



HOME SWEET HOME

See inside for tips and tricks about home renovations, landscape care, choosing the right plants, and more.

C2-C8

HOME & GARDEN

inside DO I WANT TO DIY? | SMALL RENOVATIONS THAT CAN MAKE A BIG IMPACT | BUDGET-FRIENDLY WAYS TO FRESHEN UP THE EXTERIOR OF YOUR HOME | SIX OPTIONS FOR FUNDING YOUR NEXT HOME IMPROVEMENT PROJECT | FOUR TIPS TO PICK THE RIGHT PLANTS FOR YOUR LANDSCAPE | THE BASICS OF CONTAINER GARDENING | LEARN THE BASICS OF FERTILIZING A LAWN | THE MANY BENEFITS OF HOUSEPLANTS | CANDLE CRAFTS TAP CREATIVITY | POISONOUS PLANTS TO AVOID AROUND THE HOUSE | HOW TO THROW A LAST-MINUTE DINNER PARTY | TIPS FOR ORGANIZING YOUR CLUTTERED KITCHEN | HOW TO GET YOUR POOL SUMMER READY

Do I want to DIY?

Three questions to determine if it's best to renovate on your own

(MetroCreative Connection)

A do-it-yourself mentality has taken hold in millions of households across the globe. Popular television channels like HGTV and DIY Network as well as accessible home improvement content on apps like YouTube has inspired many homeowners to tackle renovation projects around their homes. Taking such initiative is admirable, though it also can prove costly if homeowners end up biting off more than they can chew.

Home improvement videos and television shows have a tendency to oversimplify renovation projects, potentially giving homeowners a false sense of confidence in their DIY abilities. A concerted effort on the part of homeowners to determine if it's best to renovate on their own or hire a professional should always be the first step of any renovation project. No two homeowners are the same, but the follow-

ing three questions can help homeowners determine if DIY is their best option.

CAN I AFFORD TO DIY?

Professional home improvement projects are costly for a variety of reasons. Materials can be costly, but so are the tools and labor necessary to do the job right. Homeowners may not have the tools necessary to complete complicated projects. Specialty tools can be expensive to purchase or even rent, and the cost of acquiring such tools should be included in any DIY project cost estimates. Labor also factors heavily into professional projects, and for good reason. Talented contractors have unique skills that have been developed and perfected over many years. Those skills can ensure projects are completed quickly and correctly. Labor may seem costly, but such costs may ultimately prove to be a bargain compared to the cost of fixing DIY mistakes.

Projects that are minor in scope and don't require the use of potentially costly specialty tools may be better suited for weekend warriors than more complicated renovations.

DO I HAVE THE TIME?

Homeowners must determine how much time they have to complete a project before deciding to do it themselves. No one wants to spend months staring at an unfinished renovation project. Homeowners who are already pressed for time may not be able to complete projects in a timely fashion, which can make homes less comfortable and even less safe.

CAN I PULL THIS OFF?

DIY projects can instill homeowners with a sense of pride in their homes, but it's imperative that homeowners considering the DIY option conduct an honest assessment of their skills. A lack of renovation experience

does not necessarily mean a homeowner cannot successfully complete a DIY project. But in such instances, it may be best to start with small, straightforward projects and then gradually move up to bigger, more complicated projects as skills are fine tuned. And homeowners who have never been at their best with a hammer in hand should not be ashamed to leave the work to the professionals.

Television shows and online tutorials can make renovations appear easier than they actually are. Homeowners considering DIY renovations can ask themselves a handful of questions to determine if they're ready for the challenge of renovating their homes on their own.

COURTESY PHOTO
No two homeowners are the same, but there are three questions that can help homeowners determine if DIY is their best option.



Small renovations that can make a big impact

(MetroCreative Connection)

Home renovations provide a host of benefits. Such projects can increase resale value and improve on the safety, aesthetics and functionality of a home.

Some homeowners may employ the mantra "go big or go home" when they embark on home improvements, thinking that only the largest renovations produce noticeable change. But that's not the case. Various smaller renovations can provide a lot of bang for homeowners' bucks as well.

COUNTERTOPS AND HARDWARE

A complete kitchen overhaul may stretch some homeowners' budgets. However, changing an older countertop for a new material can provide the facelift a kitchen needs. And while changing the cabinets may be homeowners' ultimate goal, swapping hardware in dated finishes for newer handles and pulls can provide low-cost appeal.

PAINT

Painting a space is an inex-

pensive improvement that adds maximum impact. Paint can transform dark and drab rooms into bright and airy oases. Paint also can be used to create an accent wall or cozy nooks. Homeowners also can showcase their personalities with their choice of paint colors.

LIGHTING

Homeowners should not underestimate what a change in lighting can do. When rooms or exterior spaces are illuminated, they take on entirely new looks. It's worth

it to invest in new lighting, whether it's a dramatic hanging light over the dining room table or task lighting in dim spaces.

WEATHERPROOFING

Improving windows, doors, weatherstripping, and insulation in a home can offer visual appeal and help homeowners save money. The initial investment may be significant, but those costs will pay off in energy savings. According to One Main Financial, space heating is the largest energy expense the av-

erage American homeowner has, accounting for around 45 percent of all energy costs.

MUDROOM

Turn an entryway into a more functional space with the addition of cabinets, benches or custom-designed storage options that perfectly fit the area. Cubbies and cabinets can corral shoes, umbrellas, hats, bags, and much more.

ACCENT UPDATES

Any space, whether it's inside or outside a home, can

get a fresh look with new decorative accents. Invest in new throw pillows and even slipcovers for living room sofas. Use new tile or paint the brick on a fireplace in a den, then update the mantel with decorative displays. Purchase wall art that can bring different colors into a room. Change the cushions on deck furniture and buy color-coordinated planters.

These subtle changes will not cost as much as full-scale renovations, but they can still help homeowners transform their homes.

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Budget-friendly ways to freshen up the exterior of your home



COURTESY PHOTO

There are many budget-friendly ways homeowners can tend to the exterior of their properties.

(MetroCreative Connection)

As any homeowner knows, renovation projects tend to cost a lot of money. The average cost of a home renovation is difficult to gauge, as such endeavors run the gamut from complex projects like a kitchen overhaul to simpler ones like painting a room inside a home. Indeed, the National Association of the Remodeling Industry notes that scope is what drives the cost of a renovation project. Though there might not be an "average cost" of a renovation project, homeowners can expect to spend thousands of dollars on projects that are not very small in scale. Navigating such an expense at a time when inflation remains high might be difficult for some homeowners looking to maintain the appearance of their home

exteriors. However, there are many budget-friendly ways homeowners can tend to the exterior of their properties.

POWER WASHING

Power washing won't break the bank but it can revive the look of a home. Power washing removes dirt and grime from the siding of a home and a power washing can be used to clean porches, walkways and patios as well. Hardware chains like Home Depot and Lowes typically rent power washers, but homeowners who don't want to do it themselves can hire a professional for a few hundred dollars, if not less. Power washing after winter can be a good idea, as the elements can take a toll on a home's exterior. A good power washing before spring and summer entertaining season can thus give a home a fresh, clean look without breaking the bank.

FURNISHED FRONT PORCH

A furnished front porch can serve as a welcome sign to neighbors and provide a great place to relax with a morning cup of coffee and a good book. Homeowners with a small porch won't need to bust their budgets to upgrade their front porch furnishings. Some small chairs with bright cushions, a small table and a rug underfoot can revamp an entryway at low cost.

WINDOW BOX INSTALLATION

Installing window box planters is another cost-effective way to brighten up a home's exterior. Homeowners can hang window boxes outside windows on the front of their homes and then fill them with brightly colored flowers to add an inviting pop of color to their home exteriors. The experts at Better Homes &

Gardens urge homeowners to take weight into consideration before buying window planters. Keep in mind that soil and developed plants can be heavy, so look for a sturdy box as well as one that has drainage holes.

REPLACE HARDWARE

Another simple way to freshen up a stale exterior is to replace hardware. Door knobs, knockers, house numbers, and even the mailbox can appear dated after a while. Replacing these items is inexpensive and quick but can have a profound impact on how the exterior of a home appears to residents and visitors.

Exterior renovations need not break the bank. Various simple and inexpensive tweaks can quickly revitalize the exterior of a home.



COURTESY PHOTO

Homeowners may find that the more expensive renovations require them to secure some type of financing. Those who have never before sought such financing may want to consider several options.

Options for funding your next home improvement project

(MetroCreative Connection)

Before starting a home improvement project, either on one's own or with the assistance of a professional contractor, homeowners must first consider the costs involved. According to the home improvement resource HomeAdvisor, more than one-third of homeowners do not understand what hiring a professional will cost, and then cannot successfully budget and secure financing once they have set their sights on a renovation project.

HomeAdvisor says that some of the more popular projects, such as remodeling a kitchen or bathroom or building a deck, can cost, on average, \$19,920, \$9,274 and \$6,919, respectively.

Homeowners may find that the more expensive renovations require them to secure some type of financing. Those who have never before sought such financing may want to consider these options.

CASH-OUT REFINANCING

With cash-out refinancing, a person will begin the mortgage process anew with the intention of paying off the current mortgage balance, and then taking out additional funds for other purposes. Cash-out refinancing is a way to tap into a home's existing equity for use on improvements or other expenses, such as college tuition.

HOME EQUITY LINE OF CREDIT

The financial experts at Bankrate indicate that a HELOC works like a credit card, with the house as collateral. There is a credit limit, and borrowers can spend up to that limit. The interest rate may or may not be fixed. However, the interest may be tax-deductible if the financing is used to improve, buy or build a home.

HOME EQUITY LOAN

Individuals also can borrow against equity in their homes with a fixed interest rate through a home equity loan. Most lenders will calculate 80 percent of the home value and subtract a homeowner's mortgage balance to figure out how much can be borrowed, according to the financial advisory website The Simple Dollar.

PERSONAL LOAN

Homeowners can shop around at various financial institutions for competitive personal loans to be used for home improvement purposes. Funds may be approved within one business day, which can be ideal for those who want to begin their improvements soon.

PERSONAL LINE OF CREDIT

A personal line of credit allows borrowers to borrow only the money needed at the time, and offers a variable interest rate that is generally lower than fixed loan rates. Again, like a credit card, PLOC gives a person a maximum borrowing amount and is ideal for ongoing purchases.

CREDIT CARDS

In a pinch, credit cards can be used to finance improvements, but they do come with the cost of very high interest rates if the balance is not paid in full by the time the bill comes due. However, for funding smaller projects and maximizing rewards points through home improvement retailers or specific credit card company promotions, credit cards can be a way to earn various perks in addition to the benefit of improving a home.

Homeowners looking to finance their next improvements should speak to a financial advisor and shop around for the best types of funding for them.

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COURTESY PHOTO

The maintenance required to keep a plant healthy and looking good is a key consideration when designing a landscape.

Four tips to pick the right plants for your landscape

(MetroCreative Connection)

Each year, gardening enthusiasts anxiously await the arrival of spring. Spring is a great season to plant new flowers, plants, grasses, and trees, making it a popular time of year to spend sunny days out in the yard.

Veteran gardeners may know their landscapes well and be able to pick the right plants on their own. Novices may need a little help as they look to give their landscapes a whole new look. The fol-

lowing are some tips to help homeowners pick the right plants for their landscapes.

CONDUCT A SITE EVALUATION

A colorful landscape featuring an array of plants and flowers can be eye-catching and add curb appeal to a property. However, where plants will be planted is a significant variable that must be considered before homeowners choose what to plant. The Center for Agriculture, Food, and the Environment at the

University of Massachusetts Amherst notes that site evaluation is the first step when picking plants. A number of factors must be evaluated, including light availability; water availability; exposure to the elements, including wind and extreme temperatures; and competition from existing vegetation, among other things. Document these variables prior to picking plants. For example, take note of the area you plan to plant to see if it is full sun or partial shade, and then pick

plants whose growing conditions align with those you observe.

LOOK AT MORE THAN LOOKS

Aesthetic appeal might be what homeowners most desire from their landscapes, but that appeal is only achieved when the right plants are chosen for a space. If the wrong plants are chosen, they're unlikely to thrive or they could threaten existing vegetation, thus compromising the overall appeal of the property.

Native plants can often handle local weather conditions, so prioritize natives over more exotic plants whose key attribute is aesthetic appeal. If jaw-dropping aesthetic appeal is your top priority, speak with a local landscaping professional about which natives can provide that without compromising surrounding vegetation.

CONSIDER MAINTENANCE PRIOR TO PLANTING

Maintenance is another

variable gardeners must consider. Newly planted trees may require substantial watering until they've fully established their roots, and some homeowners may not have time for that. In addition, certain plants may require a considerable amount of pruning in order to create and maintain the look homeowners desire. Individuals must be willing to invest the time and effort necessary to maintain new plantings that require such diligence. If not,

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Learn the basics of container gardening

(MetroCreative Connection)

Gardening is a rewarding hobby that has been linked to health benefits like reduced stress and improved mental well-being. Gardening also can lead to an inviting home landscape full of attractive blooms and/or delicious foods.

Backyard gardens have long been planted after clearing a plot of land, tilling and amending the soil, and planting rows of favorite crops. However, gardening can be less labor-intensive and even more successful when people consider the many benefits of container gardening.

WHAT IS CONTAINER GARDENING?

As its name implies, container gardening is growing plants inside of containers. These containers can be flower pots, rectangular deck boxes or even large raised garden beds.

PROS TO CONTAINER GARDENING

One of the advantages of container gardening is that plants can be moved in and out of sunlight to ensure the right growing conditions. This isn't as easily achieved when gardens are stationary. Also, beginner gardeners may be more able to control soil conditions inside of a small container rather than a vast ground-based garden, which will require a good deal of manual labor. Pots and boxes also can be grouped together to create eye-popping displays, usually at lower costs than the sheer volume of plants that would be needed to fill out an expansive landscape.

CONS TO CONTAINER GARDENING

Container garden plants will not have direct access to the ground, so they need gardeners to create the

ideal growing conditions. Developing the right care formula can be challenging. The home and garden resource The Spruce says that drainage is an important factor in container gardening, and most containers do not offer enough drainage holes. If water cannot escape the soil, the roots of the plants can rot and die. It's not enough to add stones or gravel to the bottom of containers. Drill additional holes in the bottom (1/2-inch in diameter for small or medium-sized pots; one inch in diameter for larger pots). Also, be sure to check on soil moisture so that watering can be adjusted. During hot stretches, plants may need to be watered more frequently.

PLAN FOR PLANTS THAT PLAY WELL

Grouping plants together can create visually stunning combinations. However,



COURTESY PHOTO

Gardening can be less labor-intensive and even more successful when people consider the many benefits of container gardening.

it is important to choose plants that require the same amount of light and moisture. Look at plant tags when visiting the garden center and select complementary plants, or ask a store employee. Mixing different plant shapes, colors and leaf textures, as well as plants of various heights, can help containers look filled out.

FEED PLANTS ACCORDINGLY

Plants need nutrition to thrive in containers. Quality potting mixes will contain fertilizers, but nutrition will wane over time. Every couple of weeks, container plants will need either fresh potting mix or granular fertilizer added to feed them. Oregon State University Extension

Services suggests using a slow-release fertilizer or worm castings several times throughout the season.

Container gardening is a great way to add plants to smaller patios, reduce the workload involved in maintaining expansive gardens, and customize conditions for optimal growth.

The basics of fertilizing a lawn

(MetroCreative Connection)

Spring marks the return of lawn and garden season. Lawns often bear the brunt of winter's wrath, so spring is a great time to nurse them back to health, and fertilizing can be an essential component of that process.

Fertilizing a lawn can be intimidating. An array of fertilizers, with each seemingly designed to address a different issue, can make homeowners' heads spin when visiting their local lawn and garden center. However, fertilizing is a very simple task that any homeowner can tackle. In fact, fears about fertilizing are often unfounded and can be overcome with some basic knowledge of the process.

Identify which type of grass is in the yard

The home improvement experts at HGTV note that turfgrass is divided into two categories: cool-season

grass and warm-season grass. A local lawn and garden center can help homeowners identify which type of grass is in the yard, and this often depends on location. Fescue, bluegrass and perennial ryegrass are some examples of cool-season grasses, while Bermuda, bahia, St. Augustine, and zoysia are considered warm-season grasses. Identifying which type of grass is in the lawn is important because that will indicate when to fertilize. Cool-season grasses are typically best fertilized in early spring, while warm-season lawns can benefit from an application just before especially warm temperatures arrive.

SURVEY THE LAWN TO IDENTIFY WHICH SPREADER TO USE

A small yard or a thriving lawn with only a few bald or unsightly patches may not need a full application of fertilizer. In such instances,

a hand spreader can suffice. For larger lawns and areas, a broadcast spreader is the ideal option. Spreaders have multiple settings, and the fertilizer package will indicate which setting to utilize when using the product.

TEST THE SOIL PRIOR TO PURCHASING FERTILIZER

The lawn experts at Pennington® note that a simple soil test can reveal soil pH and phosphorous and potassium levels. Soil tests can be purchased at most home improvement stores and lawn and garden centers, and they can help homeowners determine which fertilizer will most benefit their lawns.

WATER THE LAWN PRIOR TO FERTILIZING

The experts at Scotts® recommend a good watering a few days

prior to fertilizing a lawn. Such an approach ensures the soil is ready to accept the fertilizer once it's applied.

FOLLOW THE INSTRUCTIONS CAREFULLY

Detailed instructions are typically provided on fertilizer product packaging. Once homeowners have identified and purchased the product they need, they can simply follow the instructions on the packaging, including how and when to water after application, which can make fertilizing less intimidating.

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

PLANTS

FROM PAGE C4

look for plants that don't require much maintenance while keeping in mind that even low-maintenance plants still require some effort and attention.

CONSIDER LOCAL WILDLIFE

If your lawn is routinely visited by local wildlife, then look for plants that won't look like a meal to these welcome, if uninvited, guests. For example, if you routinely see deer lounging around in your backyard, look for deer-resistant plants. This is a good way to protect your investment, of both time and money, and ensure minimal wildlife traffic through your newly landscaped yard.

Spring gardens are awe-inspiring, especially when homeowners embrace various strategies for successful planting.

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COURTESY PHOTO

Today's craft stores sell many different types of waxes and products that can produce beautiful scented candles.

Candle crafts tap creativity

(MetroCreative Connection)

Crafting is enjoyed by children and adults. Even the most ardent arts and crafts enthusiasts might be surprised to learn that their favorite hobby can offer a number of benefits related to their health and well-being.

Research shows that regularly engaging in crafts can have tangible health benefits. The rhythmic and repetitive movements of certain crafts, as well as the need to focus one's attention, can produce a calm that helps anyone, including those who may experience anxiety, according to health and self-care resource Berkeley Wellness. In an online study published in the British Journal of Occupational Therapy that surveyed more than 3,500 knitters, researchers found knitting was "soothing" and "restful" and had meditative or zen-like qualities.

The sense of accomplishment after completing a project is another great reason to engage in arts and crafts, which also may boost cognitive health by protecting certain neurological pathways in the brain.

There are many ways to engage with arts and crafts. Woodcrafting, painting, mosaic work, and metal arts are some popular activities.

One time-honed craft activity that is good for beginners or advanced crafters alike is candlemaking. Today's craft stores sell many different types of waxes and products that can produce beautiful scented candles.

TEACUP CANDLES

Candles can be housed in various vessels, but a clever turn is to use teacups or mugs to mimic the look of popular beverages. There's also the reassurance that such beverage holders can withstand hot wax.

Start by visiting a craft store and choosing a type of wax. Gel waxes are versatile and can boil, pour and set up easily. They'll also be mostly translucent, which is great for replicating the look of various drinks. Follow the instructions on the packages for usage and invest in coordinating wicks, colorants, and appropriate scents.

It's also necessary to choose a style of candle. In a teacup, a tea-colored hued wax paired with a lemon scent can be reminiscent of a hot cup of lemon tea. Use other glasses or mugs to replicate the looks and scents of hot chocolate, mimosas, cappuccino, and much more.

As you become more comfortable, experiment with incorporating molded wax embellishments, such as lemon slices, ice cubes, berries, or even cinnamon sticks. This will help drive home the realism and whimsy.

Treasure these candles for use around the house, or gift them to others on special occasions.

The many benefits of houseplants

(MetroCreative Connection)

The lines between the outdoors and indoors are being blurred. Homeowners build extensive outdoor living spaces so they can relax on weather-resistant furniture and even cook in lavish kitchens in their backyards. In addition, indoor three-season rooms full of bright, open windows that showcase outdoor vistas challenge the boundaries between outside and inside.

For those working with limited budgets, there are some easy, inexpensive ways to enjoy the majesty of natural landscapes indoors. Houseplants can be used to improve indoor spaces, and they also provide various health benefits.

HELP WITH ALLERGIES

According to WebMD, rooms with houseplants tend to have less dust and mold in them than those without any foliage. Leaves and other parts of the plants serve as natural filters, catching airborne particles and allergens. Plants with textured leaves might be especially effective at trapping particles.

PUT MORE OXYGEN INTO THE AIR

The human respiratory system works by bringing in oxygen and releasing carbon dioxide. Plants do the opposite during photosynthesis. They absorb carbon dioxide and then release oxygen. Plants can put much more oxygen into the air, improving indoor conditions.

INCREASE INDOOR HUMIDITY AND REDUCE ILLNESS

Studies from the Agricultural University of Norway found that indoor plants can increase humidity in indoor spaces, which decreases the incidences of sore throats, dry coughs, dry skin, and the common cold. Higher absolute humidity can decrease the chances of survival and transmission of the flu virus.

FILTER THE AIR

Researchers who presented their work at the 252nd National Meeting & Exposition of the American Chemical Society found certain houseplants can combat the potentially harmful effects of volatile organic compounds. Plants may help filter out VOCs like benzene, acetone and formaldehyde, which can enter indoor air via cleaning supplies, dry-cleaned clothes, furniture, printers, and paints.

IMPROVE INTERIOR ATMOSPHERE

Prevention magazine says plants can be used to screen unattractive areas, moderate room temperature by shading spots from the sun and even reduce noise. Plants also can improve ambiance and create a pleasing atmosphere in a room.

CAN IMPROVE MOOD

Growing and caring for plants can alleviate everyday stress. A nationwide study from UK Magazine Gardeners World found 80 percent of gardeners declared themselves satisfied with life compared to 67 percent among non-gardeners. Gardeners were more positive mentally. Greenery can help people feel more at home and improve mental health. A rehab center in Norway found patients reported a greater increase in well-being four weeks after having greenery added to their surroundings.

Houseplants can improve indoor areas and positively affect personal health.



Houseplants can be used to improve indoor spaces, and they also provide various health benefits.

COURTESY PHOTO

Poisonous plants to avoid around the house

(MetroCreative Connection)

Homeowners must consider various factors when choosing plants to display in and around their homes. That's because, despite their beauty, various plants are toxic to humans and animals.

Avoiding potentially poisonous plants can prevent injuries and even deaths. Here's a list of some plants homeowners may want to avoid.

Foxgloves are popular in landscapes but contain potent cardiac glycosides that can be lethal in high doses.

COURTESY PHOTO



Lily-of-the-valley are poisonous and if large doses of the toxin are consumed, it has the potential to slow the heart and pulse.

RHODODENDRON

Rhododendrons produce flower clusters that bloom in the spring. They also produce thick, glossy leaves that thrive in the fall and winter in many areas. If any part of the plant is swallowed it can cause vomiting and potentially slow the pulse.

LILY-OF-THE-VALLEY

This popular plant grows close to the ground, blooming bell-shaped, sweet-smelling flowers. If large doses of the toxin in this plant are ingested, it can gradually slow the heart down and potentially prove fatal.

DUMB CANE

The houseplant dieffenbachia, commonly known as Dumb cane, adds tropical appeal indoors. The sap of

the plant causes the tongue to burn and swell, enough to block off air to the throat. It can be fatal if ingested by both pets and humans.

ENGLISH IVY

This go-to draping vine looks lovely cascading down from planters or shelving. While its toxins need to be ingested in large amounts to cause problems, English ivy can cause skin irritation, rash and fever, particularly after eating the berries.

BITTERSWEET NIGHTSHADE

Bittersweet nightshade grows as a weed on some properties. It's particularly problematic for those who have pets or young kids because of the brightly colored berries it produces. The highest level of toxicity comes from these berries.

FOXGLOVE

According to The Spruce: Decor, foxgloves are among the most toxic specimens commonly grown on landscapes. They are widely coveted for their pink, purple and white bell-shaped flowers that grow in tall spikes. They're also deer- and rabbit-resistant, making them especially popular. However, foxgloves contain potent cardiac glycosides that can be lethal in high doses.

PHILODENDRON

Philodendron are easy to care for and hearty. While not fatal, a bite of philodendron can irritate the skin and cause nausea and swelling of the mouth, throat and tongue. Similar effects occur with Pothos, another common and hearty houseplant.

YEW SHRUBS

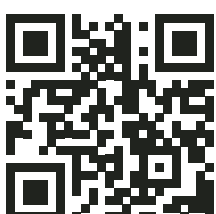
The needlelike leaves of this shrub are toxic to humans and animals, as are the fleshy, bright red berries that grow toxic seeds. Kids may be tempted to pick and consume these bright berries.

PALMS

Several different palm trees are poisonous to people and pets. Palms are an overlooked source of poisoning tragedies in warmer climates. Formosa palm, Sago palm, Queen Sago, and Cardboard palm are some of the varieties that can cause issues if ingested or allergic skin reactions if touched.

When planning a landscape, work with a skilled garden expert to choose plants that will not be hazardous to family and pets.

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How to throw a last-minute dinner party

(MetroCreative Connection)

Do you feel like having a party? A spur-of-the-moment desire to host friends or family is not uncommon. Though it may be ideal to give yourself a few days to plan a dinner party and assemble what's needed to be your best host, sometimes inspiration strikes and compels people to throw last-minute dinner parties.

In such instances, these tips for putting together a feast on the fly can be especially valuable.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Build your menu around your own specialty, ideally one that is easy to prepare. Don't try out that fancy new cookbook recipe right now. Single-pot casseroles or pasta dishes whip up in a flash and can feed a crowd.

STOCK ESSENTIALS AT HOME

It's easier to invite people over at the last minute if you don't have to shop for supplies. Keep a running inventory of foods that can be



COURTESY PHOTO

These tips for putting together a feast on the fly can be especially valuable.

brought out at a moment's notice, such as items that may go on a charcuterie platter. Olives, block cheeses, crackers, salad fixings, cured meats, and fresh vegetables

can be arranged in a heart-beat. With a can of chick peas, some garlic, lemon juice, and parsley at the ready, you can quickly create a homemade hummus, too.

CONSIDER A POTLUCK

Guests may want to help out if they are invited over on short notice. A potluck is a perfect way to fill a table with food with minimal ef-

fort, as everyone contributes a little something.

CLEAN THE VISIBLE ROOMS

There likely won't be time to clean your entire home

before an impromptu party. Therefore, focus on the kitchen, dining area and guest bathroom. Gather errant items from around the house and store in a bedroom behind closed doors. Close doors on other spaces that are off-limits during the party.

GET THE KIDS INVOLVED

If you have children, give them jobs to help out. They can set tables, fill ice cube trays or run the vacuum over high-traffic areas. Removing some tasks from your to-do list can free your time for other needs.

SCOUR YOUR HOME

Create interesting place settings or a festive table with items you already have on hand. Consider using food as functional decor on a table. A bowl of lemons makes an eye-catching centerpiece.

Make last-minute dinner parties happen with a few tricks of the trade.

Tips for organizing your cluttered kitchen

(MetroCreative Connection)

Kitchens serve as the heart of many homes. Thanks to the popularity of open floor plans, kitchens also tend to be highly visible from nearby spaces, such as family rooms and even main entryways. A messy, cluttered kitchen can be an inefficient eyesore that's visible from various locations in a home. That makes getting organized in the kitchen a worthwhile goal.

The following are some tips to help homeowners organize their kitchens.

START WITH THE UTENSILS

Utensils come in all shapes and sizes. Take inventory of your utensils, discarding or donating items you don't use. Next, designate drawers or countertop storage solutions for the utensils you use most often. Place them within easy reach, and take into account your dominant hand for placement.

CATEGORIZE YOUR PANTRY

Empty the pantry, paying attention to staples you regularly use. Then figure out a system for categorization

that works for your household. Perhaps place all baking essentials together, such as flour, oil, baking soda, and cocoa powder. Maybe you need to designate a "kids corner" in the pantry where you keep fruit snacks, granola bars and breakfast cereals. Use uniformly shaped containers to store packaged foods so you're not contending with oddly shaped boxes and bags.

USE EXTRA WALL OR CEILING SPACE

Large pots and pans can eat

up cabinet space or clutter the inside of an oven for those who don't have any other space. While your decorative enamel Dutch oven might fit nicely on a shelf or counter, cast-iron pans and skillets can be hung from durable hooks over an island or near the stove.

ORGANIZE UNDER THE SINK

It can be difficult to keep cleaning products tidy and within reach. Try installing a short tension rod inside the cabinet and use it to hang spray bottles, rubber gloves

and cleaning cloths.

USE KITCHEN CABINET ROLLOUTS

A shortage of storage space in cabinets can be remedied with rollouts. They provide additional capacity to cabinets and make it easier to find items, instead of having to dig at the back of dim cabinet recesses.

TAME YOUR CONTAINER COLLECTION

It's tempting to save all of those take-out containers or

empty margarine tubs for leftovers. But if there's an avalanche every time you open up a cabinet to reach for a container, you probably have too many. Invest in one type of storage container so you can nest the containers and lids for ultimate organization.

An organized kitchen is more attainable than it may seem. Some simple strategies can help homeowners make these home hubs less cluttered and more calming.

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How to get your pool summer ready

BY ASHLEY INGE
Staff Writer

Spring is just around the corner and summer won't be far behind. With the hot sun and longer days approaching, you'll probably want to jump in your pool as soon as possible.

But before you gather your floaties and sunscreen, you need to make sure your pool is summer ready.

Husband-and-wife duo Sara and Randy Chenault, who have been owners of Pool-Tex, Inc. since 2012, both recommend that now is the perfect time for pool owners to get ready for the summer.

"Summer's almost a bigger deal than getting ready for winter because you have so many moving parts on it when you're getting everything ready," Sara said. "Spring is already here.

We've had no break. We're already getting calls about pools being green. These pools are barely just starting to warm up, but it's happening so fast this year that there wasn't really a lot of time to get ready for it."

Randy said the mechanisms of a pool are similar in how our own bodies function

every day.

"It's kind of a weird analogy, but you can almost put it in like a body type form, like algae's the cancer, so your pool pump is like your heart — that's what pumps everything," he explained. "The pipes are the veins; the filter is like your liver and your kidneys. It cleans everything out and then goes right back into the pool, so there's all these things just like in our bodies that we have to take care of, and it's the same thing in a pool. If the pump doesn't pump, the filter doesn't filter, the pool is just going to turn green."

Sara also recommends that pool owners get their Polaris cleaners tuned up — especially if a wheel is missing.

"People need to make sure those things have wheels because the wheels fall off and they don't work too well without wheels," she said. "If there's holes in the bags, all

the debris gets out into the pool, and then you're back to square one again with the green and yucky pool."

According to the Chenaults, it's never too early for maintenance. In fact, one of the most important tasks that pool owners need to do, Sara said, is to get their filters cleaned and equipment inspected at the beginning of every year.

"Make sure everything's working correctly, make sure your baskets don't have any cracks in them because you don't want leaf debris and all the stuff that's gonna start falling from the trees to fall through, because then you'll end up with clogged lines," she explained. "When you have filter issues, if you haven't cleaned the filter, and you haven't taken care of everything properly, and inspected it to make sure that there's no holes in the grids, that everything's working properly, it will start having some problems. It will put stress on your equipment, and it can cause equipment to have catastrophic failure."

Pool-Tex also recommends that salt cells are cleaned and calibrated, and chemicals are balanced.

"If you have people that want to do their own pool, this is the perfect time if they've been thinking about converting to salt, so they're not having to spend so much money on chlorine," Sara said. "Now is the time to do it, especially with it going from spring to summer, because otherwise you're going to be so busy that it's going to be after summer when you can even get an appointment. We see all the new growth and we see all the new neighborhoods. Everybody wants a pool, but there's not enough of us to go around."

Randy said Pool-Tex services an estimated 132 pools a month in Granbury and can have anywhere from 800-920 customers in need of repairs.

"They can call me at any time for a filter clean or breakdown, you know, catastrophic failure," Randy said. "During the freeze, good grief, we couldn't keep up. I think the last time I checked my phone, I had 1,200 contacts, 100 of them are doubles, but you know, around 50 are family and friends and the rest are all business. We do have to turn down work (sometimes)."

Sara said they take pride in their attention to detail and their relationships with their customers.

"If you're honest with your people, and you take care of them, that's what matters most — that's what will take you so far," she said. "When we started, we didn't have a Facebook business. We had to start from the ground up, working years to build our customers. We made a name for ourselves. This has been something that he and I have put our blood, sweat, and tears into, and worked strictly by word of mouth. We take the time to make (our customers) feel like they're important — not like they're a dollar sign. These people, they're the ones who are helping us take care of our family. They help us pay our bills, so we take care of them in return."

Sara said integrity and honesty are also two values they adhere to — and that they also try to instill in their employees as well.

"We're very strict on our guys," she said. "They have to understand that they represent this company, so we expect them to have the same values as well, so that's another reason it's not always so easy for us to hire other people, because you have to be able to work in the heat and you have to take pride in what you do. It's not



BEFORE



AFTER

COURTESY OF RANDY CHENAULT

Since 2012, husband-and-wife duo Randy and Sara Chenault have helped transform pools that were once green and unsightly to blue and crystal clear. Operating under the name Pool-Tex, the couple provides services to pool owners all over Granbury ranging from repairs and weekly maintenance to filter cleaning and emergency breakdowns.

a glamorous job. You're hot, you're sweaty, you're cold, you're covered in mud, and sometimes you're covered in algae."

"It's dirty work keeping things clean," Randy chimed in with a chuckle.

Sara added that Pool-Tex has limited openings for pool maintenance so it's important to schedule an appointment as soon as possible.

Pool-Tex provides services throughout Granbury. Hours of operation are Monday through Friday from 8 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturdays are for appointment only.

For more information, or to schedule an appointment, call 817-573-2311, or message the Pool-Tex Facebook page.

ashley@hcnews.com / 817-573-1243



COURTESY OF RANDY CHENAULT
Pictured are Pool-Tex, Inc owners Randy and Sara Chenault.

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Pool-Tex, Inc. recommends:

- *Having your filter cleaned and inspected, replaced if needed*
- *Salt cells cleaned and calibrated*
- *Chemicals Balanced*
- *Equipment inspected*
- *Pool cleaners are working properly*
- *Repair or replace faulty equipment / skimmer baskets and Polaris bags*