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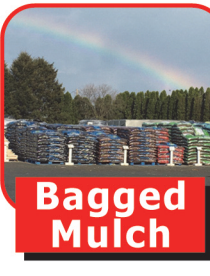
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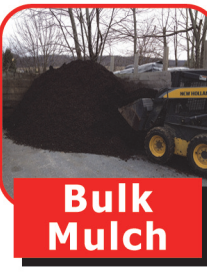
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The Benefits Of Hiring Professional Contractors

The DIY movement has inspired many homeowners to tackle home repair and remodeling projects on their own. DIY projects can be rewarding, and many homeowners who have embraced the DIY movement have discovered talents they never before knew they had.

But no matter how simple popular home renovation television shows make remodeling projects appear, homeowners should know that such undertakings are far more difficult than they appear on television. Homeowners who overestimate their abilities and the time they have to complete projects can cost themselves substantial amounts of money. In fact, there are a variety of reasons homeowners might want to work with professional contractors when tackling home improvement projects. **EXPERIENCE:** A trial and error approach can work with various projects and problems. But applying such an approach to home improvement projects is risky and potentially dangerous, not to mention costly. Experienced professional contractors with strong track records won't have to go through trial and error and are therefore more likely than DIYers to complete a project on time and on budget.

INSPIRATION: One oft-overlooked benefit of working with professional contractors is the likelihood that they can draw up ideas for projects that homeowners might otherwise never have thought up on their own. Homeowners without specific ideas in mind can ask contractors to come up with various scenarios before committing to a particular one. Veteran contractors can draw on years of experience to create designs that DIYers might be incapable of coming up with and/or incapable of seeing through to completion.

COST: Conventional wisdom suggests it's less expensive to do something yourself than to hire someone else to do it for you, but that's not necessarily true of home improvement projects. Labor costs typically account for a substantial amount of professionally contracted projects, but homeowners can cut those costs by volunteering to do some of the simpler tasks themselves. In addition, contractors often purchase materials

at a much lower cost than individual homeowners because contractors buy in bulk. So while labor costs might be lower on DIY projects, the cost of materials can offset those savings.

RESALE VALUE: Many homeowners renovate their homes with eyes on improving the resale value of those homes. But if homeowners want to showcase a newly remodeled kitchen when selling their homes, they should be prepared for prospective buyers

to ask who worked on the project. Fearing potential problems down the road, some buyers might be put off by homes that were remodeled by DIYers and not professional contractors. Renovating a home on your own can be a rewarding project for homeowners. But it's important that homeowners recognize the many benefits of working with professional contractors before making any final decisions with regard to who will tackle their next project.

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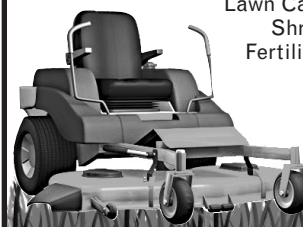
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How To Find The Right Replacement Windows

Replacing old windows is often a worthwhile investment for homeowners. Energy-efficient windows can prevent heating and cooling loss and keep homes more comfortable throughout the year. Such windows also can improve a home's resale value, proving a good return on investment for homeowners who want to upgrade their homes before putting them on the market.

According to the U.S. Department of Energy, homeowners might find it more cost-effective to replace very old and/or inefficient windows to improve their energy efficiency. Such an upgrade can save homeowners substantial amounts of money on heating and cooling costs.

Window replacement projects can be costly, so it pays to get the job right the first time. Before beginning a window replacement project, homeowners should research which windows will meet their specific needs, learning the subtleties between finishes and features, as well as comparing prices for the windows and installation.

Choose the right time of year: The best time of year to plan window replacement is when the weather will be warm, ideally in the spring or early summer. However, homeowners do not want conditions to be too warm, as each room where new windows will be installed will temporarily be exposed to the elements. Furthermore, caulk adheres better in warmer weather and will dispense easily. Consider available features: When replacing windows, homeowners may want to install the same style windows they currently have. But the problems that led to the need to replace windows may still exist even when new windows are installed. When replacing windows, consider energy performance ratings based on the locations of the windows in the house. To make sure they make the most educated decision, homeowners can investigate the solar heat gain coefficient, U-factor, visible transmittance and light-to-solar gain. Explanations

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of these ratings are available at Energy.gov.

Don't ignore maintenance needs: Maintenance costs involved with cleaning, repairs and painting can add up. When shopping for windows, consider the amount of maintenance they will need. Wood-framed windows may require more upkeep than aluminum, fiberglass or vinyl. Also, consider if certain window types, such as double-hung windows, casement windows, awning windows, or slider windows, would be practical. Keep home style in mind: A poor match between windows and the style of the home can produce unwanted changes in the appearance of the home. Replacement windows should match the style and appearance desired.

Expect minimal disruption: When homeowners hire professionals who are good at their craft, window replacement projects should not be a terrible inconvenience. According to American Window Products, Inc., seasoned professionals will be able to complete a replacement window upgrade in a short amount of time depending on the size of the home and the number of windows being replaced.

Replacing windows can be a costly task, but one that will provide a more energy efficient home that can help homeowners save money in the long run.

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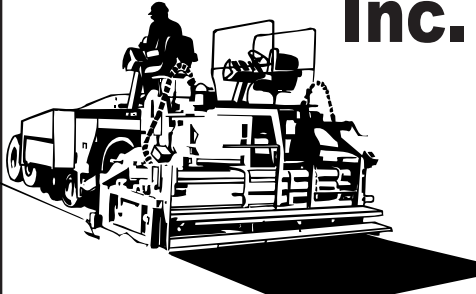
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How To Clear A Clogged Drain

Home plumbing systems are designed to handle heavy usage. When everything is working as it should, toilets flush, showers drain properly, and sink basins empty of water in a snap. But when a clog is present in a system, water can quickly back up.

There are various techniques to clear clogged drains. Minor clogs may be cleared without the help of a plumber or even any tools. More significant blockages will require more elbow grease.

The first step to clearing a clog is to locate the problem. Drainage issues that affect a particular sink or toilet may be isolated to that fixture. Clogs that are present throughout the house may be indicative of a larger problem in the plumbing that is directing waste away from the house and into the sewer system.

Sometimes a clog can be freed by pouring boiling hot water or a combination of baking soda and vinegar down the drain. If that doesn't help, move on to a plunger, advise the experts at This Old House. By creating pressure within the pipes, a plunger can dislodge whatever is causing the backup. If the clog seems to be further down the drain, hair or grime may have become trapped. An auger, often referred to as a "plumber's snake," can be inserted into the drain to

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remove the grime and free up the water flow. Homeowners without access to an auger can try to fish the clog out of the drain with a wire hanger. If clogs cannot be alleviated, drain traps may need to be accessed. Those who do not know their way around pipes and wrenches should hire a professional.

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Must-Have Kitchen Remodel Features

Homeowners looking to renovate often see room for improvement in their kitchens and bathrooms. The National Association of Home Builder's Remodeling Market Index Survey, which measures conditions in the remodeling market, indicates that, in 2015, the two most common remodeling jobs were bathroom remodels (81 percent) and kitchen remodels (79 percent). Before investing too much into their remodeling projects, homeowners should think carefully about the features that will improve their time spent at home. When planning a kitchen renovation, homeowners may want to consider the following upgrades to make the room more enjoyable while improving its functionality.

OVERSIZED SINK: High-efficiency dishwashers are great and save time, but deep sinks to soak soup pots or woks are still useful. Deep sinks may be preferable to double sinks, especially for homeowners who use lots of kitchen tools when preparing meals.

SOFT-CLOSING HINGES: When replacing cabinets (or just the hardware), consider installing soft-closing hinges and slides on doors and drawers. These devices eliminate slamming and caught fingers, reducing noise and injuries in the kitchen.

FOOT-PEDAL WATER OPERATION When outfitting a sink, think about foot controls, which are popular in doctors' offices and hospitals.

Turning on the water with the tap of a foot can reduce the transfer of pathogens to faucets from hands during food preparation. These pedals also free up hands for other tasks.

BOTTOM'S UP: People likely spend more time raiding the refrigerator than the freezer on any given day. Rather than having to bend down to seek out that favorite flavor of Greek yogurt, choose a model with the fridge on top and freezer on the bottom, especially if anyone in the household has mobility issues. When shopping for refrigerators, French-door style units may offer even more access, making it easy for homeowners to slide fruit trays, sheet cakes and other large items into the fridge.

EXTRA LIGHTING: A kitchen should be a balance of form and function. A combination of overhead lighting, decorative lighting and task lighting can illuminate all areas of the space effectively.

APPLIANCE GARAGES: Architectural and design resource Houzz says that appliance garages are popular kitchen additions, too. Set at countertop level, these cabinets allow people to keep small appliances plugged in but tucked neatly behind closed doors. Kitchen remodels are a sizable investment, and renovations can be customized to make the kitchen more hospitable for all in residence.

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What To Do After Incurring Storm Damage

Along with recent local ice, wind, and snow storms, the 2017 hurricane season proved especially devastating for millions of people in the US.

Severe storms like hurricanes do not discriminate, and when such storms finally dissipate, people from all walks of life are left to deal with the often devastating consequences. Property damage is one such consequence, and the following are some things people can do in the aftermath of storms that caused damage to their property.

- Contact your insurance provider. Not all damage resulting from storms will necessarily be covered by insurance policies, but it's still imperative that people contact their insurance companies as soon as possible after their homes or vehicles have been damaged. Agents can help policy holders learn if their policies cover the damage done to their property and to what extent their coverage will help them recover. Many people will likely be making similar calls, so policy holders should try to be as patient as possible.
- Document the damage. People whose property has been damaged should use their smartphones and cameras to document the damage as extensively as possible. Take photos from various angles before you begin cleaning up. Providers may require visual evidence of the damage before they begin processing your claim, so ask about those requirements when contacting your insurance agent.
- Avoid downed power lines. In addition to protecting the investments you have made in your



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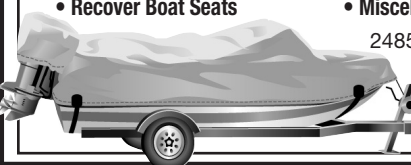
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Chimney Maintenance: A Part Of Home Safety

It's always important to revisit chimney maintenance. Even though chimneys do not require daily upkeep, regular maintenance efforts help chimneys operate safely and prevent deaths and injuries while protecting homes from fire. Various problems can arise when chimneys are not well maintained. Such problems include chimney fires, carbon monoxide poisoning and early failure of the chimney and heating sources that the chimney vents. Carbon monoxide can be scary, as it is virtually invisible without a proper detector. Hundreds of deaths per year have resulted from unintentional carbon monoxide poisoning in the United States. When carbon monoxide is breathed in, it builds up quickly and combines with the blood, reducing the blood's ability to carry oxygen. The Canada Safety Council says that body tissue and cells can't function without oxygen. Chimney fires are another potential byproduct of poor chimney maintenance. The Chimney Safety Institute of America notes that chimneys expel the byproducts of combustion, including smoke, water vapor, gases, unburned wood particles, hydrocarbon, tar fog, and assorted minerals, which can condense on the inside of the chimney flue. The residue, called creosote, is highly combustible. With the right conditions, a chimney fire can occur. To avoid chimney fires and other risks, take these precautions, courtesy of CSIA, HomeAdvisor and Popular Mechanics.

- Have chimneys inspected annually and properly cleaned by a professional chimney technician.
- Make sure tree branches and other obstacles are cleared away from the top of the chimney.
- Use seasoned hardwoods that have been split for several months to a year. "Green" wood creates more creosote.
- The top-down method of building a fire produces less smoke. This means using larger pieces of wood on the bottom and the smallest twigs and kindling at the top. The fire will burn from the top and down, igniting the wood beneath as it goes.
- Put a cap on the chimney to keep out rain, snow and small animals.
- Keep fires small; otherwise, the



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Is It Time To Update Your Home's Electrical System?

The invisible systems in a home often are taken for granted. When such systems are working as expected, daily life moves along smoothly. However, when a system goes awry, it can negatively impact routines and may create a dangerous home environment. This is especially true when something goes wrong with a home's electrical system.

Faulty wiring is a leading cause of residential fires. Many homeowners, particularly those who live in older homes, might be living in properties that have outdated electrical systems. The experts at Lowes ProServices state that having old wiring and/or insufficient amperage in a house can endanger residents. It also may damage appliances and make it difficult to sell a property in the future.

It can be difficult to gauge exactly when to overhaul an electrical system. Unless circuits routinely trip or lights often dim, homeowners may put off the work. But degrading wires or overextended circuitry can pose a fire risk, so it is best to address electrical systems promptly.

Home inspections may uncover electrical problems. Some homeowners may discover potential trouble while making renovations that require opening up walls or tearing them down, exposing the wires. Still other homeowners learn about electrical systems when they're adding new, large appliances or other gadgets that consume more power than existing items. These devices may continually cause power outages in the house, such as tripping the circuit breaker or popping a fuse.

When it comes time to update the electrical system, it is always best to work with licensed and bonded electricians who have the expertise to work with electrical wiring without getting injured. This is not a do-it-yourself type of job since it requires specialized training. Electricians likely will recommend upgrading the electrical panel to bring more power from the utility poles into the home.

This can include replacing the existing meter and circuit breaker box to allow it to handle more power or replacing items that are obsolete or dangerous. Many older homes are only capable of handling a minimum number of amps, utilizing just a few circuits. But nowadays, when homeowners have far more electronics in their homes than they once did, increased demand on electricity can overload a circuit (all of the outlets linked on one wire). Tripping a circuit breaker is a safety mea-



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sure to prevent the wire from becoming overheated and causing a fire. However, in some old systems, the circuit breaker will not trip, and this can be problematic. Rewiring a home is another step. Wire insulation can deteriorate over time, and new wires may be needed. This can be messy and time-consuming, but it's a small price to pay for safety. When rewiring an electrician also may suggest new outlets. Many home building codes now require outlets with ground fault

interruptors, or GFIs, in kitchens, bathrooms and other rooms exposed to moisture. Some older homes may not even have three-pronged outlets, so this will necessitate an update as well.

Electrical systems are the heart of a home, delivering power where it is needed. It is essential to keep such systems up-to-date so they can handle the power demands of everyday life.

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Bring More Natural Light Into A Home

Maximizing natural light in a home is a smart and sometimes low-cost renovation. Homes that are dark and drab can drain energy levels and reduce productivity. In addition, dark rooms may not be inviting places to gather as a family or when entertaining. Certain factors contribute to a dark home. Houses that face north or east may not get the same level of sunlight as those that primarily face south and west. Geographic location also plays a role in the amount of natural sunlight. Mountains, buildings and even latitude can affect the amount of natural light that enters a home. The style of a home and its attributes also may create dark conditions. Deep house eaves as well as small windows or too few windows also can contribute to a deficit of light indoors. A major remodel certainly can remedy the situation. However, there also are other less-extensive strategies to improve natural light.

- Assess the situation before renovating. Walk around the house and determine which rooms get the most light and which conditions may be contributing to the problem in other areas. Dark floors and walls may be absorbing natural light and compounding the situation. You may find that only one or two rooms need attention, saving you the cost and effort associated with a major home overhaul.
- Lighten up window treatments. Heavy drapes or thick blinds can be replaced with translucent alternatives. Translucent shades will allow light into the room without compromising privacy, say the experts at HGTV.
- Use mirrors strategically. A mirror placed opposite a window will reflect light all around the room. This can make a small room seem larger and a dark space instantly brighter.
- Install new windows and doors. If the budget allows, installing larger windows in a home will allow more natural light in. French doors or sliding doors also may make a home's interior more bright. Think about adding windows to a side of the house that has none, or increase the size of the windows on the side of the house that gets the most light.
- Maximize sunlight from above. Skylights will bring light into a home as the sun passes overhead. Tubular skylights can bring natural sunlight into spaces where you may not expect skylights to be practical.
- Use reflective decor. Reflective surfaces, including glass and metal, can brighten up a room and diffuse light around a room. Glossy back-splashes, pendant lighting and shiny metal that reflect light can increase the natural light, balancing out dark spaces.
- Prune trees regularly. Cut back branches and keep trees tidy to maximize sunlight. Avoid planting tall shrubbery in front of windows.
- Routinely clean windows and glass doors. Dirt and other grime can prevent light from getting through. Regularly give windows a thorough washing. Natural light is an important commodity in a home. Sunlight can improve mood and go a long way toward keeping home occupants healthy and happy.

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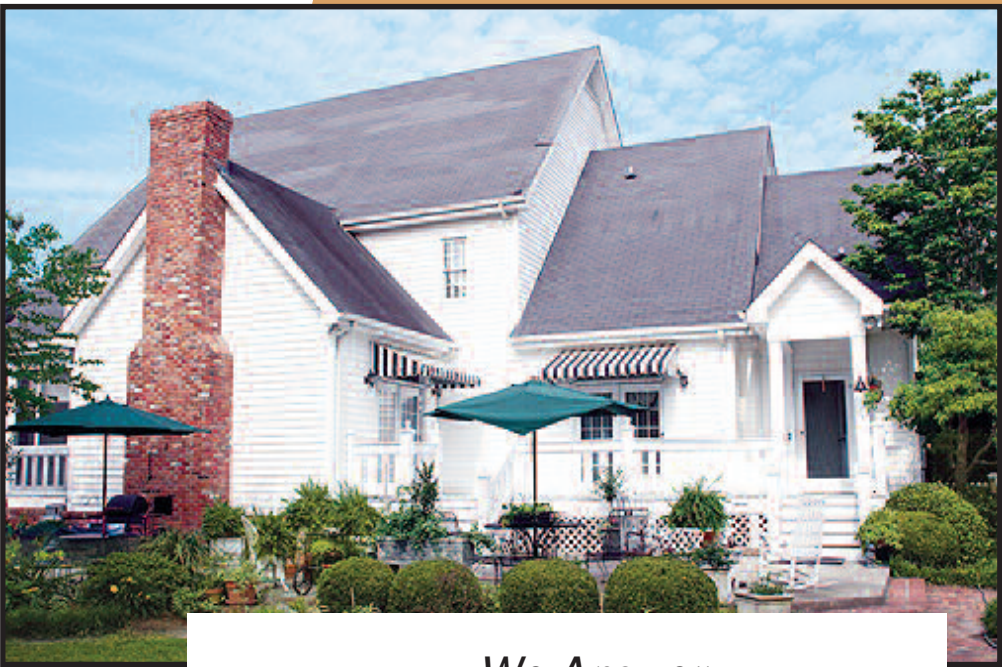
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