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are also a full-line dealer for SCAG mowers, Echo Power Equipment, and Toro Mowers, sales, parts and service.

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efits of customizing your home from the ground up?

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METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

Gardening sparks a level of creativity among enthusiasts, and that can help to alleviate stress by lowering levels of the hormone cortisol.

Gardening offers more than a day in the sun

STAFF REPORTS
Metro Creative Connection

Millions of people embrace opportunities to get back in their gardens each spring, and they might be reaping more rewards from that activity than they realize. According to the American Institute of Stress, gardening sparks a level of creativity among en-

thusiasts, and that can help to alleviate stress by lowering levels of the hormone cortisol. In addition, authors of a 2022 study published in the journal *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening* concluded that gardening during the COVID-19 pandemic helped people cope with coronavirus-related stress through outdoor activity.

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Overcome seasonal allergies

STAFF REPORTS

Metro Creative Connection

Seasonal allergies crop up at certain times each year, particularly in spring and fall. In 2021, approximately 81 million people in the United States were diagnosed with seasonal allergic rhinitis, according to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America. The Canadian Allergy, Asthma and Immunology Foundation says between 20 and 25 percent of Canadians suffer from allergic rhinitis.

Tree and grass pollen are notable contributors to allergies, as is mold. Verywell Health says allergies can be worse in certain areas. In the U.S., certain areas of the East Coast have high rates of allergies, while cities on the West Coast tend to be less harsh on those with allergies. Since allergies can make life

uncomfortable, people want to know all they can do to overcome seasonal allergies. These strategies can help.

- Know the pollen count. Information is key, and knowing when pollen or mold counts are particularly high can help people take certain steps to avoid allergic reactions.

- Close the windows. When pollen levels are high, closing windows to prevent breezes that can bring pollen inside a home can be an effective strategy. You also can utilize a HEPA filter on the home's air conditioning system.

- Remove clothes worn outdoors and shower to rinse pollen off of skin and hair.

- While it can reduce energy usage, hanging clothing to line dry during high pollen counts can cause pollen to stick to freshly laundered items.

- Avoid gardening or other outdoor activities when pol-

len is high. If you must be outdoors, wear a mask.

- Try an antihistamine product that will reduce your body's reaction to the seasonal allergen. WebMD says butterbar as well as a plant-based Phleum pratense could be natural alternative antihistamine products.

- Use a nasal rinse to clean allergens out of your nose. This can help ease congestion and itching. Select sterile saline solutions or carefully follow directions for preparing rinses in neti pots.

- Corticosteroid nasal sprays can improve nasal symptoms. Speak with a doctor about how to use these products and how long to use them.

- Consider allergy shots, also known as allergen immunotherapy. These shots can help desensitize the body to common allergies by using very small amounts of aller-



METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

Keep track of the pollen count so you can take steps to avoid allergic reactions.

gens over time. Eventually the immune system will produce a reduced reaction to the

allergen. Allergies can be troublesome. However, various strat-

egies can help to diminish the often unpleasant effects of seasonal allergies.

Tips to revitalize a garden this spring



METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

Discard dead plants and prune any dead branches.

STAFF REPORTS

Metro Creative Connection

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

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

these tips to help bring a garden back to life.

- Discard the dead weight. Winter can take its toll on a garden, even in regions where the weather between December and early spring is not especially harsh. Discard dead plants that have lingered into spring and prune any perennials that need it. Branches that fell during winter storms also should be removed at this point if they have not previously been discarded.

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

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

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

bloom and ultimately thrive once the weather warms up.

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

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

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Watch out for these poisonous backyard plants

STAFF REPORTS

Metro Creative Connection

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

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

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

· **Hogweed:** This is an invasive plant that grows throughout North America but is particularly well-known along the Atlantic coast. The sap in the leaves can cause phytophotodermatitis, which is a chemical reaction after exposure to sunlight. Painful, severe blisters can form on the skin wherever it touches, and hogweed sap may cause

blindness if it gets into the eyes.

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

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



PHOTO COURTESY TEXAS PARKS AND WILDLIFE

Poison ivy, *Toxicodendron radicans*, grows in Texas all year round. All parts of the plant are toxic in all seasons. Burning leaves of Poison Ivy are particularly dangerous because the toxin is carried in the smoke and can cause serious respiratory damage if inhaled.



PHOTO COURTESY OF CHARMAINE RICHARDSON

Texas Bullnettle, also known as Bull Nettle, Tread-softly, Spurge Nettle (*Cnidocolus texanus*) Leaves are alternate, 2-4 inches long, typically 5-lobed, crinkled in appearance and covered with stinging hairs. If one brushes against the leaves, one will feel the "sting" for 30-45 minutes.

ed in high quantities.

· **Nerium Oleander:** All parts of this beautiful shrub are extremely poisonous. It should definitely be kept away from pets and treated with caution or avoided altogether.

· **Foxgloves:** Adored among pollinators, Foxgloves produce towering pink and white trumpet blooms in early summer. The whole plant is toxic if eaten, however. People who eat any part or attempt to

make tea may find their heart rate slowing down or becoming irregular.

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

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

skin.

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

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

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What to know about installing a pool at home

STAFF REPORTS

Metro Creative Connection

Summer is a season of relaxation when school is not in session, vacation season is in full swing and people everywhere are getting outside and soaking up the summer sun. It's hard to imagine how that can get any better. But it can for people thinking of installing a pool in their backyard.

Pools definitely have a wow factor that's hard to replicate. Homeowners considering pool installation can take note of these factors as they try to decide if a pool is right for them.

COST

The cost to install a pool depends on a host of factors, including which type of pool homeowners are considering and where they live. According to the online home improvement resource Angi (formerly Angie's list), the average cost to install an above ground pool in the United

States in 2022 was \$3,322, while the average inground pool installation in the same year was \$55,000. That's quite a disparity in price, and homeowners should know that the average cost of each project is higher in certain regions and under certain circumstances. Potential ancillary costs, such as excavation and plumbing relocation, will add to the final cost of the project. The erection of fencing around the pool if no fencing currently surrounds the area where the pool will be located also will add to the final cost.

POOL TYPE

As noted, above ground pools, on average, require a considerably smaller financial investment than inground pools. This is an important consideration, but which option may ultimately prove the better investment is worth researching. Homeowners can speak with a local real estate profes-

sional to determine if an inground pool or above ground might yield a significantly higher return at resale. If an inground pool is likely to increase property value by a substantial amount, it could be well worth the extra up-front costs.

MAINTENANCE

Pools are undeniably fun, but they still require maintenance. The experts at Better Homes & Gardens note that vinyl liners in pools last approximately six to 10 years,

while painted concrete may require a fresh coat of paint every five years. Plaster finishes may last as long as 15 years, while cement-coated products can last a lifetime. Pools also need periodic cleaning, and chemicals to keep the pool operating safely and cleanly will require an additional, if somewhat minimal, financial investment. Homeowners investing in a new pool should be aware of the maintenance required to keep the pool clean and be willing to do that

maintenance. And though homeowners typically can open and close pools on their own, it's also possible to hire someone to do it for a relatively small fee each season.

LOCATION

A survey of the land in a yard can reveal how smoothly a pool installation may or may not go. Though it's possible to install a pool in just about any yard, some spaces might require greater preparation and pre-installation effort than others. Sloped

backyards, for example, may require the services of a landscape architect to prepare the space, which can extend the time it takes to complete the project and add the overall cost.

These are just some of the factors that merit consideration when mulling a pool installation. A homeowners' best resource might be a local pool company who can visit a home, provide an estimate and point out any challenges that may arise during the install.



METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

Pools definitely have a wow factor that's hard to replicate.

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How to keep your lawn looking green

STAFF REPORTS

Metro Creative Connection

Homeowners' fascination with a lush, green lawn is something that has developed over time and is still 'growing' strong. According to a 2019 survey conducted on behalf of the National Association of Landscape Professionals, 81 percent of all Americans had lawns and 79 percent said a lawn is an important feature when buying or renting a property.

Even though lush lawns are still coveted, due to drought, the financial climate and even invading insect populations, many people are taking inventory of their landscapes and deciding if a lawn is a priority, even going so far as to reinvent their spaces with lawn alternatives. Still, there are ways to keep properties green no matter which route is taken. Here's a look at some environmentally friendly ways to address a landscape.

IRRIGATE FROM BELOW

There are many ways to water landscapes, but homeowners may want to take their cues from the commercial farming industry. Drip irrigation systems utilize a network of valves, pipes and tubing close to the roots of plants or under the soil. Such systems are more efficient than surface irrigation options, helping to save water and nutrients in the soil.

WATER EARLY

Scotts Lawn Care suggests watering a lawn in the morning before 10 a.m. when it is cooler and winds tend to be calmer. This ensures water can be absorbed into the soil and grass roots before evaporation occurs. Watering midday may cause the water droplets on the lawn blades to heat up and actually scorch the lawn.

PLANT A NEW GRASS TYPE

Homeowners can experiment with eco-friendly grass

seed blends that mix native grasses and may not require as much water nor ideal growing conditions.

UTILIZE GREEN ALTERNATIVES

Rather than focusing solely on grass, some homeowners are turning to alternatives like clover and even moss, particularly if their landscapes do not have the most pristine growing conditions. This may reduce the need for chemical fertilizers and herbicides. The result is still a green, inviting yard.

WATCH THE LAWN HEIGHT

Mowing too frequently or at too low a height may compromise the lawn's ability to thrive. Grass cut to the proper height develops a deep root system to better locate water and nutrients in the soil. That means homeowners may not have to water as much or as frequently. Taller lawns also shade the soil and the roots, reducing some evaporation.



METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

Green landscapes are possible with a few tips that help conserve water and maximize natural resources.

COMPOST

Leave the clippings on the lawn to break down and further feed nutrients to the lawn, helping it look greener and thrive. Furthermore, rely on supplementation with

compost to reinforce the nutrient profile in the soil. The National Resources Defense Council says composting is the natural process of recycling organic matter, such as leaves and food scraps, into a

valuable fertilizer. It doesn't take much to nurture compost in a yard.

Green landscapes are possible with a few tips that help conserve water and maximize natural resources.

Wood floor cleaning guide

STAFF REPORTS

Metro Creative Connection

Wood floors are coveted for a number of reasons, not the least of which is their aesthetic appeal. Many people prefer wood flooring because dust and dirt do not become trapped as they would in carpet fibers, seemingly making wood flooring easy to clean.

Most floors endure a lot of wear and tear. However, with care, wood flooring may last for decades. Part of that care includes understanding how

to properly clean and maintain wood floors so they look their best. The following are some steps for keeping wood floors as pristine as possible.

- Remove shoes. It's a good idea to remove shoes, particularly heels, when walking on wood floors. Sharp heels, cleats and other shoes can scratch or dent wood flooring. All shoes can track in excess dirt, which can contribute to a lack of luster as well.

- Sweep or vacuum frequently. The experts at The Spruce suggest sweeping,

vacuuming or dust mopping wood floors daily. Dirt and dust make floors more slippery, and dirt or sand particles can lead to scratches on the floor.

- Learn your flooring type. Wood flooring is broken down into three main categories: solid hardwood flooring, engineered hardwood flooring and laminate wood flooring. Traditional hardwood is made of planks or strips of any hardwood covered in a wood stain. Engineered flooring is manufactured by gluing

together several thin plies of hardwood. Laminate flooring looks like wood but generally is a veneer or a photographic image of wood covered by a thick layer of melamine resin over fiberboard.

- Skip harsh cleansers. Regardless of flooring type, most are covered by a sealant that can become streaky or dull if the wrong cleanser is used. Avoid chlorine bleach, ammonia, pine oil, or undiluted vinegar. Instead, choose a cleanser that is specifically recommended for the floor-

ing type. Do not allow water or solutions to sit on the floor, as that can contribute to staining and warping. With laminate flooring, avoid wet mopping unless the flooring is specifically marked as being able to be wet. The underlayers of laminate flooring can warp if it gets wet.

- Damp is better than wet. When cleaning wood flooring, use a damp rather than a soaking wet mop. Better Homes & Gardens says standing water can damage wood surfaces.

- Use the hard floor setting. When vacuuming, adjust the vacuum to a hard flooring setting, which will not engage the brush rollers on the vacuum head. Rollers can scratch wood and laminate flooring, advises The Home Depot.

- Use repair products as needed. Scratch and repair kits can fill in small scratches. Wood floor polish and wood waxes also can revitalize worn floors. Again, check that the product is safe for your particular flooring before use.

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STOP IN TODAY!

Make a yard less attractive to ticks

STAFF REPORTS
Metro Creative Connection

Backyards are ideal places to spend warm afternoons soaking up some sun. Lazy days in the yard are a big part of what makes warm weather seasons like spring and summer so appealing. But those afternoons can quickly go off the rails when an unwelcome visitor makes its presence known.

Ticks can be found throughout the world, but the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention notes that only a select few types of ticks transmit bacteria, viruses and parasites, or pathogens, that cause diseases in people. But even if the number of tick species that transmit diseases to humans is relatively low, ticks that can infect humans are a notable threat. Such ticks carry pathogens that the CDC notes can cause a number of diseases, including Bourbon virus, Ehrlichiosis and, of course, Lyme disease, among others.

Human beings can come into contact with ticks in their own backyards. But humans can take various steps to make their lawns less welcoming to ticks.

- Cut your grass short and keep it that way. Black-legged ticks are transmitters

of Lyme disease, which the CDC notes is the most common vector-borne disease in the United States. Lyme disease also poses a growing threat in Canada, where data from the Public Health Agency indicates human-reported Lyme disease cases increased from 144 in 2009 to more than 2,100 in 2022. Black-legged ticks do not like environments that are dry and hot, so short grass makes lawns less attractive to this type of tick. Consumer Reports advises homeowners who have let their grass grow a little too high (around five or six inches) to bag their clippings when cutting the grass. Lots of clippings on the grass can provide a respite from the heat for black-legged ticks.

- Create a tick barrier if your property abuts woods. Woods provide a cover from summer heat that black-legged ticks crave. So properties that abut the woods may be more vulnerable to these unwanted guests than yards that do not border woodlands. A barrier of dry mulch made of wood chips between a property and a bordering wooded area can help repel ticks, who won't want to settle in often dry, hot mulch beds.
- Plant with infestation prevention in mind. Some



METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

Keep your lawn short to discourage black-legged ticks. They do not like environments that are dry and hot, so short grass makes lawns less attractive to this type of tick.

plants can help to repel ticks because they boast certain characteristics that ticks cannot tolerate. The fragrances, textures and oils of plants like garlic, mint, lavender, marigolds, and others create

less welcoming conditions for ticks. Homeowners can speak with local garden centers for advice on tick-repellant plants that can thrive in their particular climate and on their properties.

- Remove yard debris. Piles of wood, leaves and brush can make for good conditions for ticks that transmit disease. After raking leaves and gathering brush, discard the resulting piles immediately.

These measures will not necessarily prevent all ticks from establishing themselves on a property, so individuals are urged to inspect their bodies and the bodies of their pets after a day in the yard.

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What to know about reseeding or replanting your lawn

STAFF REPORTS

Metro Creative Connection

Spring marks the return of flowering plants and warm weather. And homeowners know that spring also ushers in the return of home renovation season.

Homeowners undoubtedly have an extensive list of projects on their to-do list this spring, and that may include helping their lawns and gardens recover after a long winter. Unpredictable weather, which can include drought and excessive rainfall and everything in between, can take its toll on a lawn. In certain instances, the best solution may be planting new grass. But homeowners can consider these tips before they begin the process of reseeding or replanting their lawns.

• Scarify the lawn. Scarifying a lawn can help to create a clean slate, but the timing must be right.

Various lawn and garden experts, including those at BBC Gardeners' World Magazine, recommend scarifying in spring or early autumn. But don't jump the gun when scarifying in spring by scarifying before the lawn has started to grow after a dormant winter. Scarify when the soil is a little wet and the grass is once again actively growing. Scarifying can remove any lingering weeds from last season and also pull up any moss that might have taken hold over the winter. Without weeds and moss to contend with, freshly planted seeds are in better position to thrive.

• Work with a landscaping professional. Homeowners with manageable lawns can likely scarify their own lawns with a relatively inexpensive plug-in scarifier. However, scarifying can be a strenuous physical activity, particularly for homeowners with

large lawns. In such instances, homeowners can benefit from working with a qualified landscaping professional. Such a professional can scarify the lawn and subsequently reseed or replant new grass. The latter task is not so simple, as the lawn care experts at Scotts™ note that choosing the correct seed is a vital part of reseeding or replanting a lawn. Choosing seed may sound simple, but it's a potentially complex decision that requires knowledge of the existing grass, including when to plant it. Certain grasses are best planted in spring or early fall, while others are best planted in summer. A qualified landscaping professional can identify the existing grass and plan the seeding or planting around this important detail.

• Prepare to water the lawn. Watering is vital to the long-term success and health of freshly planted grass seed.

Scotts™ urges homeowners to keep the top inch of soil consistently moist, but not soggy. That requires a daily commitment, and setting a multi-function hose nozzle or sprinkler to the mist setting once per day or more if it's hot outside can increase the chances grass will grow in thick and strong. Scotts™ recommends keeping the top two inches of the soil moist until the new grass reaches a mowing height of roughly three inches. Once that benchmark has been reached, watering frequency can be cut back to about twice per week, but now the soil should be deeply soaked instead of misted. The soaking will help roots grow deep into the soil.

Spring is a great time for homeowners in various regions to reseed or replant their lawns. With the right approach, homeowners can enjoy a full and lush lawn throughout summer.



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Scarifying a lawn can help to create a clean slate, but the timing must be right.

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How to keep animals safe outdoors

STAFF REPORTS

Metro Creative Connection

Fresh air and sunshine can do wonders for the body and even the soul. People realize this, which is why outdoor activity is encouraged; staying indoors all the time can quickly sap energy levels and diminish mood.

What is good for human beings also may be good for pets - within reason, of course. Domestic companion animals can benefit from time in the great outdoors. It provides them new sights and sounds, opportunities to explore, and new ways to exercise. Their owners just need to take precautions to make outdoor ventures safe for domesticated animals. The good news is there are steps to make time outdoors safer for pets.

MAKE THE YARD PET-FRIENDLY

Those who have the benefit of a yard will want to fence it in. Fences stop pets from running away, and they can limit the probability that predators will get inside the yard.

The yard should routinely be inspected for dangers,

including poisonous plants (poison ivy, mushrooms) that pets may ingest, as well as other hazards.

INSTALL A PET DOOR

A pet door can provide convenient access to the outdoors when pets would like to get outside. Doors can be purchased with radio-signal locks that will disengage when a pet wearing an electric collar tries to go through; otherwise, the door stays closed for security reasons.

PREVENT PARASITES

Work with your veterinarian to get a prescription for parasite preventatives. This includes flea and tick medication and worm medication. Pets may get heartworms from the bites of mosquitoes. Therefore, limit the number of mosquitoes on your property by draining standing water and potentially using repellents if mosquitoes are a nuisance.

WATCH THE WEATHER

Pets will need ways to cool off or warm up when spending time outdoors. Extreme heat or cold could be dangerous, so avoid having pets spend prolonged periods of

time outside if the weather is especially harsh.

CHECK IN FREQUENTLY

Pets should not be left entirely to their own devices outdoors. Fences may keep some predators out, but those that can fly or climb (or burrow) can make it inside. Keep tabs on pets while they are outside. Do not keep a dog tied up for a while, as the animal may get tangled and choke.

USE A LEASH

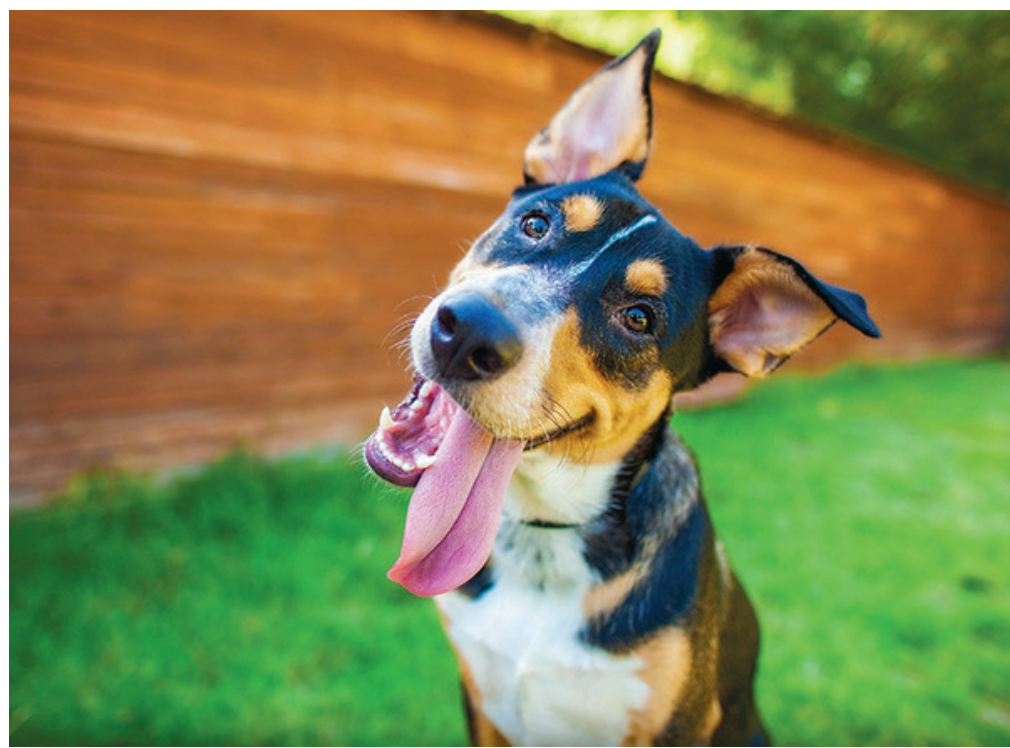
Walks around the neighborhood are made much safer with the use of leashes, or leads as they are sometimes called. A leash enables pet owners to restrain their pets if need be and prevent them from running loose and getting lost.

AVOID HIDDEN POISONS

Antifreeze, oil and even discarded trash can be dangerous to pets if ingested. Pet owners need to exercise caution on walks.

EXERCISE CAUTION IN STORES

Certain retailers have relaxed their policies about letting pets inside. Others have not but seemingly turn a



METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

There are ways to make time spent outdoors safer for pets.

blind eye when pets come inside. By and large, only certified service animals are legally allowed to be in most retail stores. Bringing an 'emotional support animal' or another pet in the store can compro-

mise the ability of trained animals to properly provide care because they may become distracted by other pets. Non-service animals also may become injured by shopping carts or get under

feet of shoppers if they are not properly leash-trained.

Pet owners can safeguard domesticated animals and pets in various ways when spending time outdoors.



METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

Native plants help combat water shortages by reducing the need to water.

The benefits of planting native species

STAFF REPORTS

Metro Creative Connection

Spring and summer present ideal growing conditions for many plants, making these seasons an ideal time to tend to lawns and gardens. Though it's easy to succumb to the temptation of exotic plants, avid gardeners and eco-conscious planters recognize the significance of native plants.

Novices may not realize that native plants are much better for a landscape and the local ecosystem it calls home. Recognition of the many benefits of native plants can make for healthier lawns and gardens and a healthier planet as well.

Native plants are built for local climates. One of the issues gardeners who plant exotic plants run into is keeping

those plants thriving when weather turns harsh. For example, exotic plants may require extra watering in areas that experience drought or even long periods without precipitation in spring and notably summer. The United States Environmental Protection Agency reports that at least 40 states anticipate water shortages by 2024. Planting native plants can help to combat those shortages by reducing the need to water plants if conditions become dry in late spring and summer.

Native plants save money. It's also important to note that native plants save homeowners money. Because they're capable of thriving in local conditions, native plants tend to require less watering, which can help homeowners

reduce their utility costs. But native plants also require less upkeep, which means homeowners can save on potentially costly, not to mention eco-unfriendly, pesticides and other amendments in order to maintain the look of exotic plants. And though it's not always the case, exotic plants tend to cost more at nurseries than natives.

Native plants save gardeners time. In addition to saving money, native plants don't require as much attention. Though spring and summer is a great time to be in the yard, it's also a great time to be out and about. Because native plants thrive in local conditions, gardeners won't need to spend much of their free time tending to them. Exotics tend to require a lot of extra attention and effort,

especially when conditions become harsh. Spending more time outdoors in harsh weather does not appeal to most gardeners.

Native plants blend in with an existing landscape. Native plants look natural within an existing landscape, adding some instant aesthetic appeal without breaking the bank. When planting exotics, homeowners may feel a need to redesign their entire gardens to create a certain look (think Japanese garden). That can quickly consume a budget and take up a lot of free time in both the short- and long-term.

Planting season marks a great time to revitalize a landscape. Choosing native plants is the best choice for homeowners and the planet they call home.

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Create your native plant garden

STAFF REPORTS

Metro Creative Connection

Gardening is a worthwhile endeavor that not only passes the time, but can be a form of exercise and relief from the daily grind. Gardens also provide ample opportunity to experiment, as individuals can produce everything from vegetables to bountiful blooms.

Recent years have witnessed a growing emphasis on eco-friendly gardening that aims to reduce reliance on chemical fertilizers and pesticides in an effort to protect the planet. One way to do so is to rely on native plants.

WHAT ARE NATIVE PLANTS?

Native plants are indigenous to particular regions. The National Wildlife Federation says native plants grow in habitats without human introduction or intervention. Native plants have formed symbiotic relationships with local wildlife over thousands of years, which the NWF notes makes them

the most sustainable options. Native plants help the environment and thrive with little supplemental watering or chemical nutrients.

NATIVES VARY BY REGION

Native plants vary by region. In arid climates, certain succulents may be native because they don't need much rainfall to thrive. In lush wetlands, succulents might be out of place.

START NATIVE PLANTING

The NWF offers native plants for 36 different states that can be shipped right to customers' doors to help replenish native varieties. In addition, gardeners can visit local gardening centers to select native plants. Small and independently owned centers often feature knowledgeable local staff whose expertise can prove invaluable to individuals seeking native varieties.

It's important to keep in mind that native varieties may look less cultivated than more exotic blooms and

foliages designed to sell for their unique appearances. Wildflowers and native grasses may be the types of native plants found in abundance, which may grow up and out quickly. These other tips can help the process.

- Plan and prepare the site by removing weeds and turning over the soil. This will give seedlings an opportunity to take root without competition from weeds. Seedlings will give gardens a faster head-start than waiting around for seeds to germinate. However, gardeners can start seeds indoors and then move them outside once they are seedlings.

- Avoid planting native plants in rows, as that's not how they're likely to grow naturally. Vary the placement so the plants look like they sprouted up haphazardly.

- Gardeners can still exert some control over native gardens prone to growing a little wild. Borders and paths can better define the growing areas.



METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

One of the benefits of using natives is that you can limit water use unless conditions have been especially dry.

- Grow Native!, an initiative from the Missouri Prairie Foundation, suggests planting two to four species in broad sweeping masses or

drifts. Mix grasses with flowering plants. The grasses produce dense, fibrous roots that can prevent weed growth.

Native plants should require minimal care. Keep an eye on them and supplement with water if conditions have been especially dry.

A guide to various types of home awnings

STAFF REPORTS

Metro Creative Connection

Homeowners recognize that upgrades can improve the functionality and comfort of their homes. Improving outdoor spaces has proven particularly popular of late. The National Association of Home Builders reports that outdoor living has been propelled to the top of homeowner wish lists. Plus, a recent survey conducted by the New Home Trends Institute found connection to the outdoors/nature and outdoor

entertaining ranked high among desired home designs.

One way to make outdoor spaces more accommodating is through the installation of awnings. Many homeowners would like to enhance their homes with awnings but do not know where to begin. Learning about the various types of awnings can help homeowners determine which option best suits their needs.

FIXED AWNINGS

Fixed awnings are stationary on a building's exterior. While the awnings are gener-

ally stable, they can be damaged by snow or wind. It's key to find an installation expert to make sure the awning is installed correctly so that it can withstand weather and other issues. It's also important to know that fixed awnings remain in the same position and orientation, so its best to know exactly where to place it beforehand.

RETRACTABLE AWNING

Retractable awnings are the most popular type of awnings because they can be extended when necessary to keep a space cool or protected, then

rolled or folded up when not in use. These awnings are advantageous because they can be retracted when bad weather hits to prevent damage.

MOTORIZED RETRACTABLE AWNING

Motorized retractable awnings offer the utmost convenience. Standard retractable offerings require a handle or hand crank to manually extend or fold up the awning. Motorized awnings can be operated with a sensor, remote or even motion trigger. Even though they cost more, they're a favorite among

homeowners.

AREAS OF USE

Awnings can be installed in various locations. Patio awnings are much preferred because of their large coverage area, which typically spans entire patios. Door awnings are installed above the exterior door of an entryway to protect visitors and occupants from precipitation and to improve the home's look. Window awnings can add additional shade and privacy. There also are side awnings, which are essentially wall-like structures that run across

a patio, garden or balcony for wind or sun protection. They're also utilized to improve privacy.

Homeowners can choose from various types of awning materials, including fabric, metal, glass, and others. Working with a reputable awning company is the best way for homeowners to peruse possible products and find awnings that will suit their needs.



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How to make outdoor living spaces more comfortable

STAFF REPORTS

Metro Creative Connection

Private backyards are now go-to spaces for recreation and entertainment and great places to recharge the body and mind.

One ripple effect of the COVID-19 pandemic was more time spent outdoors, even if it was predominantly on one's own property. OnePoll, in conjunction with the lawn care company TruGreen, surveyed 2,000 American homeowners and found participants spent 14 hours outside every week in 2021, which was three hours more than prior to the pandemic. In addition, respondents admitted that time spent outdoors was therapeutic.

A separate survey conducted for the International Casual Furnishings Association found that people now spend more time relaxing, gardening, exercising, dining, and entertaining outside than in years past. Though COVID-19 may no longer dominate headlines,

the desire to enjoy outdoor spaces has not waned.

While enjoying outdoor living areas, homeowners can do all they can to make these spaces comfortable and welcoming. The following are some good starting points.

GET ALL LIT UP

Outdoor spaces can be enjoyed no matter the hour when there is ample lighting. That could be why the International Casual Furnishings Association reports those who plan to renovate their outdoor spaces list outdoor lighting as a priority. Outdoor lighting not only sheds light on entertaining spaces, but also makes spaces safer and more secure.

INCREASE PRIVACY

No matter how friendly homeowners are with their neighbors, there comes a time when privacy is paramount. Fencing, whether it is wood or vinyl, or even a natural fence made from closely planted hedges, can ensure residents feel comfortable venturing outdoors to swim, take a cat nap or even star

gaze in private.

ADDRESS THE ELEMENTS

Homeowners should note the direction their backyard faces and the typical daily conditions of the space. For example, a yard that faces southwest may get plenty of strong sun during the day, requiring the addition of shade trees, covered patios or arbors to cut down on the glare and heat. If the yard is often hit by winds, trees or bushes planted strategically as windbreaks can help.

SIT COMFORTABLY

High-quality comfortable seating increases the likelihood that homeowners will want to stay awhile in their outdoor spaces. A deep seating set complete with plush chairs, outdoor sofa or love seat and chaise lounge chairs gives people more opportunity to sit and stay awhile.

TAKE A DIP

A pool can be the perfect gathering spot on a warm day, while a spa/hot tub can bridge the gap to cooler weather. According to the



METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

Make your back yard a comfortable oasis.

Family Handyman, soaking in hot tubs can relax tired muscles after a long day, loosen up stiff joints, improve cardiovascular health,

and reduce the time it takes to fall asleep.

BITE BACK AT BUGS

Homeowners may want to

consider using a professional exterminator to get rid of ticks, mosquitoes and other nuisance insects from outdoor spaces.

Maintaining a lawn routinely roamed by pets

STAFF REPORTS

Metro Creative Connection

While many treatments can be applied to lawns to help them thrive, animal waste is not among them. Pet owners who aspire to have beautiful lawns will have to take a few extra steps to ensure lawns can persevere despite the presence of furry companions.

RESEED WITH A DAMAGE-RESISTANT GRASS

There are many different types of grass, and some are more resilient than others. Tall fescue, Kentucky bluegrass, perennial ryegrass, and Bermuda grass are just some of the grass varieties that can capably handle pet traffic. If replacing the entire lawn is

not possible, consider reseeding or addressing the areas that pets frequent.

STRENGTHEN THE ROOT SYSTEM

It may be tempting to cut the lawn short, particularly if dogs or cats like to nibble on longer blades of grass. But that approach could be doing the lawn a disservice. According to The Home Depot, letting the lawn grow to at least three inches will help keep moisture in the soil and prevent evaporation. That moisture will strengthen the roots, creating a healthier lawn for pets and people.

CREATE PET PATHS

Various materials can be used in these high-traffic areas to minimize the sights and signs of pet

traffic. Mulch or crushed stone can establish these pet highways and look like intended features.

SET BOUNDARIES

Pet urine contains high levels of nitrogen, which can burn grass and turn it brown. It's not possible to water down urine or pick up solid waste immediately every time a pet goes outdoors, so designate a pet-friendly spot for potty time. Use fencing or a dog run to separate this area and help mitigate 'land mines' all over the lawn. Fencing also can keep pets out of vegetable gardens and away from potentially toxic plants.

AVOID CHEMICAL LAWN TREATMENTS

When pets use the yard and rest

on the lawn, you'll need to eliminate products that can be harmful to them. Choose all-natural fertilizers and weed and pest preventatives.

LOOK FOR ALTERNATIVES

If maintaining a lawn with pets seems like an uphill battle, consider swapping out your landscape with a variety of materials. Scale back on grass, and incorporate groundcover, hardscape materials like pea gravel, or extend the patio. Artificial turf also is an option, as it won't brown and wither. Some turf products can even be quickly and thoroughly cleaned with water.

It can take some trial and error for pet parents to protect their lawns from their furry friend.



METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

Pet waste can damage lawns, but there are ways to mitigate some of that damage.

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