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### **Building a hydroponic garden**

Hydroponic gardening can change people's perceptions of what's needed to grow vibrant plants. Rather than soil, all you may need for a hydroponic garden is water to grow a variety of healthy, strong plants.

According to Fullbloom Hydroponics, hydroponic gardening is a method of growing plants in a water-based, nutrient-rich solution. Instead of soil, roots are supported by an inert material, such as pellets, perlite, or vermiculite. Some people use coconut fiber, sand or gravel as well. The key is that the substance not supply any additional nutrition to the plant. In some instances, the roots grow in water alone.

Hydroponics works so well because the person doing the gardening can directly control the nutrients, oxygen and light according to what the plant needs. A nutrition-based water delivery system delivers food to the roots in a highly soluble form, rather than the roots having to search through the soil and extract the same nutrients. Absorbing food with very little effort means the plant can divert its energy to growing and flower production.

This method of no-soil growth can be used just about anywhere. Although it has not yet edged out traditional farming methods, hydroponics is gaining popularity among entrepreneurs and hobbyists. An added attraction to hydroponics is its efficiency. The gardening resource Maximum Yield says hydroponics is ideal where traditional farming is not an option, such as in large cities where there is little to no access to agriculturally amenable land. Hydroponics can even be merged with vertical farming methods, helping to save space and increase output. Hydroponic gardens can be placed anywhere there is access to water and natural or simulated sunlight. Empty warehouses, rooftops and much more can be turned into hydroponic garden locations with minimal effort.

Scientists say that there can be drastic differences in growth rates and yield from hydroponic and soil plants. The group Greentrees Hydroponics says the growth rate for a hydroponic plant can be 30 to 50 percent faster than a soil plant grown under the same conditions. Environmentalists tout that hydroponic gardening is also beneficial to the environment because the plants require considerably less water than those produced with soil gardening and require fewer pesticides or other amendments to thrive.

Hobbyists looking to dabble in hydroponics can find many different hydroponic systems on the market today, in an array of prices and sizes. Wicking, ebb and flow, aeroponics, nutrient film, and deepwater culture are different hydroponic systems, each with their own advantages. Once gardeners get the knack of hydroponics, they may not want to turn back to traditional soil.



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### Select the right fertilizer for your needs

For plants to truly flourish, the right growing conditions and soil that offers the right nutrients is of paramount importance. Fertilizer enhances soil so that plants and flowers can thrive. However, fertilizer is not a one-sizefits-all mix.

Choosing fertilizer can be a little overwhelming thanks to the variety of formulations available at neighborhood lawn and garden centers. Shelves contain all-purpose products, such as those billed as vegetable fertilizer, and even formulations geared toward specific flower varieties. Others may feature buzz words like "all-natural" or "organic," and consumers may not be sure just what they need to keep plants healthy. The following guidelines can help anyone grow more vibrant plants.

### Start with a soil test

It's difficult to determine what plants need without an accurate picture of what's going on in the ground. A soil test can paint a picture of what's going on and indicate if any nutrients are lacking. A common misconception is that gardeners fertilize plants. But fertilizer amends the soil that feeds plants, according to the soil-testing lab professionals at Virginia Tech. Soil types vary by region, and conditions may even vary between spots on a landscape. Testing where the plants will be placed can yield the most accurate results. Soil tests are available at gardening centers and online. Otherwise, landscaping professionals can conduct tests.

### Know the N-P-K ratio

Most fertilizers will come with information concerning the nutrients within. Most notably it will have a breakdown of how much nitrogen (N), phosphorous (P) and potassium (K) is in the mix. Judging by the soil test, gardeners can choose a product that will give them the right ratio to amend the soil for the type of plant they are hoping to grow. Complete fertilizers often have NPK in the formulation. Incomplete fertilizers may have only one or two nutrients. This allows a person to customize fertilizer even more without overdoing it with a particular nutrient.

#### Grow plant knowledge

A cursory knowledge of the plants being planted in the garden also can be helpful. Gardeners must recognize that some plants will not tolerate excess amounts of a particular fertilizer component, while some may need more. Checking books out of the library, seeking information online and consulting with landscaping experts will help expand homeowners' knowledge about plant types and the needs of each particular plant they hope to grow.

### Solid and liquid fertilizer

Fertilizers are generally sold in pellets, spikes and liquid forms. Pellets or granules are dispersed over large areas and will gradually offer nutrients when the soil is watered. Liquid fertilizer is concentrated and fast-acting. These may be used for container plants or smaller areas. Spikes usually are placed in houseplants or to feed individual trees or shrubs. Depending on the formulation, fertilizer may need to be reapplied once a month or more. Consult the product packaging for the correct application advice. Fertilizer amends soil to grow stronger, more resilient plants.



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### Simple tips for repotting your plants

Gardening time is here, with people enjoying plants both inside and outside of their homes. Container gardening, which is a planting method in which flowers and other plants are grown in pots and other containers, is quite popular because of design versatility. Containers can be moved from location to location if plants are not thriving in a particular spot. They also make gardening possible when there isn't any available land space, which might be the case for apartment-dwellers.

Flower pots enable plant enthusiasts to enjoy foliage inside of the home as well. Houseplants can add beauty to interior spaces and help filter indoor air. In the late 1980s, NASA and the Associated Landscape Contractors of America actually studied houseplants as a way to purify the air in space facilities. They found several plants are particularly good at filtering out common volatile organic compounds (VOCs). Having plants around can create inviting spaces and improve healthy conditions inside and out.

Part of caring for plants in containers involves knowing when a potted plant might need a little tender loving care. As plants grow larger, they may outgrow their containers and require more roomy quarters. Without ample space, plants may not be able to adequately draw up water and nutrients to support top growth. Repotting may seem like it is easy, but it actually takes a little finesse so not to damage the plants.

Gardening experts like those from Fine Gardening, HGTV and Today's Homeowner suggest these repotting tips.

• Be sure the plant is well watered for a few days prior to the repotting process. Watering also will help loosen the root ball from inside of the smaller pot.

• A plant ready for repotting should slide out with most of the soil in one piece. If the soil is free-falling, it may not need to be repotted at this point because there's still room for the roots to expand. Other signs that plants may need repotting include roots poking out of the soil or plants that are straggly and pale.

• Consider repotting outside because the process can be messy. Have all of your materials, which include a trowel, gloves, scissors, and potting soil, handy so that you can tackle the process smoothly.

• Remove your plant from the pot carefully. Place the plant on its side, then support the main stem in one hand and use the other hand to gently pull the pot away. Be careful not to pull on the main stem or break the stem. Tread gently.

• Cut away any rotten or dead roots, and trim really long ends. Make three or four vertical cuts about a third of the way up the remaining root ball. This also will help with water and nutrient absorption once the plant is in its new pot.

• Gently untangle any remaining roots and prepare to place the plant in a new pot.

• Choose a new pot that is slightly larger than the root ball. Fill the pot with soil so that the root ball sits about an inch below the rim of the pot. Add more soil around the roots to fill the

Did you know? 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 pot. Be sure to leave enough room so that with each watering the pot can hold water.

• Thoroughly water the plant after repotting to moisten the soil.

Watch your plant afterwards to be sure that it's taking to its new potted home. It can take around three to four weeks for the plant to recover from repotting. Water regularly, avoid fertilizing and keep the plant out of direct sunlight.

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. 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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### **Preparing garden beds for spring and beyond**

Gardening enthusiasts may have been thinking about their landscape plans throughout the winter, eager to once again get their hands dirty with soil. Whether a home gardener is making preparations for edible crops or beautiful flowers, he or she must take time to make the soil amenable to planting. To establish hearty, durable plants, gardeners can focus on three main areas: addressing soil composition, cultivating and adding nutrients.

### Soil composition

Many gardeners prefer growing a variety of plants in their gardens. Such an approach requires taking inventory of the type of soil in one's garden and making the necessary modifications so that the types of vegetables, herbs, shrubs, or flowers that will be planted can grow in strongly. In fact, according to the plant company Proven Winners, the most important step to developing good roots is preparing the soil.

Take a sample of the soil and examine it to see what is present. If the soil is too full of clay, too sandy, too dense, or too loose, that can lead to problems where plants cannot grow in strong. Work with a garden center to add the right soil amendments to make a rich soil. This may include organic compost or manure, which will also add nutrients to the soil.

### Cultivation

Cultivating the soil can involve different steps. Removal of weeds, errant rocks, roots, and other items will help prepare the soil. Mother Earth News suggests working on garden soil when the soil is damp but never wet; otherwise, garden soil can become messy and clumpy. Use a digging fork or shovel to lightly turn the soil when it's mostly dry. Gentle tillings also can open up the soil to incorporate the nutritional amendments and relieve compaction that likely occurred from freezing temps and snow pressure. Tilling also helps with drainage and oxygen delivery to roots. The DIY Network suggests turning over soil at a depth of 12 inches to work the soil - about the length of a shovel spade. However, the resource Earth Easy says that existing garden beds have a complex soil ecosystem and simply top-dressing with compost or manure can be enough preparation for planting. Gardeners can experiment with the methods that work best for their gardens.

#### Nutrition

Testing the pH and the levels of certain nutrients in the soil, namely nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium, will give gardeners an idea of other soil additions that may be needed. Soils with a pH below 6.2 often can benefit from the addition of lime several weeks before planting. Soil tests will determine just how much fertilizer to add to the soil. Complete fertilizers will have equal amounts of nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium. Individual fertilizers can amend the soil with only these nutritional elements that are needed.

Top-dressing empty beds with a layer of mulch or compost can prevent weed growth and preserve moisture until it is time to plant. If existing shrubs or plants are in garden beds, use more care so as not to disturb roots or dig too deeply.

Winter can do a lot of damage to your gardens, so checking soil composition and nutrition are essential before starting your spring gardening. Besides checking nutrition and soil composition, you will want to clear debris and check for pests.

Preparing garden beds takes some effort initially, but can be well worth the work when plants flourish throughout the growing season. If you follow these simple tips, your garden will be the envy of the neighborhood.

### Create a budget-friendly home landscape

Homeowners understandably envy the awardworthy photo spreads in lawn and garden magazines, wanting to emulate those same looks on their own properties. Scores of designers and landscape architects are involved in the process of creating those amazing lush lawns and perfectly placed plantings. Although not every homeowner has the budget to create lavish landscape designs, it's still possible for homeowners to create lawns they can be proud of.

• Establish your budget. The first step in any project is to determine how much money you can devote to the job. Once you have established the budget, all other factors can be built around it.

• Find an inspiration piece. Great landscapes are inspired by many things, whether it's a memorable piece of art or a landscape layout in a lawn and gardening magazine. Use photos of other gardens or neighbors' yards as inspiration and build off of them. As long as the theme is cohesive, it will look pleasing to the eye.

• Consider the space and how you want to use it. Understanding the space will help you better allocate your budget. If your yard is more of a retreat, look for ways to create privacy and a vacation feel. If you have kids and entertaining friends is a main priority, focus on recreational aspects, such as a pool, playset and some durable plants. Understanding how to allocate your budget will help you to avoid spending money frivolously.

• Think about reclaimed or repurposed materials. Brand new items can quickly eat up a budget. However, repurposing salvaged or inexpensive items can stretch that budget while adding some unique flair to a landscape. See if you can find an outdoor patio - see **BUDGET** on page 5B -

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#### East County Times Spring Home & Garden April 12, 2018 Page 5B

### How to improve your home's curb appeal

Men and women who have tried to sell a home are likely familiar with the phrase "curb appeal." Curb appeal is similar to getting ready for a big date, only you're not dressing yourself up to make a strong first impression. Instead, improving curb appeal involves dressing your home up in the hopes it makes a strong first impression on prospective buyers, many of whom will have a strong opinion about the property before they even get out of their cars to have a look around.

A home with strong curb appeal can entice buyers who are likely to believe that a home with a well-maintained exterior is likely to have an equally impressive interior. Homeowners who want the process of selling their home to go smoothly can improve the property's curb appeal in a number of ways, many of which don't necessitate a substantial home improvement budget.

• Clean up. The most effective way to improve curb appeal is to clean up the property. Many homeowners are savvy enough to remove toys and other items from the yard before showing a home, but cleaning up goes beyond removing clutter from the property. Make sure all hedges are trimmed and remove weeds, sticks and other debris from any flower beds. Lay mulch in the flower beds and garden, as mulch prevents weed growth while helping the soil retain moisture, resulting in more attractive gardens to catch a

buyer's eye.

• Get an "edge" on other sellers. Edging is another easy and effective way to improve curb appeal. Edge driveways, sidewalks and other walkways around the property, removing or trimming anything that is hanging over the driveway or walkways. If the boundary between your driveway and lawn is not distinct, consider installing edging materials such as stone or bricks. The edging can be level with the driveway or elevated, but keep in mind that elevated driveway edging can protect the lawn, preventing kids from riding their bicycles onto the lawn or cars from driving onto it. Adding edging is not a very difficult do-itvourself project.

• Take to the trees. Many homeowners grow accustomed to overgrown trees around their property and may not notice that low-hanging, unsightly branches are hiding the home from view. Buyers want to see the house, so take to the trees and trim any branches that hang too low or obscure your home.

• Clean the gutters. Leaves and sticks hanging from the gutters are a red flag to buyers, who tend to associate clogged gutters with roof damage. Clean the gutters thoroughly before putting your home up for sale and keep them clean throughout the selling process. If your property includes lots *- see CURB APPEAL on page 6B -*

### - continued from page 4B -

set that someone is giving away or selling for a lower price. All it takes is a coat of paint and some new cushions to make it look like new. Discarded bricks or stones can be worked into a patio space or used to create raised garden beds. Purchase inexpensive flower pots and then paint them to make them look like stone or another desired material.

• Buy native plants. Native plants, shrubs, trees, and flowers will fare better than non-native, exotic plants. That means you'll have to spend less time and money nurturing them into health, and less money having to replace plants that cannot withstand your climate.

• Consider perennial plants. Perennials may cost more at the outset, but the savings will be realized in the years to come.

• Hire a professional. It may seem counterintuitive to spend money on a

landscaping professional when you've established a strict budget, but that's one way to save money. Landscape artists or garden designers have the experience to guide you in the right direction.

• Use gravel in spots where plants don't thrive. Gravel is an inexpensive landscaping material that can fill in voids where plants or ground cover simply do not flourish. Those working on limited budgets may be happy to learn gravel is typically less expensive than concrete or pavers.

• Ask friends or family for clippings. Don't be shy about admiring the plantings of those you know. Flatter their good taste and ask if you can have some clippings to propagate yourself. These clippings can turn into lush plants in no time - with no additional spending required.

With some frugal spending, planning and budgeting, anyone can create a beautiful landscape.



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### Safeguard your home from insect infestations

The dawn of spring marks the return of many things, including long hours of sunlight and warm temperatures in which to enjoy that sunshine. But homeowners know spring also marks the return of insects, unwelcome guests that can be difficult or expensive to control once they have entered a home.

As problematic as insect infestations can be, preventing such problems can be simple, especially when homeowners are proactive. The following are a handful of ways to keep insects out this spring and summer.

 Consider potential food supplies and cut those supplies off. Insects often enter a home in search of food, so cutting off potential food supplies is a great way to prevent insects from coming inside. Give dining areas a thorough cleaning after meals, vacuuming or sweeping the floors beneath dining tables each night before going to bed. (Parents of young children may want to sweep floors after each meal.) In addition, clean pets' bowls each night to be sure there are no food scraps left that may entice insects, and make sure pet food containers are tightly sealed after each serving. Sinks are another potential food source, so empty food traps after using the sink and run the garbage disposal as well to remove any food that might be lingering.

• Address potential shelters. Insects also seek shelter inside homes, and there are many areas in a home that can provide adequate shelter. Cracks around windows and doors and in the foundation provide both entry points and potential shelters for insects. Seal such cracks with caulk, testing the areas by feeling for any incoming air. If you still feel air coming in, there is still some sealing to do. Cracks in cabinets or counters also may provide shelter to insects, so address these areas as well.



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• Reconsider exterior lighting. Exterior lighting may be inviting insects into your home. Insects tend to congregate around lights at nighttime, so avoid placing lights right outside entryways. Once doors are opened, insects can then fly right into your home. Keep exterior lights as far away from entryways as possible. If you need lights right outside your doors, install motion-sensing lights that only turn on when you come within a few feet of the door. This reduces the volume of insects that congregate outside your entryways, and lowers the risk that insects will follow you in when you arrive home at night.

· React quickly upon seeing insects. Insect infestations happen gradually, so homeowners should react quickly when seeing a single insect or a handful of insects inside their homes. The slower your response, the more likely one or two intruders is likely to turn into a large infestation. Immediately clean any areas where you see insects, and take more substantial measures if your initial efforts were not enough to prevent more insects from coming in.

The presence of insects inside a home can be a nuisance, but there are many ways to prevent such infestations and keep unwelcome guests at bay.

Home improvement projects range from major construction overhauls like bathroom remodeling jobs to smaller renovations that may entail something as minor as painting the walls. These five projects, however, can be conquered in a weekend.

1. Improve storage in the entryway. Home entryways are the first places many people drop mail, shed their shoes and toss their keys upon arriving home. Storage solutions can include putting in a desk or hutch with baskets underneath to store umbrellas and backpacks. Or hang a coat rack and create a shoe rack to store shoes.

2. Shed new light. Add some design appeal to your home by replacing an old lighting fixture with some-

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### **CURB APPEAL**

- continued from page 5B -

of trees, install guards to keep twigs and leaves out of the gutters.

• Make the home accessible through the front door. Many homeowners enter their home through a side door or through their garage. If you fall into this category, keep in mind that prospective buyers will be entering through the front door, so make this area accessible. Clear any clutter away from the front door, and consider upgrading the door handle to a more modern feature. In addition, make sure the lock on the front door doesn't stick, forcing the realtor and buyers to immediately struggle before entering the home. You want buyers and their real estate agents to get in and out of the home as smoothly as possible.

• Make sure all plants, including flowers, are living. Dehydrated or dead plants and flowers are eyesores, and they will give buyers the impression that you didn't pay much attention to your property. Make sure all plants are alive and thriving and replace those that aren't. You can replant new flowers or plants or just use potted plants instead.

When selling a home, homeowners can employ a number of tactics to improve their home's curb appeal.

### Five weekend projects to try now

thing more modern. Such a task is relatively easy, and you need not possess the skills of a trained electrician.

3. Add molding for a finishing touch. Dress up spaces with crown molding or a decorative chair rail that goes around a room. You can even use molding to frame new or existing artwork.

4. Update hardware in the bath and kitchen. Switch the handles, draw pulls and knobs on cabinetry with new hardware.

5. Patch and paint walls. Spend a weekend filling in holes left behind by since-removed wall hangings. If the patches dry quickly, paint over them. If not, resolve to do your patchwork one weekend and paint the ensuing weekend.



When to tackle garden weeds

### **Cost-effective fencing options**

Fencing serves many purposes. Some homeowners erect a fence for privacy, while others do so to contain pets and children. Because fencing can be expensive, some homeowners look for ways to cut costs, which can be relatively easy, especially for those homeowners willing to consider various materials when erecting their fence.

Traditional fences are available in materials ranging from wood to vinyl to metal. Homeowners have other options at their disposal if they prefer a more natural fence. Different shrubs, trees or grasses can be planted to create a barrier between properties or within the property.

When choosing a fencing material, consider that even a less expensive material may prove more expensive in the long run if it needs significant maintenance or has to be replaced in just a few years. Therefore, the most cost-effective fencing material may not necessarily be the least expensive one at the store. Here are some materials homeowners can consider.

• Found material: Repurposed wood or metal can be crafted into a rustic, oneof-a-kind fence. Materials can be found that are no cost, requiring only the cost of labor. Should you build it yourself, this can be next to nothing. Sometimes existing fences on another property can be disassembled and re-built on your own property for little to no cost as well.

• Chainlink/chainwire: Chainlink fencing is one of the most economical types of boundary fencing. The fencing comes in a variety of diamond sizes and is fixed to galvanized pipes spaced across the perimeter of the property. Although it is some of the least expensive fencing, it does not offer much privacy on its own. But if you are looking at fencing simply as a barrier, chainlink could be the way to go.

• Picket fencing: A wooden picket fence is another inexpensive fencing material. The pickets can be purchased in various heights, and this fence may be used as garden border fencing or to mark a property line between homes. Spacing the pickets widely apart may cut down on the number that need to be purchased, further keeping the cost down.

• Bamboo: Bamboo is a rapidly growing grass that produces a hard wood-like material that is used in many building applications. Bamboo wood can be used to build a fence, but the natural plant also can be planted to form a living fence for privacy.

• Stockade fencing: A stockade fence is one of the more basic wood fencing options. Wooden slats are placed alongside one another to form an effective and affordable privacy fence. Stockade fencing can be stained or painted to preserve it.

• Vinyl fencing: Although vinyl fencing is one of the more expensive fencing materials at the outset (it costs about twice the price of a wood fence), it does pay for itself rather quickly thanks to minimal maintenance. Unlike some other materials, vinyl will not rot or discolor. You also won't have to purchase stain, paint and expensive cleaners for a vinyl fence.

There are many different fencing materials that can coordinate with a variety of budgets.



Weeds are the bane of lawn and garden enthusiasts. Weeds can spread rapidly and overrun pristine grass, choking lawns and robbing them of their lush green look. In garden beds, weeds can steal water from thirsty plants, threatening their survival.

A proactive approach that prevents weed growth is easier and less frustrating than dealing with weeds after they have sprouted. That means addressing weeds before they release seeds, and not waiting for the damage to be done.

According to the home and landscape experts with This Old House, spraying herbicide for weeds in June and July can address weeds before seeds are set. Tilling and installing a new lawn in late August or the beginning of September can help the lawn establish itself before the first frosts arrive, all the while avoiding weed growth.

The weed control experts at Roundup also suggest a springtime application of weed killer if this is the desired route. Early treatment can prevent weed roots from spreading too far in the soil, which can reduce the chances that weed remnants will be left behind to grow at a later time.

Homeowners with small lawns or gardens or those who prefer handweeding or using nonchemical ways to treat weeds must take steps to address the weeds early. Gardeners can try suffocating weeds by placing wood, blocks or plastic over them. Wet newspaper used as mulch can block weed formation and also clear patches of unwanted grass so that garden beds can be mapped out. Pouring boiling water on weeds or pulling them by hand is more effective when roots are young.

Weeds are a nuisance and an eyesore in lawns and gardens. Choosing the right time to treat them can ensure they don't adversely affect lush landscapes and thriving gardens.





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If you own a house, chances are you've had the nightmare of your whole place flooding out while you float away. Sometimes, the water pouring down your wall and into the basement isn't always a roof issue; sometimes it's as simple as getting new gutters. Fed up with our back wall's Niagara Falls cosplay, we decided to call the Gutter Guys to come out and take a look, and it didn't take them long to determine what was causing the waterfalls. They charged a few hundred bucks, which was more than fair, and were done really quick. We knew we made the right call when a neighbor called a different company and their new gutter and downspouts looked pretty janky and overflowed during the next rain storm. We slept pretty well after that.

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