
 E W G L L Y R E V O L C L R M O U D E U
 P P Y C C L U M P I N G C P M M O R O T
 C C U O E P S E R S N A L S R O V L I V
 V N D C Y K G P A L K A L I N E W M S W

Find the words hidden vertically, horizontally, diagonally, and backwards.

WORDS

ACIDIC
 AERATION
 ALKALINE
 AMENDMENT
 CLIPPINGS
 CLOVER
 CLUMPING
 COMPACTED
 CULTIVAR
 DISEASES
 GRASS
 GREEN
 GROWTH
 MOISTURE
 MOW
 NUTRIENTS
 PESTS
 PLANT
 RUNNERS
 SOIL
 SPREADER
 THATCH
 TOOLS
 VARIETY

Puzzles courtesy of Metro Editorial Services

* ANSWERS ON PAGE 47

LAWN & GARDEN WORD SEARCH

E P Y P F H I B O S Z R L E U C S B O B
 Z I H L D I Z N Y S S D G B I F U Z W G
 I N E D R A G D N T W Z P E D G N F L N
 L D A B Y P E T M I R S M D Z H L L Z I
 I Y L N M B C O W H H W E G R T I A D M
 T C T P T O C L S C S W D E H L G N T M
 R M H H N R P O L L I N A T O R H D P I
 E T Y I E D D U I L L N D L W C T S T R
 F C I A C E M P Y S I O E N U R P C M T
 W A F B S R P M O H A T Z Z W L H A B D
 Z C C I L M D F S R D B H F S Z T P W D
 Y O L C D O L H L U R N A G O I D I G F
 A S A O Y L O B W B A N M H U Y Y N S Z
 D D W M P I Z M B S I F F G D O Z G D N
 N E N P L M N I I F N G M N M W R U D C
 E E P O B R H E A N A W O U Z S E D W E
 M W D S S E W I E O G M S N G U O N S O
 A I Y T O W D G B R E W S S T C E S N I
 T W R R M T I C N A G Y Y H U R U C U T
 L G N B G I U T Z W G Y O D W R D T D A

Find the words hidden vertically, horizontally, diagonally, and backwards.

WORDS

AMEND
 BLOOMING
 BORDER
 COMPOST
 CUT
 DRAINAGE
 DROUGHT
 EDGE
 FERTILIZE
 GARDEN
 GREEN
 HEALTHY
 INSECTS
 LANDSCAPING
 LAWN
 MOSSY
 MULCH
 POLLINATOR
 PRUNE
 SCENT
 SHRUBS
 SUNLIGHT
 TRIMMING
 WEEDS

BACKYARD WORD SEARCH

S B L C N E D R A G E X A W D E W Y I T
 T C H I L D R E N D N O P I S C K C A M
 C I I J P E R G O L A D G U R K O S A K
 E N I L O P M A R T A B O E R I E L G C
 S P O V W C B D N K Y H D B K N I F H E
 N R L U S R E V A P E E R C T T E C S D
 I N I A N A L E P E E M O E K N R Y E P
 L E S Y Y I M V R F J N R U C O E T I A
 X I T R A I E T D E C T T E P N Y R T T
 F G A E A S N R O R A A X R J J Y E R I
 C H Y B H F I G E I E H E O E F L P A O
 O B C B E B S T N R A L Y C S R S O P G
 W O A U T R E Y T M A M K F H P B R D F
 N R T R A D L E M X E Y I B K N A P B P
 N C I H G E R O A N X T E S G N I W S U
 A F O S D Y C T T G W I S D G N G H J L
 U C N M P K I K D R A Y K C A B O C O T
 X W R I R O M G Y U X O B D N A S O G N
 A O N E N X A I N U R G O D Y M P U A D
 C W S V S S H E D L R D R P R I V A C Y

Find the words hidden vertically, horizontally, diagonally, and backwards.

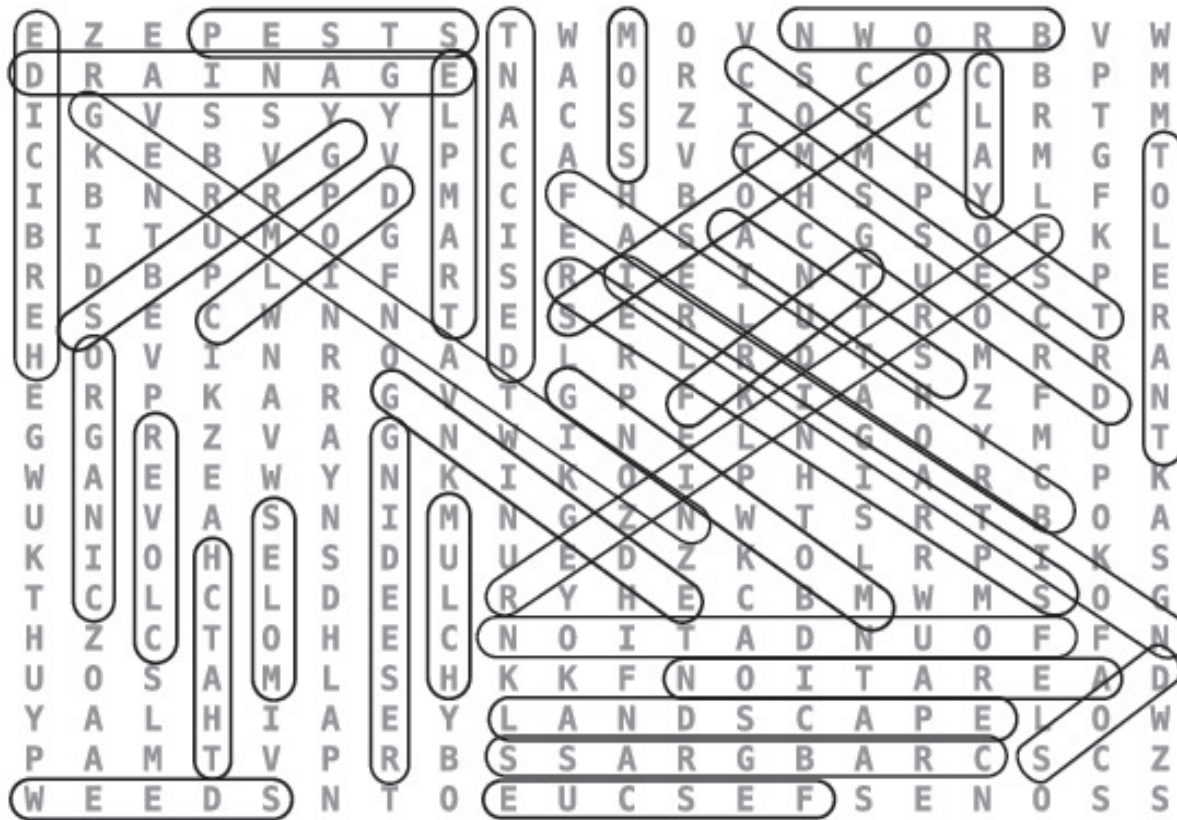
WORDS

ACRES
 BACKYARD
 BIRD FEEDER
 CHILDREN
 CONCRETE
 DECK
 DOG RUN
 ENJOYMENT
 ENTERTAIN
 FENCE
 GARDEN
 GATE
 HAMMOCK
 INSECTS
 LANAI
 NEIGHBOR
 PARTIES
 PATIO
 PAVERS
 PERGOLA
 PLAYING
 POND
 POOL
 PORCH
 PRIVACY
 PROPERTY
 RELAXATION
 RETREAT
 SANDBOX
 SHED
 SHRUBBERY
 SPA
 STAYCATION
 SWINGSET
 TRAMPOLINE
 TREEHOUSE

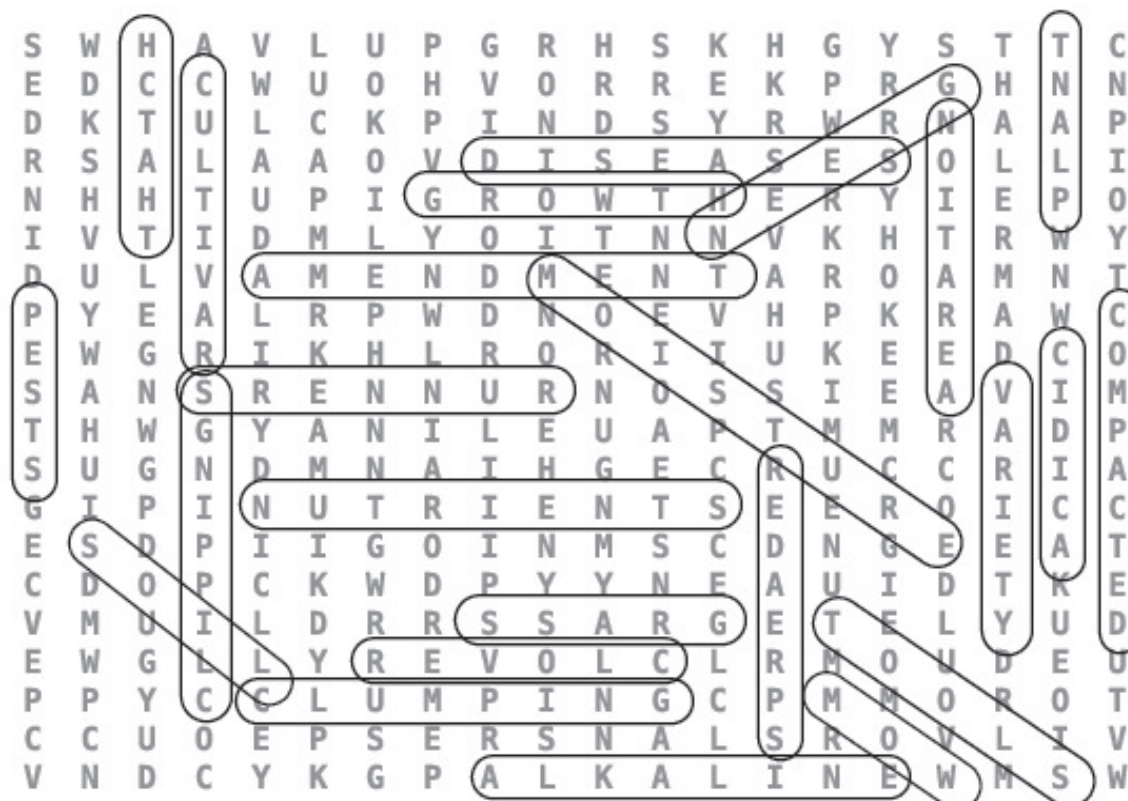
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* ANSWERS ON PAGE 48

LAWN WORD SEARCH ANSWERS



LAWN CARE WORD SEARCH ANSWERS



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*** ANSWERS FOR PAGE 45**

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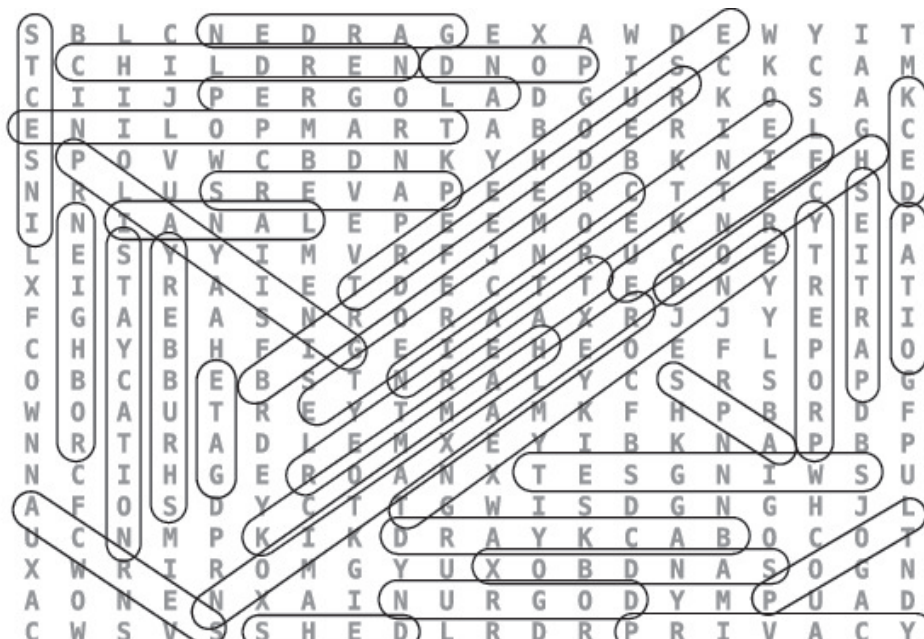
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LAWN & GARDEN WORD SEARCH ANSWERS



BACKYARD WORD SEARCH ANSWERS



* ANSWERS FOR PAGE 46

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