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A Supplement to the *East County* **TIMES**

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The Gutter Guys pride themselves on customer service

- Article & photo by Devin Crum -

For any type of gutter services your home requires, The Gutter Guys are the ones to call. With their wide range of products and services and their excellent customer service, you're sure to join their vast pool of already-satisfied customers.

"We do everything from cleaning and repairs to installation and maintenance," said owner Daniel Harrison.

The Gutter Guys carry GUTTERGARD™, fascia and soffit, seamless rain gutters and seamless half round gutters in 25 colors to match your home or whatever color scheme you prefer.

For anyone who does not already know, seamless gutters are one continuous piece of gutter that stretches for the entire length of the roof. They are, therefore, less prone to leaks.

"Anyone with a rack on their truck can go to a home improvement store and pick up 10 or 20 lengths of gutter," Harrison explained. But seamless has been standard in the industry for many years now and provides a better quality product, he added.

Harrison noted that he has worked in the customer service industry his entire life. And when he needed gutter work done on his own home back in 1988, he began calling around for estimates on what he needed.

But none of the businesses Harrison contacted returned his calls. That's not great customer service.

He ended up doing the work himself, and others were so impressed that he began offering his gutter cleaning, maintenance and installation services to them.

"Due to our outstanding customer service, we've grown into a business that has helped over 300,000 happy customers," Harrison touted.

In fact, The Gutter Guys is the only full-service



The Gutter Guys was established in 1988 and focused on excellent customer service from the very beginning.

gutter company in the Baltimore area to be awarded the Angie's List Super Service Award every year from 2006 - 2016. And still, in their 29th year of operation, their focus is still on customer service, according to Harrison.

The Gutter Guys is a fully insured and licensed contractor and assures that they have the best warranty and pricing.

They are headquartered at 7120 Golden Ring Road,

Suite 118, in Essex, and are open 8 a.m. - 5 p.m. Monday through Friday and 8 a.m. - noon on Saturdays.

Give them a call at 1-800-GUTTER-1 (1-800-488-8371) or 410-687-7886. Or visit their website at www.thegutterguys.com.

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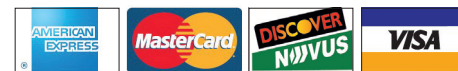
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Items to avoid while composting

Composting is an eco-friendly activity that can also save homeowners money on fertilizer and pesticides. But the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency notes that not everything can be added to compost piles. The following are some items homeowners should not add to their compost piles or bins, courtesy of the EPA.

- Black walnut tree leaves or twigs: Leaves or twigs from black walnut release substances that might prove harmful to plants.
- Coal or charcoal ash: Coal or ash from charcoal, such as the ash that builds up in the bottom of charcoal grills, may contain substances that are harmful to plants.
- Dairy products: When added to compost piles, dairy products, including butter, milk, sour cream, yogurt and eggs, can be malodorous and may attract

pests, including rodents and flies.

- Diseased or insect-ridden plants: The diseases and insects that plague plants may survive being transferred to compost piles.
- Fats, grease, lard, or oils: Fats, grease, lard or oils also may attract rodents and flies, and that might be due to the unpleasant odors such substances can produce when added to compost piles.
- Meat or fish bones and scraps: Like fats, grease, lard or oils, scraps from meat and fish and fish bones can smell unpleasant, often attracting pests
- Pet waste: Pet waste, including soiled cat litter, may contain parasites, bacteria, germs, pathogens, and viruses that can be harmful.
- Grass trimmings treated with chemical pesticides: They can negate the effects of composting by killing beneficial organisms produced within compost piles.

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"If it needs welding, I can do it," said Orwig. Orwig and his team of five spend most of their time in Baltimore City and east Baltimore County. They specialize in steel and aluminum balcony, stair and pipe rails, columns, window guards, security and basement doors, grating, fences and a whole lot more.

Bill's offers new installation, repairs and replacements, with free estimates. The company is owner-operated and does not use subcontractors. Cost is determined by the job, with no travel charges tacked on. 24 hour emergency service is available as well.

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Albright's Mechanical Services will keep you cool this summer

- By Patrick Taylor -

Soon the summer heat will be upon us, which can only mean one thing - it's time to make sure the air conditioning unit works. And when it comes to getting your cooling system checked, Albright's Mechanical Services should be the first call you make.

"It's not too hot yet, you don't want to wait until the first 100 degree day to put your air conditioning on," said Rob Baker, general manager of Albright's.

If you are looking to get your A/C tuned up, it's definitely worth looking into getting a maintenance contract. For \$165, Albright's will come out once in the spring and fall for maintenance on heating and cooling systems. Manu-

facturers recommend yearly tuneups, and systems under warranty are required to have them done.

"It's like an oil change on your car, it's the best thing to do to keep it running efficiently," Baker said.

Besides two tuneups per year, maintenance contract holders get a slew of other benefits. For a maintenance contract customer it only costs \$69 for a diagnostic 365 days a year, 24 hours a day. During normal business hours it's \$95 for a diagnostic, and evenings, weekends and holidays it's \$125. A typical AC tuneup with no coupons, no discounts is \$129. The contract also gets the customer 15 percent off on parts and labor, as well as priority ser-

vice, which can be a godsend if your unit breaks down during the sweltering summer months.

"In the busiest times, when the phone is ringing off the hook and our guys are maxed out, we're only taking calls for our maintenance contract customers and people who don't have a contract may be a day or two out," said Baker. "But a lot of these larger companies who have thousands of maintenance contracts, it might take two weeks to send someone out. We never take more than a day or two because we keep our service area tight. We aren't sending a guy three hours away across the state when he could have helped three customers locally during that time."

Albright's has been a staple in the Essex community since Don Albright, Sr. opened the business in 1970 and ran it out of his garage. The business originally focused on awnings and mobile home furnaces, but now they offer a whole lot more.

"We offer heating, A/C, plumbing and commercial refrigeration. For heating, A/C and plumbing, we do residential and light commercial," Baker said.

According to Baker, one of the aspects of Albright's that separates it from competitors is that they don't stick to a niche. While a lot of companies opt to do boilers and oil, or gas furnaces and A/C, Albright's acts as a jack of all trades, offering work on

heat pumps, gas furnaces, oil furnaces, hot water steam boilers and geothermal systems installation.

"We've kind of incorporated it all so that way we can help the customer further by not having to call out multiple companies," Baker explained. "And there are other companies out there who do the same thing, don't get me wrong, but I'd like to think that we do it better. Some people, I think, just like dealing with the neighbor next door. We've had some customers for over 30 years at this point."

And when it comes to being neighborly, Albright's certainly has that covered. Throughout their existence they have constantly donated to local charities and causes. Don Albright, Jr., who took the business over from his father in 1983, donates to youth sports programs and other groups frequently. Baker said that when they do donate, they like to keep the money local. "We don't want to donate to a nationwide charity where only three bucks are coming back into the community," he said. "We want to keep the money in Essex, Middle River and Dundalk. And Don Albright, Jr. has donated a lot of his time and money over the years."

Albright's is located at 11 S. Marlyn Ave., just off of Eastern Boulevard. To find out more about Albright's and the services they provide, feel free to visit www.albrightsmechanical.com or call them at 410-391-4737.

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Holabird Pools has 'everything you could possibly need or want' for pools, spas

- Article & photo by Devin Crum -

As pool stores go, it's always good to choose one that has knowledgeable employees who will take the time to figure out exactly what you need.

Holabird Pools and Supplies, Inc., has that and more, and the fact that they've been in business nearly 40 years is a testament to what they can do.

According to owner Carol Williams, who has been with the business since 1993, Holabird Pools sells anything customers might need for their pools - chemicals, filters and pumps, parts for repairs of filters or pumps, automated pool cleaners, and more - right down to the pools themselves.

The sizes of pools they sell - all above-ground - range from 12 - 33 feet in diameter for round ones and 12-by-24 feet to 18-by-33 feet for the oval-shaped varieties. And with the pools, Holabird Pools offers filter packages such as their "Summer Sizzler" package which includes "everything except the chemicals," Williams said.

With the Summer Sizzler package, you'll get the pool, the liner, a skimmer, the filter package of your choice and an automated pool cleaner to make the job of keeping your pool sparkling clean that much easier.

"We just have everything for a pool, and we can get anything for a pool that you could possibly need or want," Williams commented.

Holabird Pools also offers repair and water analysis services for any problems you might encounter.

The store carries all the supplies for both chlorine and non-chlorine systems, which include saltwater as well as Aqua Silk - a non-chlorine pool chemical that bills itself as a way to create and maintain soft and more comfortable pool water without using salt, chlorine or bromine, according to its website.

Williams said they usually have early-buy deals



on specialty chemicals as well, especially Sustain, a chlorine-based system which "you can't get anywhere but from me," Williams said.

"But at the beginning of the season we do have a nice discount on both [chlorine and non-chlorine] systems," she said.

And for those with spas or hot tubs, they have you covered too. Holabird Pools carries all the chemicals or other items needed for spas. They also offer water testing for them since spa water should be tested regularly and replaced approximately every three months.

Asked how the business has been able to be successful for so long, Williams said, "What keeps us in business is we're always here." She added that they do nothing except take care of pools in the summer.

"We're just here for the customers; that's the business we're in," she said. "We take our time with the customers. If they have problems, we work with them."

As a result, Williams said she sees a lot of return-

ing customers year after year. "We've just been here forever," she laughed.

The store opened at the beginning of March this year, Williams said, but when they open typically depends on the weather.

"If we have a lot of snow and it's going into March, we're not going to open until later," she explained. But this year the area experienced warm weather early, despite the more recent snow and cold snap.

"Now they're starting to come back in," Williams said of her customers.

But that's just the way of the business, she said. "If it's hot, they're going to be in the store. If it's not, they're not going to be anywhere near it."

Holabird Pools, established in 1979, is located at 4336 North Point Blvd. in Dundalk. They open at 9 a.m., Tuesday through Saturday. Call them at 410-477-2100 or find them on Facebook. And see their ad below for more information and special offers.

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Midway Lumber has a variety of goods, knowledgeable staff

Midway Lumber in Dundalk is a throw-back, old-fashioned store with a wide variety of building, construction and plumbing supplies and hardware, and it is run by long-time, knowledgeable staff.

Now in its seventh decade of serving the Greater Dundalk community and beyond, Midway offers an extensive selection of plywood and treated lumber and also sells bulk aggregate, including topsoil, gravel and sand,

according to its website.

Whether you're a contractor or do-it-yourselfer, Midway is the place to go for windows, doors, concrete blocks, fencing materials and anything else you might need for that next project.

The store also has plumbing, electrical and HVAC supplies, including circuit breakers, sump pumps and portable heaters for keeping the crew warm while working.

Midway, in an effort to be the neighborhood go-to store, also provides miscellaneous equipment and supplies, from trash cans and shovels to wood pellets and ice melt. They also sell locks and cut keys, including electronic programmed keys for newer vehicles.

Midway, located at 4400 North Point Blvd. in Dundalk (at corner of Wise Avenue) is open from 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday. For more information, call 443-470-8096.

Veggie garden tips for beginners

Planting a vegetable garden can be a worthwhile endeavor for anyone who has an available patch of land. Gardens need not take up much space, and even apartment dwellers without yards can plant small gardens in containers they place on terraces or window boxes.

One of the first decisions novice gardeners must make is which crops to grow. This will help determine how much land you will need and which supplies or soil amendments will be necessary. According to The Old Farmer's Almanac, a common error for beginners is planting too much and more than anyone could ever consume, so it's best to start small and be proud of that small garden.

Plants such as peppers, squash and tomatoes produce throughout the season, so you may not need many plants to provide for your needs. Less prolific plants may require a greater invest-

ment to produce a similar yield.

Locate your garden in an area that gets adequate sun. Many vegetables need between six and eight hours of sunlight per day. Without enough light, they will not bear as much and could be susceptible to insect infestation. Vegetables and fruit also need plenty of water because they're not very drought-tolerant.

Another good tip is to locate the garden near the house or barbecue grill. This way you can easily harvest fresh produce and use it when cooking.

Soil preparation is also key. Till the soil and remove debris like rocks, sticks and hard clumps of dirt. Work with organic material, such as manure or compost. Apply mulch after planting to help maintain moisture levels in the soil. It's easy to get a garden started and enjoy fresh food for many months to come.

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Amendments can help produce healthy soil

Mother Nature provides plenty to grow healthy lawns, gardens and landscapes. But as many homeowners know, some lawns sometimes need a little extra boost to complement nature. Soil sometimes must be amended so plants can thrive. Only after the right composition is created can plants take root and perform to the best of their abilities.

The Colorado State University Extension defines a soil amendment as any material added to soil to improve its physical properties. The goal is to provide a better environment for roots. Depending on what you are starting with, any number of ingredients must be added to the soil recipe. Water retention, permeability, drainage, aeration, nutrients, and water infiltration are some of the things amendments can improve when added to soil.

Before homeowners add anything to the soil in their yards, it is first important to determine what that soil needs. Homeowners may notice if soil is overly sandy or full of clay, but further testing can confirm what the soil is lacking. Soil tests are often available through local cooperative extension offices or private laboratories. Speak with a nursery or garden center about where you can get your soil tested. A comprehensive test may cost between \$5 and \$10 and can provide invaluable information that saves you hundreds of dollars in wasted plants and mate-

rials, not to mention effort. Some labs also can tailor their recommendations based on the type of planting you will be doing. For example, a vegetable garden may need different amendments than a row of azalea bushes.

Organic matter is a preferred soil amendment used by professional and novice gardeners alike. The decaying remains of plants release nutrients that are absorbed into the soil and used by microorganisms and bacteria, creating a healthy environment for plants. Organic material may break up compacted soil to increase drainage. In sandy soil, organic material serves as a sponge to keep water from washing away. Compost and manure are two examples of frequently used organic materials. Both of these materials are readily available at little cost.

Compost can be produced at home from food and plant scraps. Raked leaves and small amounts of grass clippings can be added to compost. Over time, the decomposition process will turn scraps into a nutrient-rich, dark brown substance that provides many plants with all they need to thrive. Compost is particularly useful in vegetable gardens.

Manure should come from herbivores, or those animals that sustain themselves on grass and other plants. Carnivores can produce harmful bacteria in their waste, which is not safe to use in gardens, particularly food-

bearing gardens. Manure can be commercially purchased, or avid gardeners can work out arrangements with nearby livestock owners and farms. These people may be more than willing to give you manure for little to no cost if you cart it away. Dried manure is preferred because it will have minimal odor. Additional forms of organic amendments include wood ash, sphagnum peat, wood chips, sawdust, and worm droppings.

Inorganic amendments also may be used, and are usually relied on to improve water retention and drainage. Vermiculite, perlite, pea gravel, and sand are examples of inorganic amendments. A combination of organic and

inorganic amendments can create the perfect mix for your needs.

Soil amendments typically are added to new and unplanted beds. Peat moss and shredded bark take years to decompose and will serve as long-term amendments in the soil. Compost breaks down quickly and may need to be worked in more frequently.

Experts recommend spreading amendments on the planting bed and then using a rake or tiller to work it in to a depth of about nine inches. Particularly sandy soil or soil with a lot of clay may need more amendments. Soil amendments can be the difference between a thriving garden and healthy landscape and one that has seen better days.

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Shade-tolerant plants help to complete landscapes

Plants need sunlight to thrive and grow, but some need less sunlight than others. People who find their landscapes are less supportive to sun-loving plants can choose from a variety of shade-tolerant plants, shrubs and trees.

Shade tolerance refers to a plant's ability to withstand low levels of light. Certain plants have adapted this feature to survive in the wild. Plants that grow at the base of forest floors, for example, will get less sunlight than others outside of the tree canopy. Such adaptations enable a wide variety of foliage to grow even though they are not exposed to much sunlight.

While sun-loving plants often have broad leaves and expend significant energy to capture sunlight for photosynthesis, shade-tolerant plants expend less energy and tend to be more efficient consumers of soil nutrients and sunlight.

Penn State Extension's Plant and Pests division says the amount of shade a plant is growing under will directly affect the density of the foliage and the plant's flowering and fruiting characteristics. Blending shade-tolerant plants into the landscape can be an effective use of space. Before choosing plants for an existing landscape, it's important to assess the level of shade or sun the plants will receive.

• **Heavy shade:** Heavy shade is when no direct sunlight reaches a plant. This occurs at the base of northern-facing

walls or beneath thick tree canopies.

- **Full sun:** Areas that receive full sun enjoy direct sunlight between six and eight hours per day.
- **Moderate shade:** These sites have reflected sunlight that may come off of water features.
- **Light shade:** Plants in these areas will get partially filtered or dappled sunlight.

Once homeowners understand which type of shade they are dealing with, they can then visit plant nurseries and select their plants. Most greenery comes with care instructions that include recommendations regarding the amount of shade/sunlight the plant will need to do well. If further assistance is needed, a knowledgeable employee can make suggestions based on landscape needs.

Those who are looking for some preliminary guidance when it comes to selecting shade-tolerant shrubs, plants or trees can consult the following list.

- **Bleeding heart:** Bleeding heart, or *Dicentra spectabilis*, is typically found in woodlands. It's a perennial in the poppy family that produces mounded foliage and arching vine-like stems of heart-shaped flowers in the spring.
- **Amethyst flower:** *Browallia* hybrids offer star-shaped blooms of blue and violet. These plants will billow out of hanging baskets or containers, and they prefer warm shade or filtered sunlight.
- **Coleus:** The *coleus*, *Solenostemon*

scutellarioides, is another perennial that can have a variety of different leaf colors and striations.

• **Witch hazels:** These are a genus in the family Hamamelidaceae, which has four different species in North America. This shrub or small tree features arching branches with dense, multi-stemmed clumps. Witch hazel produces flowers in the late autumn when most other plants are sparse.

• **Bayberry:** *Myrica pensylvanica* can grow in partial shade as a hedge or natural property divider. The leaves of this shrub are aromatic when crushed.

The shrub will produce tiny, gray/white fruits in late summer.

• **English Ivy:** Also known as *Hedera helix*, this trailing plant is widely cultivated as an ornamental plant. It will spread easily and can become invasive.

Those searching for shade-tolerant trees can choose among Sugar maple, Black alder, Flowering dogwood, and White spruce, among others.

Shade-tolerant plants can make welcome additions to the landscape, offering greenery and color in the darker areas of a property.

Aeration keeps lawns looking lush

One of the ways homeowners can keep their lawns looking lush and green is to aerate the turf when the need arises. Aerators perforate the soil with small holes. These holes allow air, nutrients and water to penetrate all the way to the roots, helping them grow deep and strong.

Deep, strong roots are essential to healthy, lush lawns. While aeration can help many lawns, not every lawn will necessarily need to be aerated. Lawns that get heavy use, such as those that are often played on by children or pets, will likely benefit from periodic aeration. Feeling the lawn also can help homeowners determine if it needs to be aerated.

Lawns that dry out quickly or feel spongy may be overcome with thatch, which can prevent lawns from getting

the air, water and nutrients they need to thrive. Aerating lawns is especially helpful before the hot summer months. Without aeration, water just runs off the dirt and doesn't make it down to the roots where it needs to go.

Lawncare professionals recommend aerating lawns that contain thatch that is more than one-half inch. Thatch also can foster grub infestations, providing another benefit to removing it and aerating a lawn.

When to aerate depends on the type of grass. Homeowners should consult with a lawncare professional about the best time to aerate their particular lawns, but it's generally recommended that cool-season grasses be aerated in early spring or fall, while it's best to aerate warm season grasses in late spring.

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Break ground with the right tools

The right tools for the job can be the difference between an interminable landscaping project and one that goes smoothly and efficiently. Aspiring landscapers probably have a few shovels and rakes hanging in their garages and sheds for basic landscaping work. But while such tools are effective for certain projects, when it comes to churning soil for garden beds or digging holes for outdoor structures, additional tools come in handy. It may be well worth a trip to a nearby home center to purchase or rent one of these tools ideal for breaking ground.

Rototiller

A rototiller, sometimes called just a "tiller," is a powered garden tool designed to loosen soil prior to planting. A rototiller also can help aerate soil during the growing season. Because they reduce the need for manual spade digging or hoeing, tillers can be useful landscaping tools, particularly for homeowners who want to work efficiently. Rototillers will break through tough soil and any plant roots. They come in a variety of sizes, and it's best to match the tool to the size of the job. Many homeowners can get by with smaller, less powerful models, especially if the tiller is only necessary at the beginning of planting season.

Auger

Augers, both mechanical and manual, are essentially large drill bits that help move materials from one location

to another. Augers are typically used to cut holes in landscapes, and they are good for post-hole drilling, which is part of the process of installing deck footings, fencing posts or other structures. Augers come in a variety of sizes, and homeowners can choose how much power they prefer. Augers can be heavy and cumbersome, and many do-it-yourselfers will find that one-person augers are more than adequate for their projects. Augers dig deep holes, so it is always smart to have the property surveyed prior to use. This way pipes, gas lines, buried electrical lines, and any other obstructions are clearly identified prior to drilling.

Cultivator

Cultivators are similar to tillers in that they loosen soil. Cultivators are effective during the growth period of plants, when they can be used to aerate the soil and remove weeds. Cultivators come in hand-held versions and push models, and some are even motorized. Cultivators get close to plants to remove weeds without disturbing the plant.

When using any tools around the garden, wear the proper protection. This includes devices to protect hearing when power tools are in use as well as gloves and safety goggles. Tillers, augers and cultivators have the potential to toss soil and rocks into the air, so make sure others keep their distance while work is in progress.

Seeding and refertilizing

Restoring lawns and gardens back to their pre-winter glory is high on many a homeowner's landscaping to-do list. In much of the country, the best times to tackle lawn projects are when temperatures are moderate, like in spring and fall.

Planting and fertilizing new grass seed should be done when frost is no longer a concern. According to Roger Cook, a landscape contractor and contributor to "This Old House" magazine, sowing lawn seed should be done when the soil is warm, the daytime temperatures are moderate and you can keep the new seeds quite moist at all times.

The process of reseeding and fertilizing your lawn is relatively similar if you decide to do so in late spring or early fall.

- Rake the parts of the lawn you plan to seed and remove any debris or rocks.
- Apply fertilizer to the cleared planting area. Use a rake or tiller to break up the soil and distribute the fertilizer to a depth of roughly two to four inches. Speak with a landscaper about which type of fertilizer you will need depending on where you live. Many fertilizers contain extra phosphorous to stimulate root growth in the lawn.
- Moisten the prepared area and let the soil settle. You want the soil damp but not so wet that it causes the newly applied fertilizer to run off.

• Begin to sow the grass seed according to the rate indicated on the seed bag for the type of grass you will be growing. Choose a grass seed that will thrive in your climate. Certain seeds are more tolerant of drought and sunlight, while other species are better for shady areas or damper climates. Again, if you have any questions, consult with a lawn and garden center.

• Spread the seed with a broadcast spreader. Some lawn experts recommend spreading the seed in parallel rows and then repeating the process again in rows set at a right angle to the first series of rows for the best chances of seed coverage. The seeds then can be raked into the soil, covered with a little more soil and patted down.

• Water to keep the seeds damp. This may require watering twice or more per day until the seeds begin to germinate. Covering the seeds with about 1/4 inch of straw also can help keep the seeds moist, deter seed scavengers and prevent soil erosion. Remove the straw once the grass begins to grow.

• Roughly four weeks after the seeds have started to grow, apply another round of fertilizer to replenish the top layer of soil with nutrients that may have washed away from the constant watering.

Many homeowners like to take on the challenge of seeding and preparing their lawns. But some may find the task is best left to the professionals.



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Recognizing and addressing grub infestations in your yard

Lawns face many threats, not the least of which is grubs. The larvae of certain types of insects, including beetles, grubs feed on the roots of grass and plants and can turn even the greenest, most impressive lawns into unsightly eyesores.

Many homeowners spend lots of time tending to their lawns, so the effects of grub infestations can be especially frustrating. Learning to recognize what grub infestations look like and how to address them can help homeowners restore their lawns as quickly as possible.

What do grub infestations look like?

According to the University of Illinois Extension, lawns affected by grub

infestations will show wilting and browning of irregularly shaped areas. But grass that is turning brown is not always indicative of a grub infestation, as numerous factors can cause grass to turn brown.

Homeowners who suspect their lawns have been infested with grubs can approach spots where brown grass is meeting green grass and pull up the sod. Grubs appear slimy and C-shaped, and 10 or more within a square foot of sod is a sign that grubs have taken over.

Another potential indicator of grub infestations is holes or dirt channels in the lawn. These might be a byproduct of skunks, moles and raccoons digging

up the lawn in search of grubs to eat.

Soft, spongy ground that is easy to pull up may also be indicative of grub infestations.

When are grub infestations likely to occur?

The timing of grub infestations may depend on geography. Homeowners who suspect their lawns have been infested by grubs can consult with lawn care professionals to determine if that's likely. Some grub infestations discovered in the spring may actually be byproducts of infestations that began in the previous fall.

How can grub infestations be treated?

One way to treat grub infestations is to remove thatch from lawns. Thatch

can harbor grubs by shielding them from pesticide applications. Aerating a lawn allows air, water and nutrients to penetrate the soil, fostering stronger roots that promote healthier lawns. Aerating also removes thatch, taking grubs' shelters away in the process.

Another way to combat grub infestations is to water deeply and infrequently, which encourages strong roots. Grubs prefer moist soil, and beetles are less likely to lay eggs that become grubs in lawns that are watered infrequently and deeply.

Grub infestations can be an unsightly nuisance. But such problems can be solved if recognized and addressed quickly.

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MDR Contracting has years of experience, many happy customers

- By Marge Neal -

With nearly 30 years in the home remodeling business, Mike Shipley has honed his craft, makes his customers happy and takes great pride in stepping back and admiring the creativity and quality of work performed by his crews.

Shipley runs three related companies - MDR Contracting, MDR Concrete and MDR Roofing - under his umbrella corporation, Maryland Real Estate Sales, Leasing and Remodeling. The owner has 27 years in the business and has been operating MDR for 15 years.

Headquartered in Hamilton, MDR specializes in residential home improvement, including concrete work, stone veneers, sun rooms, decks, roof repair and replacement and kitchen and bathroom replacements. They also do room additions and remodels.

"We have a triple-A rating with the Better Business Bureau and Angie's List," Shipley said. "In all the years of doing this, there has never been a single complaint against us."

Shipley's companies do most of their work within a 20-mile radius of Baltimore City. He does a lot of work in the Dundalk, Essex and Middle River communities and said he has many memorable projects of which he was particularly proud.

"I just finished a job in Joppa Farm - a two-room addition and a kitchen remodel," he told the *East County Times* in a phone interview. "It turned out beautiful and the owners are very happy."

In online reviews, customers compliment MDR work crews for being on time, their ability to finish the job on time and the quality of their work. Customers also appreciate the workers taking the time to explain the project and inform the clients what they can expect as the projects progress.

"The contractor took the time to understand the job I wanted and had a keen eye for detail," according to N. Millard of Baltimore. "The project started and ended on time and was on budget. There were no surprise changes or charges."

MDR crews were noted for being "professional and courteous" and for leaving the site cleaner than they found it, in comments made by Jake Seidel of Linthicum Heights.

The company's website, which offers a comprehensive list of the types of jobs the company's crews can perform as well as photographs of before, during and after projects, is www.networx.com/c.mdr-concrete.

Shipley can be reached at 443-506-9222 and estimates can be requested through the website.

Celebrate Arbor Day with 10 free shade trees by joining the Arbor Day Foundation

National Arbor Day is Friday, April 28, this year and the Arbor Day Foundation is making it easy for anyone to celebrate the annual tree-planting holiday. Join the Foundation in April and receive 10 free shade trees.

By joining the Foundation in April, new members receive the following trees: red oak, sugar maple, weeping willow, baldcypress, thornless honeylocust, pin oak, river birch, tuliptree, silver maple and red maple. The free trees are part of the Trees for America campaign.

"These trees provide shade in the summer and vibrant colors throughout the fall," said Matt Harris, chief executive of the Arbor Day Founda-

tion. "Through the simple act of planting trees, one person can make a difference in helping to create a healthier and more beautiful planet for all of us to enjoy."

The trees will be shipped postpaid with enclosed planting instructions at the right time for planting in April or May. The six- to 12-inch trees are guaranteed to grow or they will be replaced free of charge. To become a member of the Foundation and receive the free trees, send a \$10 contribution to Ten Free Shade Trees, Arbor Day Foundation, 100 Arbor Avenue, Nebraska City, NE 68410, by April 30, or visit arbor day.org/april.

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Pitch in and save money

in during the following phases.

- **Demolition:** Demolition involves more than picking up a sledgehammer and swinging away. Some demolition projects are best left to the pros. For example, any projects that involve exposure to hazardous materials are risky and therefore best left to experienced laborers. However, many homeowners are capable of safely and effectively pulling cabinets from walls, removing flooring or knocking down drywall. Homeowners unsure of how to approach demolition tasks can ask their contractors to demonstrate the proper technique so the demolition is done right and on time.

- **Salvage:** Removing debris and items that will no longer be needed once the renovation is complete is another way homeowners can pitch in. Homeowners remodeling their kitchens may be replacing their existing stoves and refrigerators and hoping to donate these items. In such instances, driving the items to the donation site or arranging for them to be picked up rather than taken off the premises by the contractor or his employees can cut labor costs, as it allows laborers to keep working toward the end goal rather than requiring them to leave the work site to drop unwanted items off.

- **Cleanup:** Homeowners also can save costs by cleaning up after the contractors at the end of each workday. Speak with the contractor about cleaning up the site each day, asking him or her what can be discarded and what must remain on-site.

Home improvements are costly. But homeowners who are capable of pitching in can greatly reduce the overall cost of their next renovation project.

According to HomeAdvisor, an online resource for homeowners looking to connect with home improvement, maintenance and repair professionals, the average bathroom remodeling project costs \$9,348, while the average home addition costs slightly less than \$41,000. But renovation-minded homeowners need not reconsider their commitment to remodeling, as there are various ways to cut the costs associated with home improvement projects.

One such way is for homeowners to pitch in and do some of the work themselves. Calculating labor costs can be difficult, as such costs can vary greatly depending on the project, the contractor and the amount of hired help that contractor intends to employ. However, some estimates suggest labor will account for anywhere from 25 to 50 percent of the overall cost of the project. So it's no surprise that homeowners can save themselves substantial amounts of money by doing some of the work themselves.

Homeowners who intend to do some of the labor themselves should discuss this plan with contractors during the vetting process. Before hiring a contractor, make sure homeowners' expected labor contributions are clearly defined in the contract.

While it's best to leave the most complicated parts of a project to the professionals, homeowners can pitch

Expect the unexpected when renovating

According to projections released in 2015 by Harvard University's Joint Center for Housing Studies, a growing number of people in the United States planned to renovate their homes in 2016. The report estimated that spending on remodeling and repairs in 2016 would climb 8.6 percent to \$310 billion, a figure that is close to the peak reached in 2006.

While it is still too soon to tabulate all of the figures from 2016, a quick glance at the data indicates renovations have increased across the country. And one only need travel through communities to see a greater number of contractors and homeowners working on homes.

Tackling any renovation project is an exercise in patience. Renovations can impede on daily activities and cause a certain level of upheaval in homeowners' lives. Homeowners planning renovations also may find that they must have some wiggle room when it comes to both their budgets and their expectations. Remodeling, particularly with regard to older homes, may unveil unforeseen issues that only arise in the face of the renovation.

So what can homeowners expect during a renovation? The following are a few issues that might arise during home improvement projects.

- **Dirt and noise:** Homeowners can count on dust, debris and noise throughout the renovation process. Dust appears when walls come down or go up, and construction teams typically erect temporary walls or tarps to contain the debris. Air filtering

systems also can limit dust particles. Noise is unavoidable. If it becomes troublesome, arrange to be outside of the home when the bulk of the construction is taking place.

- **Delays or schedule changes:** Even the best contractors cannot control every aspect of the job. They rely on subcontractors and vendors to do portions of the work. Materials may not always arrive on time, or they may fall short of homeowners' expectations. This can push back the project schedule. Homeowners should hope for everything to be done on time, but it can be less stressful if homeowners anticipate delays and be a pleasant surprise if there are no delays.

- **Hidden issues:** Contractors may uncover all sorts of issues that need to be addressed before a project can progress. Examples include the presence of asbestos (common in older homes), plumbing problems, incorrectly wired electrical systems, and leaks or moisture issues. These problems also can impact the cost of the project, so set aside some money in the budget for unforeseen expenses. Chances are you are going to need some extra money to handle a few surprises during the project.

It's important to expect the unexpected when embarking on home renovations. Budgeting for hidden costs, expecting delays and coping with the upheaval to daily schedules are par for the remodeling course. However, the end result is often well worth the time and effort.



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Cracks can cause hazards in trees

Inspection from industry certified arborists can prevent severe property damage

Tree failure is a major cause of property damage, especially after high-winds. If the wind is strong enough, even healthy trees can be uprooted or broken. But it might not take a storm or high winds to cause a cracked or rotted tree to fail under its own weight.

"Homeowners worried about trees falling and damaging property should call a qualified arborist for an on-site inspection," advises Tchukki Andersen, BCMA, CTSP* and staff arborist with the Tree Care Industry Association (TCIA). Andersen notes that trees are genetically designed to withstand storms, but all trees can fail, and defective trees fail sooner than healthy trees.

"To a professional arborist," notes Andersen, "certain defects are indicators that a tree has an increased potential to fail."

Cracks in tree trunks can be one of the major indicators of an unstable tree. Most cracks are caused by improper closure of wounds or by the splitting of weak branch unions. They can be found in branches, stems or roots, and vary in type and severity.

There are horizontal and vertical cracks. Horizontal cracks run across the grain of the wood and develop just before the tree fails, making them very difficult to detect. Vertical cracks run with the wood grain along the length of the tree and may appear as shear or ribbed cracks.

Shear cracks can run completely through the stem and separate it into two halves. As the tree bends and sways in the wind, one half of the stem slides over the other, elongating the crack. Eventually the enlarging crack causes the two halves of the stem to shear apart.

Ribbed cracks are created as the tree attempts to



Cracks in trees can lead to broken limbs which can fall, causing damage to homes or other property if not properly addressed by a certified arborist.

seal over a wound. Margins of the crack meet and mesh but are reopened due to tree movement or extremely cold temperatures. Thicker annual rings are created in order to stabilize the developing crack at the location of the wound. This forms the ribbed appearance over a period of many years.

These cracks put a tree at high risk of failure and are especially dangerous when combined with other defects or with advanced decay.

A qualified arborist can determine the potential for failure by measuring the shell thickness in a few locations around the tree's circumference, determining the width of the crack opening and looking for

the presence of any other type of defect.

What is the risk?

Cracks are hazardous because they compromise the structure of the tree. They can eventually split the stem in two, and are very dangerous when combined with internal decay. The presence of multiple cracks and decay indicates a potentially hazardous tree.

Find a professional

A professional arborist can assess your landscape and work with you to determine the best care for your trees. Contact the Tree Care Industry Association, a public and professional resource on trees and arboriculture since 1938. TCIA has more than 2,300 member tree care firms and affiliated companies who recognize stringent safety and performance standards and who are required to carry liability insurance. TCIA also has the nation's only accreditation program that helps consumers find tree care companies that have been inspected and accredited based on: adherence to industry standards for quality and safety; maintenance of trained, professional staff; and dedication to ethics and quality in business practices. For more, visit www.tcia.org or www.treecaretips.org.

An easy way to find a tree care service provider in your area is to use the "Locate Your Local TCIA Member Companies" program. You can use this service by calling 1-800-733-2622 or by doing a ZIP Code search at www.treecaretips.org.






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Composite decking can be a smart choice

Decks add character and functionality to a home, increasing outdoor entertaining space and often-times improving the resale value of a home. Homeowners have various options when choosing decking materials, but one such option, composite decking, is growing in popularity.

Decks used to primarily be made from pressure-treated lumber. While lumber remains a popular material, more and more homeowners are opting for composite decking products. As anyone who has pressure-washed, stained and sealed wood decks can attest, such spaces require lots of upkeep to look new year after year. Composite decks require much less maintenance, making them highly attractive to homeowners who would rather spend time using their decks instead of maintaining them.

Composite decking is any type of decking material that is formulated from different recycled materials. The majority of these materials include hard plastic and wood shavings of pulp. Unlike wood, which can fade, crack and rot, composite decking, which has been available for roughly a decade, does not degrade quickly and requires very little upkeep.

Available in a variety of wood colors to match outdoor decor, composite decks also can feature artificial wood grains to make them look similar to wood planks. Although composite decks are not completely impervious to the elements, with some occasional washing to impede mold growth and new technology that has improved stain-resistance, many of the pitfalls of other materials can be avoided with composite decks.

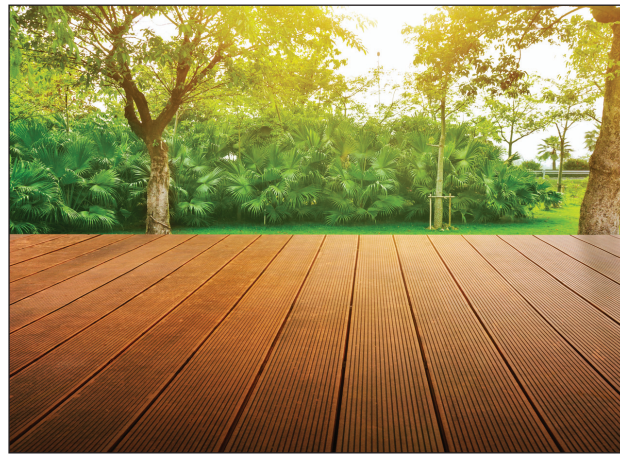
Composite decking fits in with eco-friendly lifestyles. The planks are made from recycled materials that would normally end up in landfills. Products from Trex, a popular composite decking manufacturer, are made from 1.5 million shopping bags and

wood mill waste. As composite decks do not rot away and are long-lasting, they will not need to be replaced frequently, which is another eco-friendly benefit.

When comparing composite decking brands, look mainly at the colors, materials used in the composition and the fastening systems. Many are fastened with regular deck screws, offers This Old House. The newer systems have channels for hidden fastening, and the composite deck tiles snap into place.

Composite decks do have a few drawbacks. They can be expensive - nearly double the initial cost of wood decks. And although they don't rot, composite planks can scratch. Without refinishing, damaged boards will need to be replaced. Harsh chemicals may fade color and damage the composite materials, so caution is needed.

Composite decking remains an in-demand choice for outdoor spaces. Low-maintenance and long-lasting, these decks have quickly become favorites among homeowners.



Composite decking can mimic the look of wood, but requires much less maintenance.

Addressing spring ant problems

The return of warm weather in the spring often marks the return of animals and insects as well. The spring season is a popular time for insects to mate and build nests. This also may be a time when homeowners see ant "swarms" in or around their homes.

Ants and termites are social creatures, and when their colonies become too large, flying ants will spread out in search of new territories and to establish new queens. This mobility may also be coupled with an increasing number of ants marching on the ground and scaling walls.

Although many species of ants are harmless, homeowners do not want to see ants inside their homes - especially in large numbers. The following strategies can help homeowners address ant infestations this spring.

- Identify the type of ant around your property. Consult with online guides or books to identify the species of ant on your property. Knowing which species of ant is in or around your home can help you address the problem more effectively.

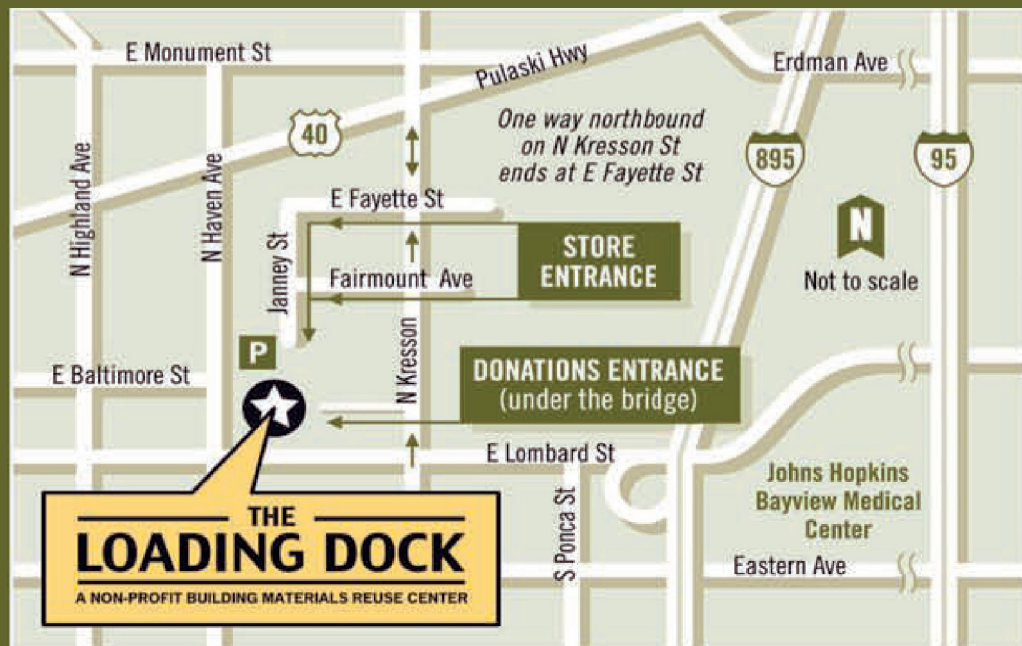
- Create a food trap. Ants are attracted to various food sources, such as fats, sweets and proteins. Mixing a very small amount of a food with boric acid can help control ant populations. Ants will bring tainted food back to their colonies and perish.

- Keep a clean house. Use vinegar, soap and water to clean areas where ants are seen. Many leave a scent trail of pheromones to tell others where to go for a food source.

- Treat carpenter ants at the source. Carpenter ants will not bring back food to the nest. Instead, sprinkle diatomaceous earth, or DE, around outdoor nests to eradicate colonies.

- Work with an exterminator. If home remedies do not work, consult with a trained exterminator.

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How to make existing windows more energy efficient

Drafty windows make homes less comfortable by allowing cold air in during the winter and warm air in when temperatures rise. But comfort is not the only concern associated with leaky windows, as such fixtures also can have a negative impact on the environment.

Leaky windows require heating and cooling systems to work harder to keep home interiors comfortable during times of the year when temperatures can be extreme. In the dead of winter, a leaky window will force a home's inhabitants to turn up the thermostat, which only increases energy consumption and energy bills. The same scenario plays out in summer, when leaky windows allow hot air in, leading homeowners to lower the temperature of air conditioning units so everyone inside is cool and comfortable.

Thankfully, making windows more energy efficient does not necessarily require homeowners to replace existing windows. Before going that potentially expensive route, homeowners can consider the following strategies to improve the energy efficiency of their windows.

- **Hang curtains.** Curtains can help homeowners cut down on heating and cooling costs. According to the U.S. Department of Energy, properly hung draperies can reduce heat loss by as much as 25 percent. In the summer, curtains can block the hot rays from the sun from entering a home, reducing the need to turn up air conditioning units. While curtains won't fix leaks or block hot or cold air from entering a home, they can serve as a buffer between a home's inhabitants and the air seeping in through leaks.

- **Caulk or add weatherstripping.** Small cracks and gaps around windows, which are most often found around windows in older buildings, might not seem like a big deal, but such breaches can lead to considerable energy loss. The DOE recommends using caulk to seal cracks that are less than 1/4-inch wide on the parts of the window that do not move (i.e., frames and where the trim meets the wall). Caulk



might be less effective at fixing leaks larger than 1/4 inch in width. Employ weatherstripping to address leaks on movable parts of the window. Properly applied weatherstripping should adequately seal windows when they are closed without making it difficult to open or close them later on. Weatherstripping is available in various materials, and homeowners can visit www.energy.gov/energysaver/weatherstripping to find the material that's most suitable for their situation.

- **Install window films.** Plastic window films are another option for homeowners looking to improve the energy efficiency of their windows. Heat shrink film can be cut to fit each individual leaky window in a home and then attached to windows using double-sided tape. A hair dryer can then be used to shrink the film and remove any wrinkles. Low-emissivity, or Low-E, coatings are a more expensive alternative to heat shrink film, and they can be equally effective at improving energy efficiency. Installation of Low-E coatings can be more difficult, as they do not provide as much leeway for mistakes during application as heat shrink film.

Leaky windows are bad for homeowners' energy bills and the environment. But homeowners have options other than full window replacements to fix leaks and improve efficiency.

Realize energy savings with one simple step

A simple project that will help keep your home cool this summer is topping up your attic insulation. This easy project will reduce your household energy consumption and will save you money on monthly energy bills.

A poorly insulated attic is a primary source of energy loss, forcing your AC unit to work harder than necessary. Most attics are insulated, but many, especially those in older homes, are not insulated adequately enough. Over time, insulation can settle and compact, allowing heat to escape through gaps.

Topping it up is easy. Ideally, you want to aim for a depth of 16 inches of insulation for an overall R-value of 50. When existing insulation is present, simply level existing insulation to the top of the joist. Lay it on top of joists, running perpendicular to the first or existing layer of insulation. Ensure batts are butted against each other tightly. Fit batts closely to cross joists: cut batt if necessary (this can be done easily with a serrated blade or bread knife) and leave no space between layers. Don't forget to insulate the hatch to the same level as the rest of the attic. Apply weather stripping to the edge of the hatch to reduce air leakage. Keep in mind that only IC-rated electrical fixtures can have insulation placed with zero clearance. Follow manufacturer's instructions and local building code to insulate around the chimney.

Insulation begins working the moment it is installed and lasts throughout the life of the building, which means one easy DIY project can provide years of savings.

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The benefits of backyard koi ponds

Koi ponds can make for beautiful additions to landscaped backyards or home gardens. While many people are drawn to koi ponds because of their aesthetic appeal, there are many additional reasons for homeowners to consider installing koi ponds in their backyards.

Ponds and water gardens can transform yards rather quickly. Ponds can add appeal to otherwise mundane yards and provide eye-catching, relaxing spots to sit and enjoy the scenery.

Koi ponds have recently fallen into a favor with homeowners in North America, but these popular water features date back several centuries to Asia. Centuries ago, Chinese rice farmers began keeping carp in their rice paddies, and that practice eventually caught on in Japan. The fish started to breed and

form slight color variations. Koi, often referred to as "Nishikigoi," are actually descendants of the common carp, though the koi of today are more brightly hued and ornamental fish than carp.

Koi can become a low-maintenance family pet. These fish tend to grow accustomed to having people around, and will often interact with visitors at the surface of the water. It's not unusual to have koi beg for food or take food from a person's hand. They also may tolerate some light handling.

Another benefit of koi ponds is that they create a miniature ecosystem within the yard. When stocked with aquatic plants and other fish that can help keep mosquito larvae and other parasites at bay, they can sustain themselves quite nicely. Ponds also can attract birds and beneficial insects, such as butterflies

and dragonflies. By implementing straight vertical walls on the perimeter of the pond and setting up some natural barriers, homeowners can avoid unwanted predators from disturbing their koi ponds.

Koi ponds also provide some psychological benefits. The sound of the water can be soothing and relaxing. Sitting by the pond may help alleviate stress, as unwinding next to a pond and watching the fish swim by can help individuals decompress.

Homeowners who have koi ponds may also benefit socially from these eye-catching additions to their landscapes. Homeowners may connect with others who share their passion for koi and water features. This opens up the opportunity to share the landscape and pond with others, building new friends and relationships in the process.

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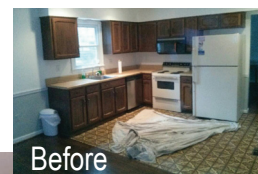
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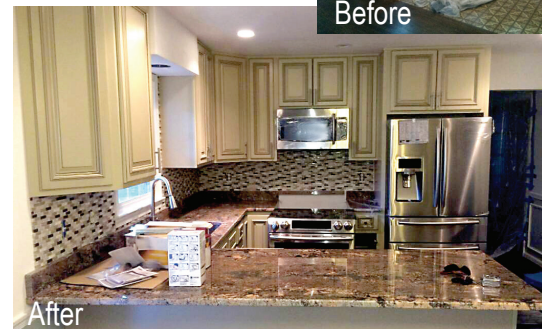
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Tree Pruning to ANSI Standards



pruning practices that arborists should follow.

Arborists adhering to the ANSI A300 pruning standard *will not*:

- leave branch stubs
- make unnecessary heading cuts
- cut off the branch collar (not make a flush cut)
- top or lion's tail trees (stripping a branch from the inside leaving foliage just at the ends)
- remove more than 25 percent of the foliage of a single branch
- remove more than 25 percent of the total tree foliage in a single year
- damage other parts of the tree during pruning
- use wound paint
- prune without a good reason
- climb the tree with climbing spikes

Find a professional

A professional arborist can assess your landscape and work with you to determine the best and safest course of action for any work that needs to be done. Contact the Tree Care Industry Association (TCIA), a public and professional resource on trees and arboriculture since 1938. It has more than 2,300 member tree care firms and affiliated companies who recognize stringent safety and performance standards and who are required to carry liability insurance.

TCIA has the nation's only accreditation program that helps consumers find tree care companies that have been inspected and accredited based on adherence to industry standards for quality and safety; maintenance of trained, professional staff; and dedication to ethics and quality in business practices.

An easy way to find a tree care service provider in your area is to use the "Locate Your Local TCIA Member Companies" program. You can use this service by calling 1-800-733-2622 or by doing a ZIP Code search on www.treecaretips.org.

a carefully written pruning prescription.

How can a homeowner know if an arborist will prune a tree correctly?

"Ask the arborist if they prune according to the American National Standards Institute standard for tree pruning, which is called ANSI A300," says Andersen.

This standard recommends, and in some cases requires, that the use of certain tools, cutting techniques and pruning methods be followed, and sets the standard definitions for terms the arborist will use in your estimate. Properly written work estimates for tree pruning should be written in accordance with ANSI A300 standards.

In addition to the information given on the work estimate, ANSI A300 sets some guidelines for basic

Now is an excellent time to prune dead and hazardous branches out of trees, according to tree care experts. Why? It is easier to spot potential hazards such as cracks, defects and deadwood in leafless trees and apply corrective pruning when necessary.

"Most trees can be pruned year-round, if pruned properly," says Tchukki Andersen, BCMA, CTSP* and staff arborist for the Tree Care Industry Association. "However, certain pruning operations are easier to do in the winter, especially if the ground is frozen or the tree is not actively growing."

Some homeowners worry that arborists will not be able to identify deadwood on a leafless tree. "On the contrary," says Andersen. "This is the best time for an arborist to locate deadwood by looking for changes in branch color, fungus growth, cracks and other symptoms that can help them make this determination. Since the leaves are off, the view of the entire tree's architecture is clear and a thorough check can be performed."

Pruning is much more than the simple act of sawing off limbs. Proper pruning is an art based on scientific principles of plant physiology. At its most basic level, pruning trees involves removing damaged, dead or structurally weak limbs, which will improve a tree's health and reduce the chances of personal or property damage caused by falling limbs. More advanced pruning methods aid in improving the tree's structure and long-term health.

Proper pruning encourages growth, increases flower and fruit production, improves plant health and removes damaged limbs, all which give aesthetic appeal to a tree. Pruning at the right time and in the right way is critical, since it is possible to kill a tree by neglect or over-pruning. Pruning at the wrong time can be damaging to tree tissues. The best time for tree health to prune would be in early spring following



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