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Petunia's cousin Calibrachoa takes center stage in 2018

While new flowering species are introduced on a fairly regular basis, very few have supplanted longtime garden favorites such as geraniums and petunias, says University of Missouri Extension horticulturist David Trinklein. An exception is Calibrachoa, or "Callie" for short.

Introduced in the 1990s, this diminutive relative of petunia has become one of the hottest sellers in the bedding plant industry. The National Garden Bureau named Calibrachoa its 2018 flowering annual of the year. With flowers about an inch in diameter, Callies look very much like miniature petunias. What sets them apart, Trinklein says, is the palette of vivid colors and patterns of their flowers. Varieties with yellow, orange or bronze flowers are commonplace.

Since Calibrachoa flowers produce very few seeds, the plant's energy is devoted to producing more flowers rather than ripening seeds. While this enhances its attractiveness, it means most varieties need to be vegetatively reproduced. This costs more than starting plants from seeds, Trinklein says, so expect to pay just a bit more for Callies than you would for most petunias.

The added expense is well worth the

investment, he says. Callies are heat-tolerant and produce loads of flowers. Calibrachoa is semi-trailing and grows to a height of about 12 inches, making it an excellent "spiller" plant in a combination planter or hanging basket.

"As a matter of fact, Calibrachoa probably performs better in a container filled with a soilless growing medium than in a garden bed or border," Trinklein adds. This is especially true if the soil lacks good drainage.

However they are used, Callies need full-sun exposure. Partial shading leads to decreased flowering and a less attractive display of color. Callies are fairly heavy feeders and should be given additional fertilizer during the growing season. Feed every other week with a liquid or soluble fertilizer according to label directions, Trinklein says.

Calibrachoa seems to have a higher need for iron than most bedding plants, he says. Therefore, the growing media should be maintained at a pH level in the 6.0 range, which is slightly acid. Additionally, feed with iron sulfate or chelated iron if new growth becomes yellowish.

Callies are relatively pest-free but can suffer from root rots such as pythium and



phytophthora if grown in poorly drained soil or when overwatered in a container.

Nearly every major seed or plant company has jumped on the calibrachoa bandwagon. Million Bells, Superbells, Cabaret,

Cruze, Calipetite and Can-Can are series to look for in the bedding plant market this spring, Trinklein says. "All bring dazzling color and outstanding performance to the garden."



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Paving stones can add beauty to walkways, driveways and backyard patios, providing that eye-catching finishing touch to a property while enhancing its curb appeal.

Even though the installation of pavers can be a labor-intensive process, with the right tools and tips, this can be a do-it-yourself project for homeowners with renovation experience. Consider these tricks and how-to tips courtesy of The Home Depot, DIY Network and Unilock.

Get your supplies

To begin a paver project, homeowners will need to stock up on some supplies they may not already have at home. Marking paint, mason line, wooden stakes, leveling sand, paver base, and more will be required. A manual tamper can be used. However, for larger areas, it can be worth the cost to rent a plate compactor.

Measure the area

The number of bags of sand, paver base and paving stones needed for the project depends on the size of the area. For example, according to the Home Depot, for 60 square feet, homeowners will need about 30 12 x 12-inch paver stones, 40 bags of paver base and 12 bags of paver leveling sand.

Spray or mark the area where the paving stones will be laid. Measure carefully so you can order exactly how many stones you will need. Have the materials delivered to reduce heavy lifting and trips to the store. Be sure to have all utility lines marked prior to excavation to avoid damage.

Prepare the base carefully

One of the most important aspects of paver installation involves preparing the base. If you cut corners in this process, the finished results can be sloppy, weeds can grow through and/or stones may loosen.

It's essential to grade the area away from the house. That means that the highest point of the patio or walkway should be closest to the house and then the incline gradually flattens out as it moves away from the home. This allows proper water runoff. Mark the height on the stakes and adjust the mason line. Remember to slope the area away from your home with a drop-off of about one inch for every 8 feet.

The base of many DIY applications should be between four and six inches deep. Work incrementally, raking and tamping until the base is firm. Lightly wetting the material can help it solidify.



Sand helps inhibit weed growth and anchor the pavers together. Plastic lining will not be practical.

Installation

Use edge restraints and a string line to keep the design straight. Do not hammer the pavers together. Paver sand will need to be

swept over and settled between the stones to help set them in place.

It helps to read tutorials and watch videos on paving stone installation prior to beginning the project. With practice, the installation will go more smoothly.



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When to tackle weeds in your lawn

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 so long that the damage is already 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 hand-weeding 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 and have not yet spread.

The UK-based company Lawnsmith also suggests a mid-spring weed killer application. This ensures that all weeds that have surfaced are addressed and that none are missed by weeding too early.

The Idaho-based Town & Country Gardens suggests lawn and garden enthusiasts wait to tackle weeds. By waiting and applying weed treatments in the fall, when dandelions and other weeds are absorbing food and nutrients in larger quantities to survive winter, homeowners can rid their lawns and gardens of weeds efficiently.

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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FFA greenhouse plants growing

Owensville High School students started working in the greenhouse back in February getting plants ready for the annual OHS plant sale. The sale will start this year on Sat., April 21 from 9 a.m. to noon. The greenhouse will continue open from April 23 to May 5. Hours are Mon. through Fri. noon to 5 p.m., Saturdays 9 a.m. to noon.

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Maintain indoor air quality all year long

Millions of people anxiously anticipate the arrival of spring. Months spent cooped up indoors as temperatures outside dip below freezing can take their toll, and those first warm, sunny days of spring can be just what people need to kick the winter blues.

Winter can be dreary for people confined to indoors as temperatures drop, and poor air quality in a home can add to that dreariness while adversely affecting individuals' health. Air quality tends to suffer most in winter, but there are ways to ensure the air inside a home stays healthy all year long.

- **Inspect and address any sources of carbon monoxide.** Carbon monoxide, or CO, is an invisible, odorless gas that can contribute to poor indoor air quality and a host of health problems if it goes undetected in a home. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, potential sources of CO in a home include improperly vented natural gas appliances, such as stoves and water heaters, gas-powered tools that are used indoors, clogged chimneys, or blocked heating exhaust vents. Men and women can periodically inspect potential sources of CO and address any issues they find while also making sure all CO detectors are properly installed and functioning optimally.

- **Inspect HVAC ducts.** Ductwork is used to deliver warm or cool air in homes with heating and air conditioning systems. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency notes that much of the dirt in air ducts adheres to the duct surfaces without ever entering living spaces. However, the EPA notes that homeowners should consider having their ducts cleaned if an inspection uncovers substantial visible mold growth. In addition, the EPA recommends homeowners consider cleaning if ducts are infested with vermin or clogged with excessive amounts of dust or debris.

- **Avoid chemical cleaning products.** Chemical cleaning products may be great at disinfecting dishes, countertops and other areas in the home, but such items may be toxic and adversely affect indoor air quality. For example, chemicals such as bleach and ammonia, which are used in many commercial cleaning products, can linger in the air, irritating the eyes, nose, throat, and lungs. Homeowners concerned about the quality of air in their homes also can avoid scented products, such as air fresheners and scented detergents, which the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health notes may release volatile organic compounds



DUCTS MAY need to be serviced by professionals in homes where indoor air quality is poor.

into the air.

- **Inspect bathrooms for mold growth.** Mold can grow on surfaces that are routinely wet, and that makes poorly ventilated bathrooms common sources for home mold infestations. Mold can adversely affect indoor air quality when mold spores are released, potentially triggering allergic reactions, asthma attacks and respiratory conditions.

After bathing in bathrooms without vents, men and women can open windows so the room dries before mold can grow. In bathrooms with vents, make sure vents are running during baths and showers and afterward until ceilings, walls and floors appear dry.

Poor indoor air quality can be easily addressed to ensure individuals stay healthy throughout the year.

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Prepare HVAC systems for warmer days ahead

The arrival of a new season can be an exciting time. Homeowners may have renewed vigor to start home renovation projects or even tackle some cleaning and organization tasks. Before the weather starts to warm up too much, homeowners may want to evaluate their home cooling needs and ensure that all equipment is in good working order.



Spring air conditioning inspections and tuneups are essential steps in system performance. Homeowners should not take for granted that a system that performed optimally last year will do so this year when temperatures climb. Various factors, including weather damage, dust and grime, mechanical wear and tear, and even rodent or insect infestations, can compromise HVAC systems. Since HVAC systems have so many moving parts, a thorough inspection of such systems can save headaches and money down the road.

According to Heating Ontario, the extreme weather conditions that come along with fall and winter can be especially taxing on homes and the systems that keep them com-

fortable. During a spring visit, an HVAC technician will perform maintenance on the air conditioner and make sure it is ready for the heat of summertime. This maintenance may include cleaning the unit, checking controls, calibrating the thermostat, lubricating moving parts, checking refrigerant levels, tightening electrical connections, and clearing any clogs. Homeowners are urged to also change the filter at the start of the cooling season.

Correcting any issues in the HVAC system well in advance of the arrival of warm weather can help ensure comfort when air conditioning is needed. As an added advantage, homeowners should install programmable thermostats if they do not already have them to keep cooling as cost- and energy-efficient as possible.

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Experiment with growing edibles indoors

Foodies find it hard to beat vine-ripened tomatoes plucked right out of a garden. Other edibles, such as fresh lettuce for a small luncheon salad or a handful of fresh parsley right out of a pot to add to a marinade, also add a lot to meals.

The convenience and flavor of freshly grown edibles propels many home gardeners to grow produce and herb gardens in their yards. But those short on outdoor space may be happy to learn that many edibles grow equally as well indoors as outdoors.

Many people maintain comfortable temperatures between 70 and 75 F in their homes all year long, which can be the ideal condition for growing an array of edibles no matter the season. For those with homes that receive ample sunlight (or if homeowners are willing to supplement with artificial light), growing conditions can be even stronger. An indoor garden can comprise as much space as a homeowner is willing to devote. Shelving can maximize vertical areas and enable gardeners to include even more planting room.

Keep these tips in mind when cultivating indoor edible gardens.

• Tomatoes: Tomatoes should be reserved

for the sunniest spot in a home or one where additional UV light can be used. Tomatoes will need pots or containers that are roughly six inches deep with ample drainage. Keep in mind that tomatoes grown indoors will be smaller than outside fruits, and you may want to consider plum or cherry tomato varieties.

• Cucumbers: For those fresh salad mixes, cucumbers can be grown indoors in large pots so they can have space to develop. Be sure to put a climbing structure in the pot so that vines can grow vertically, and place cucumbers in a sunny, warm location.

• Carrots: Natural Living Ideas says that if you have between four and five hours of bright sunlight per day and deep pots with loose, well-draining soil, you can cultivate carrots indoors. Carrots prefer cooler spots for sweet yields. Plus, carrot greens can make for attractive indoor decorations.

• Microgreens: Swiss chard, basil, dill, kale, and other greens can provide nutrient-dense additions to any meals. These plants do not require a lot of depth to a container and can thrive on a sunny windowsill in a room that's between 60 and 70 F.

• Scallions: These plants of the onion family add flavor to many recipes. When



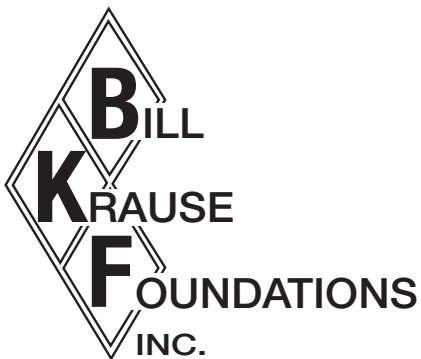
SMALLER VARIETIES of tomatoes can do quite well when grown indoors in the right conditions.

scallions are grown at home, gardeners can snip off the greens as needed. Choose deep pots so the scallions can establish strong root systems.

• Turnips: Large, deep pots are needed to grow turnips, says Loyal Gardener. You

can grow them from seeds and be harvesting turnips in about two months.

Homeowners or apartment dwellers can experiment with different types of edibles indoors. The result can be fresh foods no matter the season.



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The benefits of water features in garden landscapes

Many homeowners aspire to make their homes appear as beautiful and welcoming as possible. Exterior renovations may be high on homeowners' to-do lists, and landscaping is oftentimes a key component of those projects.

When planning gardens, homeowners may benefit by considering more than just flowers and shrubs while giving thought to other elements that can breathe vitality into their landscape designs. Water features can do just that, as such features provide more than just visual appeal.

• **Aesthetic appeal:** Water elements stand out against the greenery and foliage and can be used to create focal points around the garden or yard. A single fountain can draw the eye, while a trickling stream or waterfall can deliver water to various spots in the landscape.

• **Soothing sound:** Rain drops on a rooftop or waves lapping on a shoreline elicit feelings of harmony and relaxation. Water features can bring that gentle sound close to home, further enhancing the ambiance.

• **Brings texture:** Water has its own unique and fluid texture that can provide stark

contrast to blades of grass or the hard lines of architectural elements, such as pergolas or retaining walls. A pond or fountain can soften lines.

• **Enhance the natural ecosystem:** Water features can attract wildlife to a property. Birds may visit to take a quick sip, and dragonflies are sure to dart and hover over the shimmering ripples. Inviting natural wildlife to the yard can add hours of entertainment by enjoying the animals and insects.

• **Remedy problem areas:** Rather than fighting with the landscape, homeowners can adapt it. An area of the yard prone to soggy conditions or flooding can be transformed into a pond or waterfall to work with natural surroundings.

• **Foster a passion:** Many people turn to water features so they can explore the hobby of nurturing an outdoor aquarium. Koi ponds are relatively easy to install and maintain, and the vibrant fish add visual appeal.

• **Add a personal touch:** Water features are as unique as the homeowners who create them. To set landscaping apart from neighbors' homes, homeowners can add fountains, ponds or flowing water elements



WATER FEATURES, such as ponds or waterfalls, can add a special touch to the landscape.

to their properties. Decorative water features also can be melded with pools and spas to help these manmade recreational areas seem like they were carved right out of the

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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.

Although it seems like a futuristic concept, hydroponics — or growing plants without soil — actually dates back many centuries. The hanging Gardens of Babylon and The Floating Gardens of China are two of the earliest examples of hydroponics.

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, old shipping containers, 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 gardening again.



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Moles, voles and gophers: How burrowing wildlife can damage your lawn

Soft, spongy lawns may be indicative of various problems underfoot that occur relatively sight unseen. Barring a septic system backup or considerable flooding, insects or animals may be to blame.

In many areas, burrowing wildlife can wreak havoc on landscapes. Identifying

which critter is causing the damage helps homeowners develop the most effective solutions to issues involving wildlife.

Moles

Moles will spend much of their lives underground, rarely coming up to the surface. They spend their days digging long

tunnels from their dens in search of grubs, earthworms and tuber plants all year long. Moles can be gray, black, brown, or gold and will be between six and eight inches in length. Their wide front feet are designed for excavating, and moles have very small eyes and angular snouts.

Many times moles are to blame for zig-zagging lines across a yard. Channels are typically dug between five to eight inches below the surface of the soil, according to the home and garden resource site Hunker. The tunnels are only about 1.5 inches in diameter and one may see small molehills of excavated soil in areas around the yard. Mole tunnels can be followed through the yard thanks to the appearance of elevated ridges on the surface of the soil.

Voles

Even though their name is similar, voles look nothing like moles. They are also known by the name meadow mice and look more like mice than they do moles or gophers. Voles are small as well and primarily feed on foliage and plant roots. It can take a trained eye to differentiate between holes created by moles and voles, but foliage eaten around an entry or exit hole suggests the presence of voles. Unlike moles, voles don't create soil masses on the surfaces of landscapes, which can make recognizing infestations more difficult.



Groundhogs, gophers, prairie dogs

Groundhogs, gophers and prairie dogs also are burrowing rodents. These rodents are larger than moles and voles. Groundhogs, also known as woodchucks, are the largest of the group, followed by prairie dogs and gophers.

Prairie dogs tend to be more social than groundhogs and gophers and may be seen congregating together. Gophers tend to stay below ground and will pull food into their burrows, says the Florida-based A Wildlife Whisperer. Groundhogs often stretch their subterranean tunnels to dens, which they may like to set up under backyard sheds or other protected areas. Groundhogs' size and desire to forage and eat their fill above-ground often make them easy to spot.

Once the animal doing the burrowing has been identified, homeowners can begin removing food sources and altering conditions to make their yards less critter-friendly. In the instance of moles, using a grub-killer can diminish their numbers. Wire mesh fences buried underground can deter digging into garden beds. Homeowners who are vigilant about disrupting burrows and tunnels may encourage rodents to relocate.

If burrowing wildlife prove problematic, homeowners can work with professional exterminators to assess the situation.



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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-size-fits-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 any would-be gardener or landscaper 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.

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Three ways to use your lawn to improve curb appeal

Returns on home improvement projects vary. In its annual Cost vs. Value Report, Remodeling magazine notes the projects that yield the best returns on investment in a given year. But a host of factors, including the type of market (buyers' or sellers') and the region where the home is being sold, ultimately combine to determine if homeowners' investments in home improvement projects will provide the returns they were hoping for.

Though there's no way of guaranteeing a home improvement project will yield a great return, real estate professionals often cite improving curb appeal as an excellent way to attract prospective buyers and potentially get the asking price or more when selling the home. Improving curb appeal makes even more sense in today's real estate market, when many people do their own searching via real estate

websites such as Trulia or Zillow. When using such sites, buyers will likely be less inclined to click on a listing if exterior photos of the property are not eye-catching.

Various projects, including tending to lawns and gardens, can improve curb appeal. An added benefit to focusing on landscaping to improve curb appeal is it promotes spending time outdoors in spring and summer. In addition, many lawn- and garden-related home improvement projects need not require professional expertise.

1. Maintain a lush green lawn.

Lawns that fall into disrepair may not give buyers a correct impression about how homeowners maintained their homes. Lawns with multiple dead spots and grass that appears more brown than green may lead many buyers to assume that the home's interior was equally

See **Curb appeal**, Page 17B



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Curb appeal • from page 16B

ill-cared for. Maintaining lush green lawns is not as difficult as it may seem. Applying fertilizer and aerating at the appropriate times of year (this varies by region) can promote strong roots and healthy soil, making it easier for grass to survive harsh conditions like drought. When watering in summer, do so in early morning or evening so as little water is lost to evaporation as possible.

2. Address brown patch.

Even well-maintained lawns can fall victims to brown spots. According to the lawn care professionals at TruGreen, lawns in regions with hot temperatures and high humidity can be infected with brown patch, a common lawn disease that is caused by fungus, which can produce circular areas of brown, dead grass surrounded by narrow, dark rings. Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences notes that removing dew that collects on grass leaves each morning, which can be accomplished by mowing or dragging a water hose across affected areas, can be an effective way to reduce brown patch. Homeowners without much lawn care experience can consult professional landscapers to address the issue. But those looking to sell their properties should note that buyers often walk the grounds of homes they are considering buying. So addressing any issues on the lawn should be a priority for sellers.

3. Confine dogs to certain areas.

Dog owners may want to let their pets roam free in their yards. But homeowners about to put their properties up for sale may want to confine their four-legged friends to certain areas. That's because dog urine can be high in nitrogen. Nitrogen itself is not harmful to lawns, but in high concentrations it can contribute to yellow or brown spots. Also, highly acidic dog urine may even adversely affect pH levels in the soil.

Curb appeal can go a long way toward helping homeowners sell their homes, and a lush lawn can be used to catch the eye of prospective buyers.

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The basics of mulching

Mulch is available in various forms. Like other land and garden products, mulch can go a long way toward helping plants thrive.

Mulch comprises just about any material that is spread over the surface of soil. Its purpose is primarily to help soil retain moisture. In addition, mulch can staunch weed growth, keep soil cool, improve the aesthetics of garden beds, and even improve soil nutrient composition. When the right mulch is chosen, it can reduce the amount of time homeowners spend watering and weeding their gardens and insulate plants from dramatic changes in weather.

Gardeners may not realize that mulch also can prevent garden soil from becoming overly compacted, according to HGTV. This can mean beneficial earthworms can move easily through the soil, creating channels for water and depositing their nutrient-rich waste products.

Gardeners can choose organic or inorganic mulch. Organic mulches are derived from natural materials that will decompose over time, lending organic matter as well as various nutrients to the soil. Organic mulches also may contain beneficial microorganisms that can fight against plant diseases. Inorganic mulches may be made of stones, landscape fabrics and plastic. Both types will need to be amended or replaced as they degrade. Those who want the most environmentally-friendly mulching materials can choose all-natural mulches instead of synthetic alternatives.

To work effectively, mulch should be applied in a two-to-

three-inch layer of material, state the experts at Old World Garden Farms. This is the ideal amount to retain soil moisture and suppress weed growth without choking plants. Also, mulch that is too thick may make it impossible for water to penetrate, or it may prevent the soil from airing out, causing continuously wet conditions that lead to root and stem rot.

The University of Connecticut Home & Garden Education Center says mulch should not be placed directly against plant crowns or tree bases, as this can promote the development of disease. It may also serve as a habitat for bark- and stem-eating rodents. The center also suggests watering newly installed bark or wood mulches to prevent fungi from colonizing in dry mulch and causing problems like a water-repellent surface on the mulch.

Home landscapers considering mulch types may find that compost, manure and grass clippings (from nonpesticide-treated lawns) can be inexpensive and versatile in garden beds. The home advice site The Spruce notes that newspaper may also be effective. Many newspapers have switched over to organic dyes, especially for their black and white sections. Newspapers are an inexpensive way to suppress weeds and act like organic mulch in beds. They can be covered with other organic mulch, like shredded bark, for more visual appeal.

Mulch can be a versatile asset when doing gardening projects around home landscapes. And the benefits are more than just aesthetic.



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How to control common spring pests

Just when winter thaws out and people are anxious to enjoy the blooming flowers and luscious lawns of spring, pesky pests can appear and impact comfort levels and safety.

Many pests resume their levels of activity as spring draws closer and temperatures warm up. The presence of these insects and rodents may cause problems in and around a home, which makes it essential to recognize them and avoid issues. The following are some of the more common spring pests and how to remedy infestations.

Pavement ants

Pavement ants are some of the most common pests residents encounter inside and outside of their homes. These ants are light brown to black with appendages that are lighter than the rest of their bodies. Small in stature, pavement ants have parallel lines on their heads and thorax, according to pest extermination company Orkin.

Although pavement ants nest outdoors, they can enter homes through small crevices in search of food scraps. Their large colonies may not disappear until treatment is introduced. Keep foods in tightly sealed containers, clear counters and floors of crumbs, and address water sources, such as leaks. Pesticides may be needed in extreme

conditions.

Fleas

Fleas are tiny, jumping, biting pests that must find a host upon which to live. As ectoparasites, they feed on blood while living on the body of living hosts. Pets can bring fleas inside the yard and home in warm weather. According to the University of California Statewide Integrated Pest Management Program, flea larvae develop more quickly at higher temperatures. At normal room temperatures, the entire life cycle of a flea is about 18 days.

Several flea control products are available to control fleas on cats and dogs. There also may be powders and sprays to alleviate flea infestations in the home. Vacuuming is also very effective in killing larvae in the carpet and at picking up adults.

Wasps

An errant wasp, hornet or yellow jacket may have survived winter and ridden out the colder temperatures within a home. Once the weather warms, queens will begin to look for places to lay eggs and establish colonies. Treating areas where wasps are seen entering and leaving the home is key. Seal holes as soon as possible.

Although wasps help control other insect



ANTS ARE a nuisance that become more active as the weather warms.

populations, their painful stings and potentially aggressive nature can make them challenging to have around a home. If a nest is found, hire a professional to remove it.

Spiders

Many spiders are not harmful enough to humans and pets to be much of a problem. In fact, spiders can be helpful to have around to control the populations of other insects. Still, many homeowners would prefer these web-

slinging friends remain outdoors. Therefore, sealing cracks in a home's foundation and repairing small openings around windows and doors can help keep spiders out. Also, alleviating moisture issues in basements, garages or attics may keep out other bugs that would be prey to spiders.

Homeowners can take the steps necessary to cut down on pests in and around their homes.

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Grandpa's rules for mowing grass

Old man winter was supposed to say goodbye on March 21 when we officially welcomed the start of spring. He is not cooperating this year. My wife and I love the spring when we can sit out on our deck in the evening with a glass of wine and enjoy the cool air without the interruption of flying insects.

But spring also mean that it is grass mowing season. Every now and then a curious acquaintance will ask me what my responsibilities are at the newspaper. My list of duties include shoveling snow (which thankfully I only did a couple of times this last winter) and mowing the grass.

Both at my house and at our Owensville office I cut the grass with a push mower in under an hour. Thankfully there is no grass to mow at our office in Belle or Vienna.

At one point, in my middle school years I mowed at least five yards a week. Of course they were our neighbors' and relative's yards. I never saw a riding mower. Everything was done with a push mower. After all, why spend the money on a riding mower when you have the strong legs of a 10 year old to do the work for you.

My maternal grandfather, Ed Koepke taught me how to mow grass. His number one rule was to push the mower clockwise.

With the grass discharged on the right side this accomplished two things.

First, since your grass clippings were thrown to the center of the yard the mower ran over them again and

by DENNIS WARDEN



again cutting them in smaller pieces. Remember at the time there was no such thing as a mulching blade.

The second reason grandpa gave me for mowing this way was to minimize the possibility of throwing an errant rock or stick through a window of the house.

Grandpa's second rule was to cleanup after yourself and remove any lawn clippings from the driveway or sidewalk.

Now I rarely see a young boy, or girl out mowing the yard. If they are it's on a lawn tractor, or a zero turn mower.

That's progress.

This brings me to one of my pet peeves. There are many people out there who do not follow my grandfathers rules. They mow counter clockwise.

This may seem like a small insignificant thing, but when one mows grass counter clockwise the grass clippings are discharged on the road.

I'm sure you are thinking, Dennis with all the problems in the world you get upset over grass clippings?

At home, our yard has a long narrow flower bed between the street and the grass. How would it look if I bagged my grass, took it up on the road and dumped it?

Do you discharge your grass clippings on your driveway, your sidewalk or where you park your car? Of course not. If you did you would use a broom or a leaf blower to remove it.

I once spotted a homeowner in my neighborhood using a leaf blower to do just that, blow the grass clippings off the road. His grandfather must have taught him how to mow.

Today many make a good income cutting grass at commercial and residential properties. Their objective is to mow the property as fast as possible and move to the next job.

Do the owners wonder how bad it looks for their grass clippings to be on the road in front of their business? I'm sure they would complain if the clippings were thrown on their parking lot.

It's bad enough to have grass on the road in town. It cannot be safe, driving 50 to 60 mph on a highway and drive into grass clippings. I've seen it where the road is almost completely green from fresh mowed grass.

In my opinion there should be a law against yard waste being placed on the street or highway.

Thanks for putting up with my pet peeve.

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Choosing materials for decking

Warm weather often gives rise to thoughts about spending time in the great outdoors. Decks can expand outdoor living spaces, making them popular home additions. However, when it comes time to map out a deck building plan, individuals may be unsure as to which deck material will meet their needs. Wood and composite decks are among the most popular choices today, and the popularity of aluminum is growing steadily.

Wood

Wood is a versatile and attractive decking material. According to the wood resource Real Cedar, some people think that wood is too expensive and requires too much maintenance. In fact, domestic softwoods can be very cost-effective decking options. According to Remodeling Magazine's "Cost vs. Value" report, wood decks retain considerable resale value.

In terms of maintenance, choosing a rot-resistant wood can result in less maintenance. Durable woods include cedar and redwood.

Popular Mechanics says both species contain tannins and oils that make them naturally resistant to decay, rot and voracious insects. Periodic cleaning and inspection/repairs will be needed, but wood can be much more durable than people may think.

Composite

Composite decking and its close cousin, plastic lumber, are some of the fastest-growing decking materials on the market. Many products are made from polyethylene or polyvinyl chloride. Some composites will be comprised of recycled plastic and wood fibers to create a weather- and stain-resistant material that doesn't warp, rot or splinter. Composite manufacturers continually experiment with manufacturing processes to duplicate the look of natural wood grain.

Homeowners are often drawn to composite decking because such decks require little maintenance. These decks do not need to be sanded, stained or refinished. However, mold and mildew can grow in shady, damp areas, so homeowners must realize that these prod-

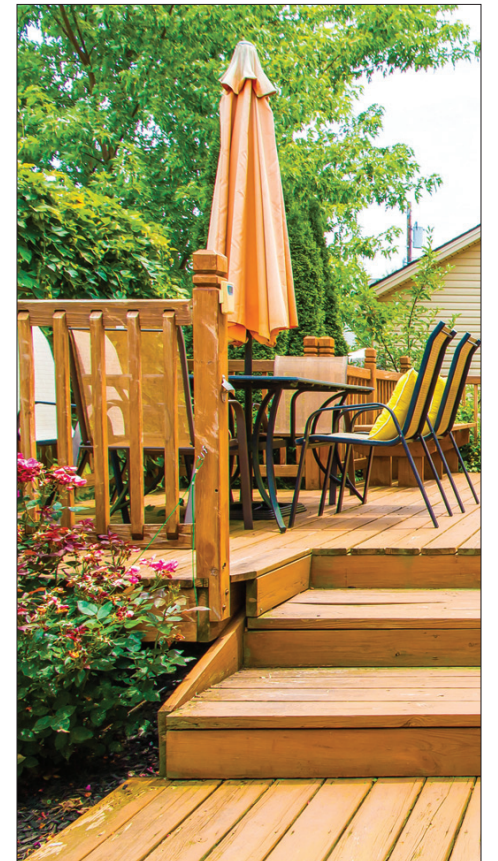
ucts are not completely maintenance-free.

Aluminum

Although aluminum decks are not seen that often, there are reasons why this decking material is becoming more popular. According to LockDry®, a manufacturer of aluminum decking materials, power-coated aluminum does not need to be replaced due to rotting, cracking or warped boards. Most planks have interlocking edges that create gap-free, watertight decks. Aluminum also has the advantage of being a very strong but lightweight material.

Some people may think that aluminum decks would be hot underfoot, but the material actually stays cooler in the sun because of its heat-dissipation properties. For those who have green goals in mind, aluminum is totally recyclable.

Various decking materials can meet the look, price point and maintenance level homeowners desire.



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How to read a nursery plant tag



Shopping for new plants for a home can be an exciting undertaking. Nurseries and garden centers are often home to dozens of types of plant species that come in various colors, leaf variations and sizes. Such variety can make choosing plants more fun while also making the process of buying plants a bit complicated, especially for novices. Thankfully, plant tags can help consumers make informed decisions.

Understanding how to read plant tags is key to making good choices. Such labels contain a lot of information, but once a person knows how to decode that data, he or she is well on the way to choosing the right plants.

Common name

The common name of the plant tends to be the most noticeable word or words on the tag. This is the name the plant is referred to outside of scientific circles. Most plants have one or more common names in addition to their botanical name.

Scientific (botanical) name

Scientific names are also known as the Latin names of the plant. Such

names will be written in italics on the tag and are usually one or two words. The scientific name includes the genus (group) and the species of the plant.

Cultivar

A plant tag may further describe the type of plant by including the cultivar. A cultivar is the variation on the species. It may describe a size or color variation. The cultivar is listed in single quotations by the scientific name.

Sun requirements

The tag should list how much sun exposure the plant requires to thrive. It may be anywhere from full sun to full shade.

Height and spread

The label frequently includes the maximum growing height and width the plant should reach when mature. This gives gardeners an understanding of just how much room the plant will take up in the garden and how to space plants in a landscape.

Water needs

How much water the plant requires may be featured on the tag as well. This helps gardeners know if they need soil

to be damp or relatively dry.

Hardiness or zone

Tags that list zones will describe the coldest zone in which the plant can exist. Otherwise, it will give a range. Many annuals will not list a hardiness zone because they are not expected to last beyond one season.

Perennial or annual

The tag should designate the plant as an annual or perennial. Annuals are not expected to last through the winter and will need to be replanted the following year. Perennials can over-winter and will regenerate year after year.

Tags also may list information such as special care needs, drought tolerance, uses for the plant, and when the plant blooms. Some plant labels will inform gardeners if the plants were produced organically or without GMO practices. Trademark information also may be included.

Plant tags provide important information for selecting and growing plants. When noted, tags help gardeners make the right selections and keep plants as healthy as possible.



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Suggestions when shopping for fencing

Fences can improve functionality of a yard and provide extra security and privacy. Some fences are decorative while others are functional. Families with children and/or companion animals also may find fencing is a necessity to keep everyone safe and corralled.

With a vast array of fencing materials available, homeowners may find it challenging to decide which material is right for their properties. The following breakdown can help homeowners learn more about fencing and potentially point them in the right direction regarding which material to choose for their properties.

Budget

Budget is one of the first considerations many homeowners have when installing fencing. Pricing will affect whether one can afford a chain link fence (one of the most budget-friendly options), wrought iron or ornate wood (more expensive). Pricing out several different types of fences will give homeowners an idea of which material fits into their budgets.

Purpose

Homeowners install fencing for various reasons. If a fence is an ornamental way to delineate property lines, a picket fence or a post-and-rail fence are simple options that can lend a homey feel to a property. These types of fences also can enhance and frame landscaping elements, such as gardens.

In many areas, laws require homeowners to install fencing around swimming pools. In such instances, chain link fencing that does not obstruct views of the pool might be the best choice. If security or privacy is the main desire, tall fences that make it difficult for neighbors to see into the yard may make an ideal choice.

Restrictions

It is important to understand local regulations before installing fencing. Communities governed by homeowners' associations may have rules in place that dictate the type of fences that can be installed. Townships and other municipalities may have their own rules concerning fence type, property borders, fence height, and other factors that will have to be adhered to so that fencing will meet code. If such rules are not following fines may be imposed and the fence may have to be removed. Homeowners also may need permits to install fencing, whether they are hiring a contractor or doing the work themselves.

Maintenance

Consumer resource Angie's List advises homeowners to consider maintenance before choosing a fencing material. Wooden fencing requires the most maintenance due to painting and staining. Aluminum or vinyl fencing requires less maintenance, but it can be harder to repair isolated damage or replace pickets, if necessary. In some instances, the entire fence may have to be replaced.

Homeowners install fencing for many different reasons. Considering price, budget, purpose, and maintenance before making a decision regarding fencing can help homeowners make the best decision possible.

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Recognizing and addressing leaf spot

Homeowners who take pride in their properties may be alarmed to notice seemingly spotted leaves on their trees. Such spots may be indicative of a condition known as leaf spot.

In spite of its appearance, leaf spot is often harmless. According to the Missouri Botanical Garden, leaf spot is a term used to describe a number of diseases that can affect the foliage of ornamentals and shade trees. Often caused by fungi that can spread thanks to wind and/or spring rains, leaf spot also may be a byproduct of bacteria. As unsightly as leaf spot can be, the Missouri Botanical Garden advises that established plants will only be adversely affected by leaf spot if defoliation occurs three or more years in a row.

While leaf spot is often harmless, homeowners should still learn to recognize it and document its presence to ensure it does not become a long-term problem.

How to recognize leaf spot

Because leaf spot is an umbrella term that refers to various diseases, its symptoms can vary depending on which type of leaf spot is affecting a tree.

- Spots: The spots of leaf spot vary in size and color depending on the plant, the organism that's affecting it and the stage of development. Spots are typically brown, but can be tan or black as well.

- Margins: Another sign of leaf spot is the presence of concentric rings or dark margins on the leaves around the infected areas.

- Black dots: If fungus is the cause of the leaf spot, the fungal bodies may appear as black dots in the spots. These dots may be within the rings or in central clusters.

- Yellow leaves: Some leaves that are infected with leaf spot turn yellow and drop prematurely.

If leaf spots are not noticed immediately, they may gradually combine to form large blotches.

How to address leaf spot

Leaf spot does not necessarily need to be addressed. As the Missouri Botanical Garden notes, many trees tolerate leaf spot and suffer little to no damage. In addition, the University of Minnesota Extension notes that the majority of leaf spot diseases affect only a small percentage of infected trees' overall leaf area and are only minimal stressors on the trees.

But homeowners who want to address leaf spot can take certain steps to do so.

- Remove infected leaves. As infected leaves fall, homeowners can remove them so the spores that caused the initial infection cannot be blown onto healthy leaves and spread the disease.

- Remove dead twigs. Removing dead twigs also can help get rid of spores that can contribute to infection.

- Change watering techniques. When watering trees, homeowners who want to prevent leaf spot or stop it from spreading can avoid overhead watering, instead

See **Leaf spot**, Page 25B

LEAVES ARE susceptible to disease that can lead to defoliation.

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Garden Solutions spring 2018

Oh my goodness .have we had some early spring moisture!! We believe our aquafers should be close to full. Sooooo now let Spring begin!!

April is the “opener” of spring. Grass greens up, trees leaf out, shrubs begin to bloom, perennials come back, and the birds continue to sing. This is truly my favorite time of year; the time of rebirth! The seasons move so fast, this is one that you really need to s-l-o-w d-o-w-n and enjoy every day.

One of the bigger movements across the country remains “Protecting the Pollinators”. Last year a huge push to “Save the Monarch Butterfly” was seen everywhere. A few years ago, the Honey Bee had been known as declining. Well, the decline of these most important pollinators is still a strong concern. Therefore, we need to make ourselves aware of the push to save all pollinators. We can help with this push by being aware of your surroundings and eliminating the use of insecticide products, especially on blooming plants that are visited by pollinators. It you have an insect issue, talk to a representative at your local garden center about methods of controlling pests without harming pollinators. Our food supply depends on it.

There is so much to talk about in April, I have made a short list of some of the more common, timely items that will need attention or guide you as we begin this most wonderful season of Spring!

- When Crabapples are in bloom, hardy annuals can be planted.
- Transplant trees, shrubs and perennials early in the



month for best success.

- Spots and bare patches in the lawn can still be over seeded if you did not apply a Crabgrass Preventer. During spring there are more issues to be aware of when seeding a lawn rather than in the fall.
- Liquid weed control should be applied this month to control dandelions, henbit and other broadleaf weeds. New grass from seed MUST be mowed 3 times to make it strong enough to withstand weed

chemicals.

- Prune spring flowering shrubs after they finish blooming.
- Start cucumber, squash, cantaloupe and watermelon seeds indoors this month.
- Termites begin swarming. Termites can be distinguished from ants by their thick waists and straight antennae.
- Ants have slender waists and elbowed antennae.
- Mole young are born in chambers deep underground.
- Hang out hummingbird feeders the first of this month. Use a solution of 1 part sugar to 4 parts water. Change the solution frequently to keep it from fermenting. Food coloring is not needed nor is it recommended for the birds.
- The last week of April is a good time to try an early sowing of warm season crops such as green beans, sweet corn, etc. Transplants of tomatoes, eggplants, peppers, and sweet potatoes can also start being planted outdoors.
- Container gardening is good choice for flower and vegetable gardening if space is in short supply. It can be done by anyone, anywhere, check it out!!
- “Natural Gardening” is here to stay.....keep your family safe and check out what organic/natural options are available to you when gardening this year. There are many.

Well, time is running short, see you in the garden
Sandi Hillermann McDonald

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Introduce earthworms into the garden

Gardeners eager to revitalize their lawns and gardens may spend hundreds of dollars on tools and products designed to improve soil and growing conditions. Although many of these items can be advantageous, gardeners also may want to look to nature's best garden helpers: earthworms.

It is believed that nearly 3,000 different types of earthworms inhabit the planet. Worms have been around for hundreds of millions of years.

Worms can be seen as bait dangling on fishing lines or as meals for red-breasted robins. But these subterranean dwellers play their biggest role beneath the soil.

Earthworms move through dirt as they search for food. The worms consume particles in the soil, helping to recycle materials like dead leaves, plant parts, decaying animals, and feces. Through their travels, worms also serve to aerate the soil. Worms bring the subsoil closer to the surface and mix it with the topsoil. Earthworms' castings also help naturally fertilize the areas in which they reside. The slimy mucus that worms leave behind contains nitrogen, which also helps to amend the soil.

The University of Illinois Extension says most earthworms found, particularly in North America, can only grow so long, even though some worms seem like they stretch forever underneath the ground. Depending on the type of worm and how many segments it has, as well as its age and ability to get nutritious foods, worms typically reach only a few inches in length, offers National Geographic. There are some anomalies, however. The Oregon giant earthworm is one of the largest earthworms found in North America, growing to more than three feet in length. That worm is very rare, however. In 2016, a 16-inch-long earthworm was discovered in England and became part of the collection at the Natural History Museum in London. Some Australian and South American earthworms are known to grow much larger.

Worms need the correct mix of oxygen, moisture and favorable temperatures to survive. If they do not have these components, they will seek them out elsewhere.

Because of the many benefits earthworms provide, they can be a boon to landscapes.

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