

A vibrant spring-themed photograph of a wooden table with various gardening items. In the foreground, a wide-brimmed straw hat with a black band and a small bouquet of white flowers rests on the table. Behind it, several potted petunias in shades of pink, red, yellow, and white are arranged. A rustic metal watering can and a garden trowel are also visible. The background is a soft-focus green garden.

Spring HOME & GARDEN

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How to establish a peaceful backyard retreat

Backyards have undergone quite a transformation over the last decade-plus. The days when patios and decks were all a backyard living space had to offer are largely a thing of the past, as homeowners have realized just how valuable it can be to commit to a stunning backyard.

The real estate experts at Zillow estimate that homes with backyard features such as outdoor televisions, outdoor showers and outdoor kitchens command 3.1 percent more than expected upon reaching the market. If 3.1 percent doesn't sound like a lot, it actually equates to nearly \$11,000 on a typical home. But there's more to gain than money when converting a backyard space into a relaxing respite. Such spaces can provide a welcoming escape from the hustle and bustle of daily life, all the while giving homeowners and residents a comfortable space to soak in the great outdoors. With that in mind, homeowners can take the following steps to establish a peaceful backyard retreat.

- **Refresh the landscape.** Even if your vision is centered on outdoor furniture and a space that accommodates movie nights under the stars, it's still best to refresh the existing landscape if it needs a little upkeep. Overgrown trees, hedges and bushes can create the same cluttered vibe that dominates interior spaces overrun with items. If necessary, work with a local tree service or landscape architect to trim, or even remove, trees and hedges that are crowding the backyard and making it feel claustrophobic or giving it an unkempt look. Aim for a landscape that affords a balance of sun and shade so the space is as comfortable as possible throughout the day.

- **Set up multiple gathering spaces, if possible.** Once a backyard retreat is established, everyone who calls the

property home might find the space hard to resist. Keep this in mind when planning the space and aim to set up multiple gathering spaces. An outdoor kitchen with a nearby dinner table can be a great space to enjoy al fresco dining, but a separate area to read a book or watch a movie or ballgame can make the space more versatile. Some may want to relax away from the noise of the grill area, and multiple gathering spaces ensures there's always a peaceful spot to unwind out back.

- **Add a water feature.** Running water has a way of calming the nerves, and that's good to keep in mind when planning a backyard retreat. Water features run the gamut from garden ponds to koi ponds to fountains to hot tubs. Homeowners can identify which feature best aligns with their idea of relaxation and then work with a landscape architect to ensure it's installed in their backyard oasis.

- **Don't forget shade.** Temperatures are rising in many areas of the globe, and that's worth noting when planning a backyard retreat. Even the most ardent sun worshippers likely won't want to be exposed to the sun at all times when relaxing in their backyards. Strategically chosen means of providing shade can make spaces enjoyable all day long. Consider umbrellas, gazebos, pergolas, and even retractable awnings to cover patios and decks when the sun is at its highest each afternoon. If you plan to spend ample time in the grass, make that more enjoyable by planting shade trees, which also can protect the grass from drought and make it more comfortable underfoot.

A relaxing backyard retreat can make for an ideal space to escape the hustle and bustle of daily life.



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How to prepare outdoor spaces for Memorial Day entertaining

Memorial Day weekend is a popular time to entertain. For many, the week-end marks the first outdoor entertaining opportunity of the year, which is certainly something to look forward to.

As outdoor entertaining season begins, homeowners can take these steps to prepare their outdoor living spaces for the first big backyard get-together of the year.

- **Break out the power washer.** Pressure washing is an important component of spring home cleanup. The warmer temperatures of spring allow water from power washing to dry more quickly, which can decrease the chances that mold and mildew will grow on surfaces like siding. A freshly power washed home also makes for a welcoming entertaining space. A power washer also can be used on outdoor entertaining spaces to remove dirt and debris that built up over the winter. Just make sure to read manufacturer instructions before using a power washer to clean paving stones, decks and outdoor furniture.

- **Inspect outdoor furniture.** Now is a good time to inspect outdoor furniture if the task was not performed in late fall or early winter before items were moved into the garage or placed in storage. Check to

make sure furnishings are still safe to use, addressing any issues before guests come over for a Memorial Day weekend gathering. Wash cushions for outdoor furniture and replace any that might be showing their age.

- **Clean the grill.** A thorough cleaning of the grill also is in order prior to summer entertaining season. Many homeowners do little or no grilling during winter, so now is the time to give grilling surfaces and the interior of the grill a deep cleaning. Check for leaks if using a gas grill, and scrub the interior of any grease that accumulated last season. Many grilling experts advise lighting a grill and letting it burn for roughly 20 minutes prior to putting any foods on the grates for the first time. Such a strategy allows residual fluids like soap, vinegar and de-greasing products used when cleaning the grill to burn off before food is placed on the grates.

- **Inspect the landscaping, too.** It's not just seating areas like patios and decks that need some investigation prior to outdoor entertaining season. Take a walk around the landscape and make sure there's no potentially dangerous spots where people could be injured when playing backyard

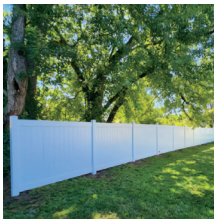
games. Fill in any holes with soil and fresh grass seed, and inspect trees to see if any branches need to be pruned.

Summer entertaining season begins each Memorial Day weekend. Homeowners can take various steps to ensure their outdoor entertaining spaces are comfortable and safe.



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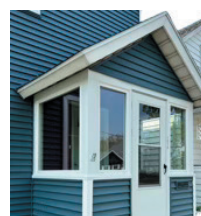
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How to make a backyard safe for dogs

Dogs, particularly puppies, can be full of boundless energy. Channeling that energy into exercise with long walks or play sessions can help stem dogs' propensity to get into trouble around the house as they burn off extra adrenaline. Pets who don't have an energy outlet may chew off-limits objects or get into other mischief.

According to the American Kennel Club, the amount of exercise a dog needs depends

on the animal's age and breed. For example, border collies or Siberian huskies may require much more exercise than English bulldogs, simply because the former are working breeds. Pet owners with large backyards often find those outdoor spots are ideal for when their dogs get the "zoomies," something that tends to be a daily occurrence. Letting their dogs run around yards, whether on their own or chasing tossed tennis balls, is an ide-

al way to provide exercise and tire out pups. In such scenarios, it's vital that pups have a dog-friendly yard in which to play.

- **Use safe lawn care products.** An expanse of grass is the perfect place to frolic or enjoy some sunbathing – for people or pets. But contact with chemically treated lawns can cause a number of health issues for dogs, such as allergies or intestinal upset.

Switching to native grasses can reduce the need to use chemicals to get lush lawns. When supplementation is needed, homeowners can switch to organic products or natural compost as safer alternatives than chemical-based products.

- **Fence off the yard.** Off-leash running and bounding through the yard will make any dog smile. However, a fence is a must-have to ensure a dog doesn't become an escape artist. Be sure the fence is high enough so that the pup cannot jump over it. Burying chicken wire in the dirt beneath the lower edge of the fence also can help prevent dogs who like to dig from exiting by crawling underneath the fence.

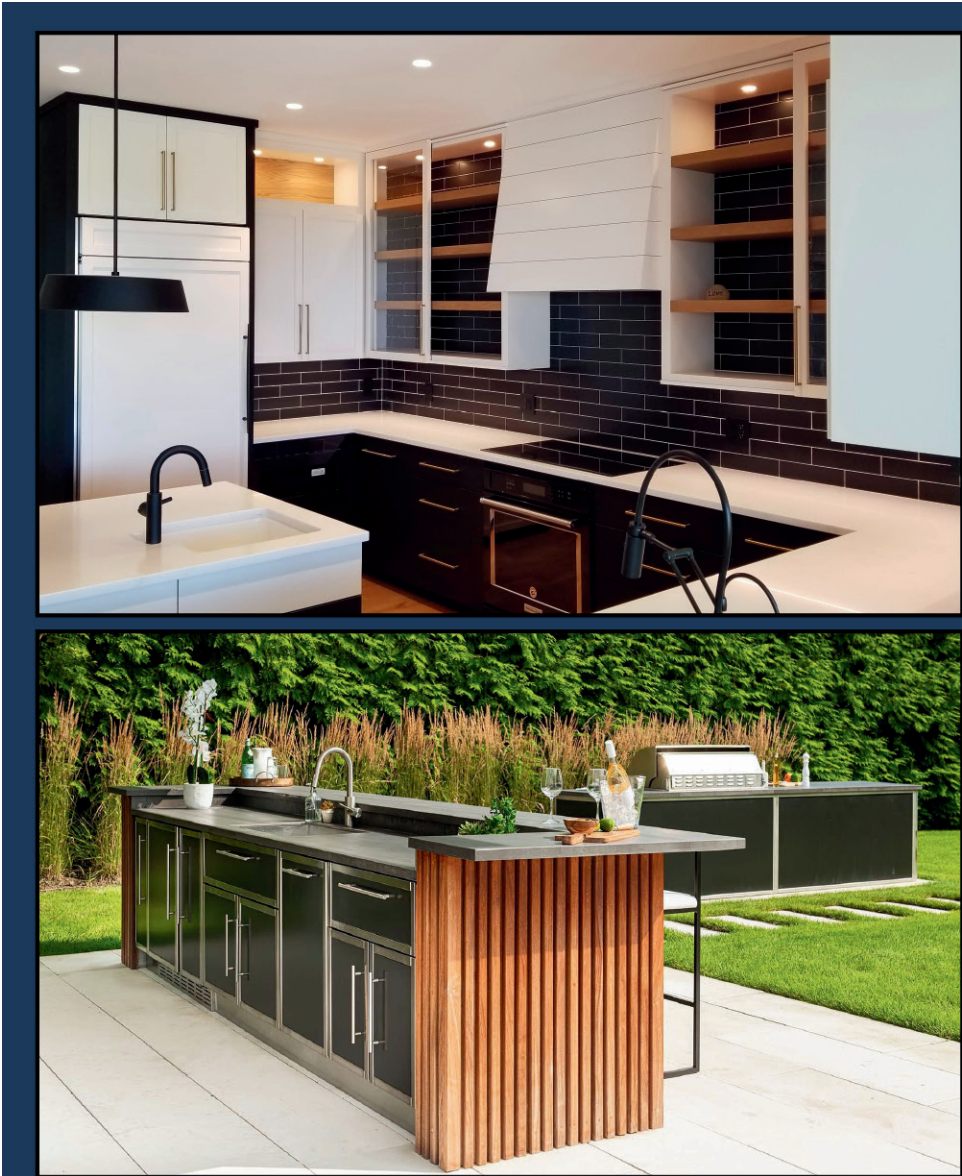
Consider installing a lock on the fence gate so that no one can wander in and surprise the dog, which may startle the animal and prompt it to defend the property. A lock also helps prevent dog theft. See ads for **Fence Masters**, **Invisible Fence** and **Harman & Associates** are great local fence options.

- **Keep the yard tidy.** Maintaining a clean yard also is key to safety. Inspect the yard regularly to make sure nothing is around that can prove harmful, whether it's poison ivy, felled branches or broken fence panels. Also, keep shrubs and grass trimmed to reduce flea and tick populations on the property.

- **Avoid poisonous plants.** Certain plants can be dangerous if they're consumed by curious pups. Chrysanthemums, peonies, irises, and hydrangeas are some plants that can be poisonous. For a full list of poisonous plants, go ASPCA's website (aspc.org).

- **Keep an eye on animals.** Dogs can spend some unattended time in the yard, but check in from time to time. Should wildlife get into the yard, dogs may get hurt by tussles or bites. Birds of prey, such as owls, hawks and even vultures, may attack small dogs in a yard. While they might not view a dog as an easy meal, they could swoop down and attack to defend territory. The same may occur with other wild animals.

A dog-friendly yard may require a little effort to create, but it's worth a little sweat equity to keep pups safe.



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Spring planting pointers

Many people view spring as a season of rejuvenation. That renewal may be somewhat metaphorical for human beings, but it's literal for lawns and gardens that begin to grow anew as temperatures rise and hours of daylight increase in spring.

Each spring presents an opportunity for homeowners to get back outside and tend to their gardens. As the temperatures rise, homeowners can consider these spring planning pointers to ensure their landscapes look lush and full in the months ahead.

- **Start with the soil.** Soil can serve as the starting point each spring. Winter can take its toll on a garden and even overwhelm the area with debris over the colder months. Clear rocks and other debris from the area before loosening the soil. The Farmer's Almanac recommends loosening soil to a depth of at least eight inches if planting a new garden. An existing garden may only need to be loosened to a depth of around six inches, after which homeowners can mix compost into the soil in early spring. Compost is organic matter that provides nutrients and helps to build strong plant roots.

- **Consider a raised garden in colder climates.** The Farmer's Almanac notes raised gardens can help homeowners in colder climates dry out and warm up wet, cold soils more quickly. Homeowners in such regions also can cover their beds with black plastic or cardboard prior to planting. Doing so can protect the beds from late-season snow and spring rains and also helps to overcome erosion.

- **Take soil temperatures.** Unpredictable weather is among the noticeable effects of climate change in recent years. That lack of predictability can make spring planting a little more tricky than it once was. Experts note that soil temperatures around 50 F are best for cool-season crops, while soil should be 60 F or warmer when planting warm-weather plants such as tomatoes.

- **Work with a garden center to identify what to plant.** The right plants for one region may not be ideal for another, so homeowners are urged to work with a local landscaper or garden center before planting. Such a consultation can be especially useful for homeowners planting a new garden. Landscapers and garden

center professionals will know which plants work in the local climate.

- **Consider planting vegetables in the spring.** Various garden experts note that spring is an ideal time to plant a vegetable garden. If planted at the right time, a vegetable garden can save homeowners money on their grocery bills and provide a season's worth of fresh veggies. Lettuce and spinach are sun- and shade-friendly

vegetables, which can make them good options for a spring garden. Cool-season root vegetables, which include beets, carrots and swiss chard, are some other notable veggies that can thrive in early spring.

Spring is a season of rejuvenation for gardens. That's even more true when homeowners consider some conventional planting wisdom in early spring.



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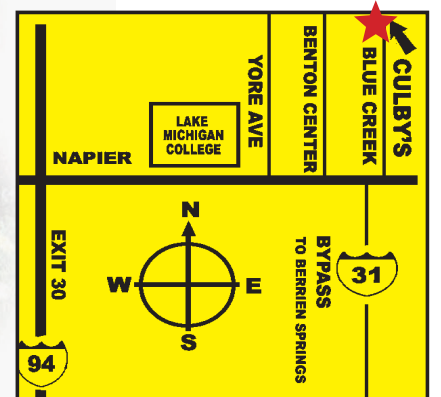
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As winter fades and sunlight spills through the windows, spring beckons with an urge to renew and refresh. Spring cleaning is more than a chore—it's a ritual to reclaim your space, clear clutter, and set the tone for warmer days. Here's how to tackle your home with purpose, leaving it sparkling and organized.

• **Start with a plan.** Walk through each room, noting what needs at-

tention—dusty shelves, overflowing closets, or grimy windows. Create a checklist to stay focused, breaking tasks into manageable chunks. Dedicate a weekend or spread the work over a week, depending on your schedule. Gather supplies upfront: microfiber cloths, all-purpose cleaners, vinegar for natural shine, and sturdy trash bags. Good tools make the job easier.

• **Begin high and work low.** Dust ceiling fans, light fixtures, and crown molding before vacuuming or sweeping floors. This prevents resettling dust from undoing your efforts. Wipe down walls and baseboards, often overlooked spots that collect smudges. For windows, mix equal parts water and

vinegar, scrub with a lint-free cloth, and squeegee for streak-free clarity. Let spring's light flood in unobstructed.

• **Decluttering is the heart of spring cleaning.** Sort through drawers, cabinets, and closets with a ruthless eye. Ask: Do I use this? Does it spark joy? Donate gently used clothes, kitchenware, or books to local charities. Recycle old papers, broken gadgets, or expired pantry goods. Organize what remains—use bins for seasonal items, hooks for bags, or dividers for utensils. A tidy space feels instantly lighter.

• **Kitchens and bathrooms demand extra attention.** Clear out the fridge, wiping shelves with warm, soapy water. Toss expired condiments and plan meals to use up forgotten ingredients. In bathrooms, scrub tiles, grout, and fixtures until they gleam. Replace worn shower curtains and replenish essentials like soap or towels. These high-traffic areas shine brightest when spotless.

• **Don't neglect textiles.** Wash or dry-clean curtains, blankets, and throw pillows to banish winter's mustiness. Vacuum upholstery and mattresses, flipping the latter for even wear. Launder bedding in hot water to kill dust mites, and consider airing quilts outside for a sun-kissed refresh. Fabrics hold memories of seasons past—clean them to start anew.

• **Finally, invite the outdoors in.** Sweep porches, clear dead leaves from patios, and hose down outdoor furniture. If you have a garden, prune overgrown shrubs or plant early blooms like pansies. A tidy exterior welcomes you home and extends your living space.

Spring cleaning isn't just about scrubbing—it's about intention. Each swept corner and polished surface creates room for clarity and possibility. When you're done, step back. Breathe deeply. Your home, now a canvas of order and light, is ready for the season's promise. Embrace it.

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The benefits of lighting up your landscape

Homeowners know there's no shortage of ways to tweak a property. Some homeowners may lament that the work associated with home ownership is never done, but owning a house also provide endless opportunities to upgrade the spaces people call home.

Landscape lighting has become increasingly popular in recent years. That popularity is undoubtedly due to a number of variables, and each highlights a benefit of installing landscape lighting around a property.

• **Affordability:** Some may think of big budget projects like kitchen remodels or room additions when pondering home renovations. Such projects can have a dramatic impact on the look and feel of a home, but landscape lighting can be equally transformative at a fraction of the cost of larger undertakings. The home renovation experts at Angi.com estimate the average landscape lighting project costs around \$4,000, making affordability a notable benefit of the project.

• **Appearance:** There's no denying the aesthetic appeal of a well-lit landscape at night. Landscape lighting can be utilized to draw attention to awe-inspiring

components of a landscape, whether it's natural features like gardens and foliage or manmade components like architectural features. Improved appearance can increase curb appeal, which is often associated with how a home looks during daylight hours. But photographs of a well-lit nighttime landscape can impress buyers as well.

• **Cost savings:** Landscape lighting might help homeowners reduce the cost of their homeowners insurance. Researchers at PolicyGenius.com found that insurance companies typically offer a discount of 2 to 5 percent to homeowners who install a home security system. Insurance providers may offer additional savings to homeowners who pair such systems with landscape lighting, which can be a deterrent to burglars who prefer to operate under a cloak of darkness.

• **Safety:** Insurance firms may discount premiums because of landscape lighting because they view it as a deterrent to potential criminals. But landscape lighting also makes moving around a property at night safer for residents and guests. Lighting can be used to illuminate walkways, outdoor living rooms, pa-

tios around pools, and other areas where residents and guests will be walking at night, which can reduce the risk of falls and injuries that may result from such spills.

• **ROI:** Savvy homeowners consider a renovation's return on investment before deciding to go forward with a project. Studies vary, but the National Association of Realtors indicates landscape lighting can recoup as much as 70 percent of

homeowners' investment in the project at resale. When viewed through the lens of ROI, the cost of installing landscape lighting is even less.

Landscape lighting adds notable aesthetic appeal to a home at a fraction of the cost of other renovation projects. The benefits such lighting provides make the project one every homeowner can consider.



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Watch out for these poisonous backyard plants

Spending time in the backyard can be restorative and relaxing. Is it any wonder why homeowners are increasingly improving their homes so that they can blur the lines between the indoors and outside and enjoy more recreational moments in nature?

Part of what makes a landscape inviting is the bevy of plants dotting Southwest Michigan landscapes. Individuals may take pains-taking pleasure in mapping out landscapes that are both functional and appealing. When selecting foliage, it's wise for homeowners

to familiarize themselves with certain plants that may not be very welcome in their entertaining areas — particularly those that are dangerous. Poison ivy, oak and sumac may be some of the better-known poisonous plants, but there are others in our corner of Michigan that can prove problematic as well.

• **Hogweed:** This is an invasive plant that grows throughout North America but is particularly well-known along the Atlantic coast. The sap in the leaves can cause phytophotodermatitis, which is a chemical reaction after

exposure to sunlight. Painful, severe blisters can form on the skin wherever it touches, and hogweed sap may cause blindness if it gets into the eyes.

• **Lily of the Valley:** This plant is known for delicate, bell-shaped flowers and a sweet scent. While Lily of the Valley is not poisonous to touch, if ingested, toxic glycosides in the flowers, berries, leaves, and stems may cause a host of problems, including disorientation, vomiting, blurry vision, and rashes.

• **Bleeding Heart:** Native to woodlands, this perennial loves the shade. It produces unique flowers that resemble tiny pink or white hearts with drops of blood at the bottom. Roots and foliage of Bleeding Heart contain alkaloids that are toxic to animals if ingested in high quantities.

• **Foxgloves:** Adored among pollinators, Foxgloves produce towering pink and white trumpet blooms in early summer. The whole plant is toxic if eaten, however. People who eat any part or attempt to make tea may find their heart rate slowing down or becoming irregular.

• **Stinging Nettle:** Brushing up against Stinging Nettle can be a painful experience. The plant has tiny stinging hairs on its leaves and stems.

• **Wild Hemlock:** This is a very poisonous member of the carrot family. If consumed, Wild Hemlock, which looks like parsley, can cause health problems. Toxins also can be absorbed through the skin.

• **Deadly Nightshade (Belladonna):** A beautiful plant that produces shiny, black cherry-like berries, this contains a poison that can paralyze the gastrointestinal muscles and eventually the heart. The Royal Horticultural Society says that even rubbing up against it can irritate the skin.

Many plants, however beautiful, can be dangerous if ingested or touched.

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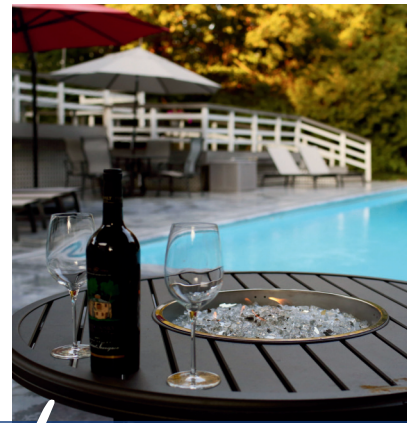
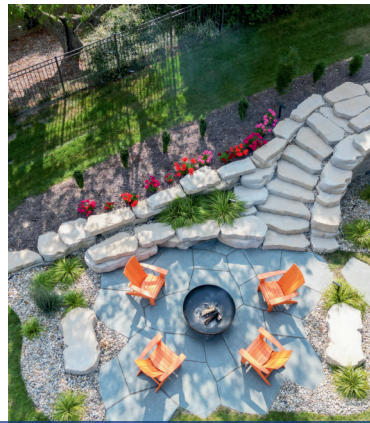
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Tips to revitalize a garden this spring

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

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

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

spring and prune any perennials that need it. Branches that fell during winter storms also should be removed at this point if they have not previously been discarded.

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

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

• **Inspect your irrigation system.** Homeowners with in-ground irrigation systems or above-ground systems that utilize a drip or soaker function can inspect the systems before plants begin to bloom. Damaged sprinkler heads or torn lines can deprive plants of water they will need to bloom and ultimately thrive once the weather warms up.

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

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



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Inflation has garnered countless headlines in recent years, and much of that news has focused on the notably higher cost of food. Though the cost of some items at the grocery store has gone down in 2024, many items remain significantly more expensive than they were as recently as three or four years ago. In an effort to overcome rising food costs, some consumers have thought about gardening. According to Washington State University,

the average household with a food garden spends around \$70 per year on seeds and garden supplies. The reward for that small investment is roughly \$600 worth of food. Though the financial investment associated with a food garden might be minimal, it's important for prospective gardeners to recognize that the commitment of time required to establish and sustain a food garden can be significant.







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Is It Time to Replace Your Roof? Here's How to Tell

Your roof is one of the most important parts of your home, protecting everything—and everyone—under it. But how do you know when it's time to replace it instead of simply patching it up?

Here in Southwest Michigan, where we face a mix of lake-effect snow, spring rainstorms, and summer heat, roofs can take a beating over the years. If your roof is showing signs of age or wear, it might be time for a replacement.

• **Age Matters.** Most asphalt shingle roofs last about 20 to 25 years. If your roof is hitting that age—especially if it hasn't been inspected in a while—it's a good idea to have a professional take a look. The freeze-thaw cycles in our region can shorten a roof's life span.

• **Curling or Missing Shingles.** Harsh winds off Lake Michigan can curl, crack, or even tear off shingles. If you're seeing damage or bare patches, it's more than just a cosmetic issue—it could lead to leaks and bigger problems down the road.

• **Granules in the Gutters.** If you notice sand-like granules in your gutters, your shingles may be deteriorating. Granule loss means your roof is losing its ability to protect your home from UV rays and water damage.

• **Interior Water Damage.** Water stains on ceilings or walls can signal a leak. Even a small drip can lead to mold growth or structural damage if not addressed quickly—especially during our rainy spring months.

• **Sagging Rooflines.** A sagging roofline might point to long-term water damage or structural issues. Snow loads in winter can also add stress. Don't ignore this one—have it checked out immediately.

• **Light in the Attic.** If sunlight is sneaking in through the attic, moisture will follow. Take a peek after the next big storm to make sure your roof is keeping the weather out.

If you're seeing any of these warning signs, it might be time to call a local roofing professional. A sound roof is essential to keeping your Southwest Michigan home safe, dry, and comfortable all year long.




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Humane ways to address uninvited garden guests

A beautiful garden is a wonder to behold. After a homeowner toils in the yard amending the soil and planting, it's imperative that a garden be given the best chance to thrive. However, the natural wildlife that shares the space might see that newly cultivated land as the perfect place to enjoy an easy meal or gather nesting materials.

Every gardener likely has a tale about chipmunks, squirrels, woodchucks, and rabbits making nuisances of themselves in the garden. Many of these animals seem to have a taste for bulbs and other plants, which can wreak havoc on what gardeners carefully plan and plant. Finding balance so everyone can get along may require patience and some well-crafted deterrents.

• **Provide food elsewhere.** Try luring the animals away to another area of the yard where the meal is even easier to come by. Squirrels and chipmunks love to dig and bury their caches, so a far-off corner with freshly tilled soil along with some berries, nuts and additional treats might attract them to that area instead of a newly established garden.

• **Install fencing.** While chipmunks and squirrels can scale fences easily, such acrobatics may be more challenging for lumbering groundhogs or rabbits. Make digging more difficult by laying chicken wire fencing on top of the soil and stake it down in some areas.

• **Use a scent deterrent.** Some animals are put off by the smell of other animals or aromas they find unpleasant. The capsaicin in red pepper and cayenne can be off-putting to these animals, so sprinkling it around the garden may ward off pests but not harm the plants. Just reapply after each rain. Similarly, some people have had luck using peppermint. Plant mint around where you do not want the squirrels and chipmunks. Since mint can grow fast and become invasive, it's best to plant in containers and move accordingly.

• **Use water or movement.** Animals can be scared away if they are sprayed with water, so a well-aimed water gun can chase away the animals when a gardener is able to stand watch. It may be easier to set up pinwheels that blow in the wind, or hang aluminum pie plates or old compact discs from strings near the garden, which may deter animals from getting too close.

• **Build a greenhouse.** When dealing with tenacious squirrels and chipmunks, the only solution may be to block off all access. Utilize an enclosed greenhouse for the garden, which will keep animals out and even extend the growing season.

Many animals can become nuisances in a yard, particularly in and around gardens. Some humane solutions could remedy the situation.





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Tips for the gardening beginner

Gardening is a popular hobby all over the world. Ruby Home Luxury Real Estate estimates there are 71.5 million gardening households in the United States alone. That translates to around 185.9 million people engaged in some form of gardening, which places the U.S. among other countries where gardening is wildly popular, including Australia and China.

A greater number of people are showing interest in gardening, which is a rewarding hobby that's good for the mind and the body. Those who are new to gardening may need a crash course to get started. These pointers can help anyone foster a newfound passion for gardening.



• **Choose the best location.** Spend time in the yard and decide where to house a garden. A far-off corner may get the most sun, but will you forget about the garden if it is too far away? Ideally, the garden should be located where it will get at least six to eight hours of sun each day. There also should be a water source nearby. The spot also should be convenient so that it is easy to go and pick vegetables or prune flowers.

• **Start small.** If you're new to gardening, begin with a small garden footprint so that you can get your feet wet. A raised garden bed can be a good starting point because it is contained and easy to maintain. As your experience (and garden) grows, you can add to the garden size the next time around.

• **Amend the soil.** It's possible but unlikely that the soil in the backyard is the perfect mix to grow healthy plants. It's more likely that the garden will need some soil modification. You can test the soil makeup with do-it-yourself kits or work with a garden center. A garden typically requires a mix of compost to add nutrients to the dirt; peat moss or coconut coir to help with water retention and to make the soil lighter; and vermiculite that helps to retain water. A compost bin set up at the same time as the garden allows gardeners to continually produce nutrient-rich food to add to the garden.

• **Plant starter guide.** It's best to keep a few things in mind when planning the garden. Think about what will grow well in your climate. Consider how big the garden will be and the size of mature plants. A small garden will not be able to accommodate corn, for example. Also, how would you like the space to look and what will be its function? Is this a purely aesthetic garden or one that will be food-bearing?

• **Start seeds inside.** If you'll be starting a garden from seeds, it's best to start indoors before your region's frost-free date. This way the delicate plants will get the needed care and can establish before they go outdoors in the ground. Keep them humid by covering the seedlings in plastic wrap. You can start the seeds in different containers, even empty egg cartons. Transplant to larger containers after the seedlings grow a second set of leaves. Once you're free from overnight frost, you can place the established, strong seedlings in the ground.

• **Plenty of Water.** An automatic watering system, such as a timer hooked up to the sprinkler, can keep the garden well watered, which increases the chances of success. Then it will only be a matter of weeks before the garden can be enjoyed throughout the season.

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