



Spring Home & Garden

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Three perennial pointers

Gardening is an engaging hobby that can provide a host of benefits, some of which may surprise even the most devoted gardeners. For example, the Harvard Medical School notes that just 30 minutes of gardening activities burns 135 calories, making gardening a fun and simple way to incorporate more exercise into your daily routine. In addition, scientists have long proven that gardening releases the hormones serotonin and dopamine in the brain, each of which are associated with improved mood.

Perennial gardens can be especially attractive to seasoned gardeners and novices. Perennials are plants that come back year after year, and committing to a perennial garden can ensure people stick with gardening for the long haul, reaping all of the rewards that come with making such a commitment.

Before planting a perennial garden, those new to gardening may want to consider these three tips.

1. Make a plan.

A perennial garden comes back year after year, which means any mistakes you make when planting are likely to haunt you year after year as well. Factors like space and location must be considered before planting. Many gardeners utilize garden planning

applications like GrowVeg to make the process of planning a garden simpler and more organized. Such applications can be especially useful for novices.

2. Consider aesthetics.

Gardens can be awe-inspiring, especially when gardeners consider aesthetics prior to planting. The DIY Network advises gardeners to consider scale before choosing which perennials to plant. Tall plants and wide beds tend to look best outside large homes, while short plants in small beds tend to look better outside small homes.

3. Work with a professional.

Local garden centers can be excellent resources when planning perennial gardens. Representatives at such businesses can offer tips on native plants, which will be more likely to thrive year after year than non-natives. Such representatives also can help you choose the right plants based on the amount of sunlight the plants will likely get after being planted. Each of these factors can be easily overlooked by people without much gardening experience.

Perennial gardens can provide years of joy and inspiration, especially when gardeners give ample attention to certain details prior to planting.



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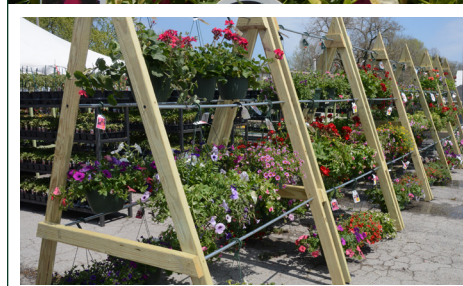
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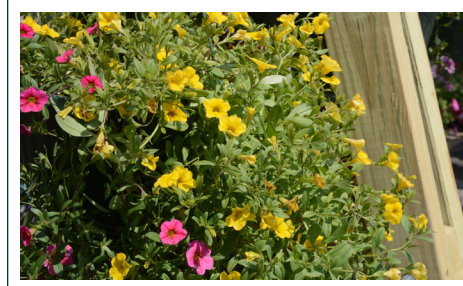
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Mulching mistakes to avoid

Landscape features vary significantly from house to house. Some homeowners may prefer water features on their properties, while others focus on flowers that would be the envy of a botanical garden. Regardless of those preferences, lawn and garden enthusiasts who want to make their properties as idyllic as possible may eventually look to mulch to help them accomplish that goal.

Mulch helps soil retain moisture, which promotes strong, healthy flowers, plants, trees, and shrubs. And because soil beneath mulch retains more moisture than soil that's not protected by mulch, homeowners won't have to spend as much time watering mulched landscapes. That saves time and conserves water, which can be a big benefit in areas prone to drought and/or especially hot summers. Mulch also helps to suppress weed growth, which can ensure all that hard work needed to create an eye-catching garden won't be compromised by the presence of unsightly, thirsty weeds.

Mulching seems like a simple task, and it can be. But that does not mean homeowners cannot make mistakes when mulching. The following are some common mulching

mistakes to avoid as lawn and garden season hits full swing.

- **Not enough mulch:** Mulch is ineffective when spread too thin. The Virginia Cooperative Extension at Virginia Tech and Virginia State University recommends applying mulch no less than two inches in depth. Anything less than that will prove ineffective at preventing weed growth and helping the soil retain moisture, and that means you will need to water more often.

- **Poorly located mulch:** Mulch should not be placed too close to plant stems or tree trunks. When it is, tissue is so wet that it makes for a perfect environment for disease and insect infestation.

- **Failing to mulch to the drip line:** The drip line of a tree refers to the outermost circumference of the tree's canopy from which water drips onto the ground. The VCE recommends mulching to the drip line of a plant or tree, which ensures the plant or tree will get the most out of the mulch. Mulching to the drip line also minimizes competition from the grass, leading to stronger plants and trees.

- **Failing to weed before mulching:** Weeds



should be removed prior to mulching. If they're not, the mulch can provide the same growing environment for weeds that you're trying to create for your plants and trees.

Mulching benefits a landscape in myriad ways, especially when homeowners avoid some common mulching mistakes.

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Signs that voles are invading

All sorts of uninvited guests can compromise the look and vitality of a garden. Some gardens are trampled by foot traffic, while others are plagued with weeds. Still others are plagued by small, tunnel-building rodents known as voles.

Voles are often confused with moles. While they do bear some similarities, namely that both travel through lawns and gardens via tunnels, voles and moles are not one and the same. In fact, moles are not even rodents.

The Old Farmer's Almanac notes that voles eat mainly vegetarian diets. That makes vegetable gardens prime targets for these small rodents that some mistake for mice. But Pests.org, a comprehensive resource for anyone looking to learn about pests and the threats they pose, notes that voles' eyes and ears are considerably smaller than the eyes and ears of mice. In addition, voles' tails are much shorter than the tails on mice.

Correctly diagnosing issues is essential to maintaining a healthy garden, and identifying vole infestations is no exception. The following are some signs that typically indicate a lawn or garden has been infested with voles.

- **Shallow tunnels throughout the property:** Voles create shallow tunnels between one and two inches wide, and these tunnels can typically be found all over the lawn. Grass stems and blades are part of voles' diets, so don't just look to the garden for signs of vole infestation.

- **Markings on bark and plants:** Pests.org notes that voles may leave small gnaw marks on bark and plants. A careful inspection of trees and other plants may be necessary to uncover this symptom.

- **Partially eaten root vegetables:** Voles may eat root vegetables like carrots and potatoes by pulling them down into their tunnels. The result is partially eaten vegetables in the garden.

- **Damaged trees and shrubs:** Voles don't limit their victims to grass and root vegetables. Young trees and shrubs that are leaning over may have fallen victim to vole infestations.

Homeowners can employ various strategies to control and prevent vole infestations. But first they must be certain the unwanted guests tunneling their way through their lawns and gardens are, in fact, voles.



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Five outdoor projects that add value

Exterior renovations can enhance the appearance of a property and make it more enjoyable for homeowners. Certain renovations have the potential to add value to a home, while others may do the opposite. Learning which one have the largest return on investment can help homeowners select features that will have the most positive impact.

Curb appeal goes a long way toward attracting potential buyers. According to the National Association of Realtors, first impressions of a property have a strong influence on buyers. Landscaping and external features can do much to influence such impressions. .

- Lawn care program: Investing in a lawn care program that consists of fertilizer and weed control application and can be transferred over to a subsequent

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The dangers of mowing too low

Spring marks the return of many things. Trees and flowers begin to bloom again in spring, while warmer temperatures are welcomed back with open arms. Grass also begins to grow again in the spring. That means it's not too long before homeowners have to dust off their lawn mowers and get to work. Those who don't necessarily enjoy mowing the lawn may be tempted to cut their grass very low, as doing so can mean longer intervals between mowing sessions. However, mowing grass too low can have a very adverse effect on a lawn.

- Cutting too low can injure the grass. Cutting grass too low can injure the grass, creating what's essentially a domino effect of problems to come. Injured grass will focus on its recovery efforts, thereby making it vulnerable to other issues.

- Cutting too low promotes weed growth. Injured grass is vulnerable to invaders,

including weeds and insects. Weeds and insects can attack grass as it recovers from injury, and before homeowners know it, their lawns are overcome with a host of problems.

- Cutting too low allows crabgrass to thrive. Crabgrass needs ample sunlight to grow. By cutting grass too low, homeowners may unknowingly be promoting crabgrass growth. Crabgrass is unsightly and can rob surrounding grass of the moisture it needs to grow. So lawns cut too low may not only lose their lush appeal thanks to the unattractive appearance of crabgrass, but also because areas surrounding the crabgrass patches might turn brown due to lack of water.

- Cutting too low can stress the grass. Cutting too low also makes lawns vulnerable to summer heat. Without blades tall enough to block some of the summer sun, grass can quickly succumb to summer heat, leading to dried out, discolored lawns.

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home owner is an attractive feature. NAR says such a care program can recover \$1,000 in value of the \$330 average cost, or a 303 percent ROI.

- Low-maintenance lifestyle: When choosing materials for projects, those that offer low-maintenance benefits can be preferential. These include low-maintenance patio materials, composite decking, vinyl fencing, and inorganic mulched beds.

- Fire pit: A fire pit can be used for much of the year. In the spring and summer, the firepit is a great place to congregate to roast marshmallows or sip wine and gaze into the fire. In the fall, the fire pit can make for a cozy retreat. A fire pit that has a gas burner is low-maintenance, and the National Association of Landscape Professionals says that most can recoup about \$4,000 of their \$6,000 average price tag.

- Softscaping: Hardscaping refers to structures like outdoor kitchens or decks. Softscaping involves the living elements of the landscape. Hiring a landscape designer to install trees, shrubs, natural edging, and rock elements can do wonders toward improving the look and value of a home.

- Pool or water feature: In certain markets, particularly hot climates, a pool or another water feature is a must-have. However, in other areas where outdoor time is limited, a pool or water feature can actually lower the value of a home. Speaking with a real estate professional can give homeowners an idea of how a pool will fare in a given neighborhood.

Outdoor improvements can improve the marketability of a home, as well as enhance its appearance and function.



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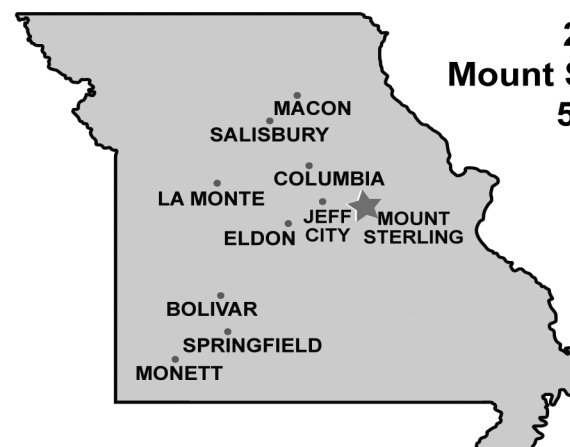
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Decor ideas to give homes a fresh look this spring

Spring is a season of rejuvenation, and that spirit of renewal can take hold inside a home.

Warm weather and longer hours of daylight make spring a perfect time to imagine a home's interior design in a new light. The following are a handful of decor ideas that may inspire homeowners to give their homes an entirely new look this spring.

- **Wallpaper:** Wallpaper fell out of favor years ago, but new styles that aren't so heavily patterned can make for wonderful additions to any room. Large-scale prints can give a room a whole new feel without giving homeowners or their guests the impression that they have stepped back in time. A simple, mural-style floral wallpaper on the walls surrounding a table in a breakfast nook can bring nature inside.

- **Pastel colors:** Nothing embodies the spring quite like pastel colors. If colorful, bright flowers dot the garden in the backyard, homeowners can bring those uplifting pastels inside by painting an accent wall or even adding some brightly colored accent furniture to rooms that could use a lift.

- **Declutter:** Clutter is often conquered during spring cleaning sessions, but homeowners who want to create more free-flowing

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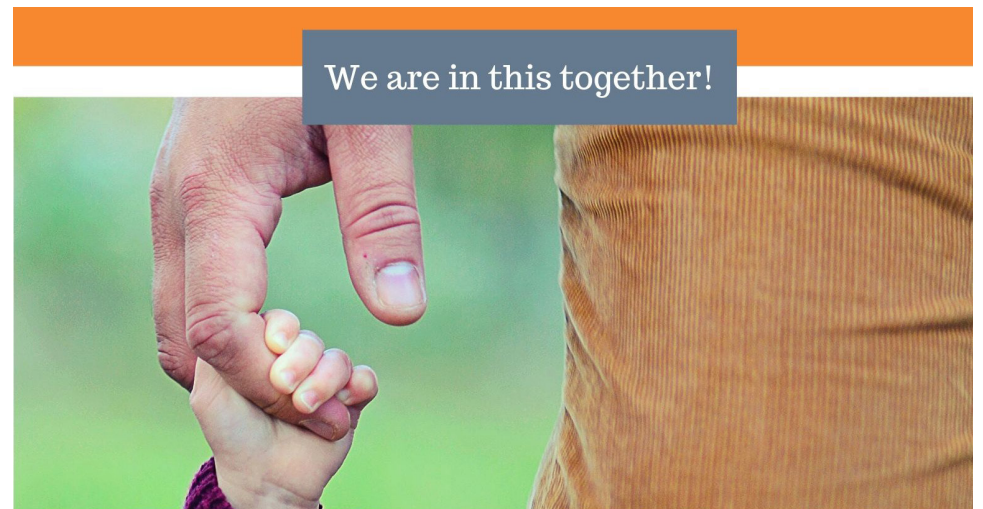
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Best methods to repair damaged driveways

Asphalt and concrete driveways are common throughout suburban neighborhoods. They are as much a part of a home as lawns, decks and other exterior elements. Regardless of how they're utilized, driveways need to be cared for and maintained to retain their appearance and function.

Even the most durable driveways can suffer from cracks and pits over time. As cracks form, they pave the way for more deterioration if they are not addressed. Water infiltration can break down the integrity of the driveway during freeze and thaw periods, and any little hole or crack can promote weed growth. Driveway repair can be a do-it-yourself project, but pay attention to the details to ensure the job is done right.

Asphalt

The home improvement resource The Family Handyman says it is key to first repair cracks and pits in an asphalt driveway before planning to topcoat it, which is generally done every year or so to maintain its appearance and durability. A variety of topcoat products are available at various price points. Experts recommend investing in a quality product that will not shrink and crack. A melt-in material that is similar to products used by highway crews can be purchased for around \$100. This product also will require use of a propane torch. Caulk-style crack repair products may not require as many tools, and are much easier to apply. They may not last as long, however. Homeowners must weigh the pros and cons

to each before beginning.

The experts at Popular Mechanics say that there also are other asphalt patch mixes available at home supply retailers. Serious holes, rather than cracks, can be addressed with a coarse-aggregate filler commonly referred to as cold patch.

After cracks and holes are filled, use a sealer to lock everything in place and create a smooth topcoat appearance. Speak with a store employee if you are unsure which product is needed for your application.

Concrete

The process is similar with concrete driveways, yet the products differ. Small driveway cracks can be repaired by scrubbing out the crack to remove debris and then filling using a mortar repair compound, suggests the repair advice site Home Guides. Larger cracks and potholes should be cleaned. Once that's done, apply a painted-in bonder to the crack or hole, followed by a dry concrete patching product mixed with water. The material can be worked into the damaged area with a trowel, and then leveled using a wood board. Afterward, a liquid concrete sealer can be applied to help prevent future cracks and holes.

Homeowners who are hesitant to fix their driveways can contact masons or asphalt specialists to perform the job. Keeping up on driveway repair can prolong the life of the surface and help delay a complete driveway replacement for several years.

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interior spaces can downsize their furniture and/or look for multipurpose features that make it hard for clutter to take over a room. Create more open space in entertaining areas by mounting the television and getting rid of a bulky entertainment center. Create even more space by replacing rarely used end tables with a storage ottoman where books and magazines can be stored to give a room a fresh, clean look.

• Accent features: Sometimes the smallest changes to an interior space make the biggest impression. Replace dated accents like vases and table lamps with newer items that reflect the latest styles and trends. Such adjustments won't break the bank, and they can give rooms a whole new feel.

Spring is a great time to reconsider home interiors. This spring homeowners can embrace various strategies, both big and small, to give their homes a whole new feel..



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Address insects before entertaining season

Barbecues in the backyard or cocktails on the patio provide some fun ways to enjoy the great outdoors from the comforts of home. While friends and family flock to such entertaining opportunities, some unwanted guests may want to crash the festivities.

It's impossible to ensure a completely bug-free outdoor environment, but there are steps homeowners can take to reduce the amount of pests who want to join the party.

Western Exterminator Supply suggests first identifying which kind of insect infiltrations are most common where you live. House flies, fruit flies, mosquitoes, wasps, and bees tend to be abundant in spring and summer. Ants, termites and other bugs also can be prevalent. These insects, however pesky they may seem, often can be kept away without the use of pesticides and other chemicals.

- Lure away pests. Many insects will be happy to snack on a treat and leave you alone. Put out a dish of sugar water or slices of fruit for insects that feed on sweets and nectar, or a slice of sandwich meat for wasps and yellow jackets. Place these items a fair distance from your gathering.

- Install fans. A patio ceiling fan can blow

away mosquitoes and flies relatively easily. And you and your guests will likely enjoy a nice breeze on sultry days.

- Use mulch wisely. Mulch will add to curb appeal, but having it too close to the house, according to the National Pest Management Association, can present an ideal environment for roaches and ants to nest and find their way into a home. As mulch decomposes, it generates heat and a cozy spot for pests, including mice. Keep mulch 12 inches away from the home's foundation and entertaining spaces, or use inorganic mulch.

- Keep patios clean. Sweep up and clean away any spilled foods and beverages promptly. Even a tiny nugget of food can attract ants and other insects.

- Use natural pest deterrents. Citronella oils can drive away some insects, as can garlic and rosemary. Lavender, eucalyptus, marigolds, and other pungent aromas will naturally keep mosquitoes and other flying insects at bay. Some people also have luck with mint-flavored mouthwash misted on patios and furniture.

- Address standing water. Mosquitoes and some other insects lay their eggs in standing



water. Routinely drain areas where water collects, including gutters and downspouts

- Use light colors. According to HouseLogic, studies show that bugs see dark and bright colors more easily than light colors. Choose lighter shades of paint for outdoor areas and it may make these spaces less attractive to some bugs.

- Leave those spider webs. Many people

yell "eek" at the sight of spiders and spider webs. But those arachnids and their sticky webs can do a fine job of capturing many unwanted insects. Resist the temptation to tear down webs and shoo spiders away.

Addressing insects means employing various natural strategies to make outdoor entertaining more pleasant.

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The differences between organic and inorganic mulches

The benefits of mulch are widely known among lawn and garden enthusiasts. By insulating soil from extreme temperatures, helping soil to retain moisture and preventing weed growth, mulch can help plants, trees and gardens thrive, even during periods when Mother Nature can make that very difficult.

Novice gardeners may find themselves a little confused when visiting a lawn and garden center to purchase mulch. That's because there are various types of mulches. One of the ways to simplify that is to break mulches down into two main classes: organic and inorganic. Learning to distinguish between these two classes can help homeowners choose the best mulch for their properties.



Organic mulch

Organic mulches are made up of materials that decompose over time. The experts at BobVila.com note that, because they decompose over time, organic mulches must be replenished on a regular basis.

Hardwood and softwood chips are among the most popular and recognizable organic mulches. Evergreen needles, leaves, grass clippings, and compost mixes also fall under the organic mulch umbrella. Many gardening enthusiasts prefer organic mulches because they help soil retain moisture, improve soil fertility and help to deter weed growth.

Inorganic mulches

Inorganic mulches are permanent because they do not decompose over time. Gravel,

brick chips and crushed stone are examples of inorganic mulches. Homeowners who do not intend to plant after laying mulch may lean toward inorganic mulches, as they won't require much work, if any, after being laid. However, the Chicago Botanic Garden notes that inorganic mulches do not improve soil quality. In fact, because inorganic mulches like rocks and stones absorb heat, they can be

detrimental to plants in areas where weather tends to be very dry and hot.

The right mulch for a given property depends on a host of factors. Understanding the differences between organic and inorganic mulches is a great first step toward finding the right mulch for your landscape.

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A lesson in building a backyard retaining wall

Flat, even landscapes are often coveted in backyards. However, flat backyards are not always so easy to find. Fortunately, varied terrain does not mean that certain landscaping plans are entirely off limits, especially for homeowners willing to build retaining walls.

Retaining walls help turn steep slopes in a yard into terraced focal points. They also can reduce soil erosion in hilly areas and can be used for aesthetic purposes, like raised planters, or to create more usable space within the yard. When an inground pool or pond is cut into a backyard hill, a retaining wall helps keep the remaining portion of that hill from collapsing into the cut-away area.

See **Wall** Page 13B

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Wall • from page 12B

When contemplating retaining wall projects, a lesson in physics and engineering may be needed. A sturdy and long-lasting retaining wall needs to be built in a way that will take into consideration the force of the soil and the point at which the soil will begin to slide away, advises the experts at The Family Handyman. If these calculations seem beyond the scope of your ability, installation of a retaining wall is a job best left to a professional. If you are ready to forge ahead, these tips can get you started. However, it's important to note the potential benefits of working with others who have already built a retaining wall.

- Safety first: Call to have underground utilities plotted and marked before beginning any excavation.

- Map out your trench and begin to dig. The trench should have a level, compacted base as it will be the foundation for which the retaining wall materials, be they blocks, bricks or wood, sit in. A

crushed stone base will help anchor the courses and serve to promote drainage. The Family Handyman says to bury the first course of the retaining wall one-tenth the height of the wall to prevent soil behind it from pushing the bottom out.

- Check for level. When placing blocks or timbers, make sure they are even with the first and periodically check for level as you go, advises the home improvement retailer Lowe's®.

- Stagger and set back. The next row of blocks or material should be positioned so that the joints are staggered for blocks, bricks or wood. A masonry blade will be needed to cut the harder materials; a circular saw will cut timber. Also, work against gravity by setting the second course slightly back from the first to help push back against the soil that is trying so hard to push forward. Repeat the process as each level is placed. Many retaining wall products are made with a lip to create this set back.



Did you know?

Oxygen is essential for the roots of grass to breathe and grow strong enough to support healthy lawns. But according to the Center for Agriculture, Food and the Environment at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, compacted soil can produce a decrease in oxygen content that can make it hard for roots to thrive. Soil compaction can result from a number of activities, including walking on grass or driving or parking vehicles on grass. When soil is compacted, it breaks into small particles that reduce the amount of pore space in the soil. That makes it hard for water, oxygen and nutrients to get through, threatening the strength of the roots and putting the grass in jeopardy. Aerating a lawn can help homeowners foster strong root growth and healthy grass. When to aerate may be contingent upon local climate, so homeowners who suspect the soil in their yards is compact should consult with a local landscaping professional to determine the best time to aerate their lawns.

- Go with the grade. For especially steep slopes, a gradual step-up design may be more secure and more appealing than a very tall retaining wall. Each level of a stepped design should be done like the first.

- Backfill with stone for drainage. Using a layer of stone behind the retaining wall can help successfully direct water away so it will not increase the weight of the soil behind the wall and push against the retaining wall, advises The

Home Depot.

Retaining walls serve different purposes in a yard. Building such a wall requires planning and careful execution to ensure the job is done correctly.

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How lawns benefit from aeration

Compacted soil can have a dramatic effect on grass. Compacted soil blocks oxygen, water and nutrients from reaching the root systems of the turf. That creates a lawn with weak roots, which make grass more vulnerable to disease and compromising its ability to withstand harsh weather.

The buildup of thatch, which is a matted layer of grass clippings and other organic debris that collects on the top of the soil, is one indicator that a lawn could benefit from aeration, a process in which the surface of the lawn is perforated to break up compacted soil and allow oxygen, water and nutrients to reach root systems. Other signs that aeration may be necessary include patches of thin grass, brown spots and a high concentration of clay in the soil.

When faced with a lawn that could benefit from aeration, homeowners may wonder if such a task lends itself to DIY or if it's best left to professional landscapers. Aerating a lawn is not always easy, and typically it involves the use of one of three types of aerators:

- **Core aerator:** A core aerator uses hollow tines to pull plugs of soil from the lawn. The plugs are left on the surface of the lawn. Homeowners can pick up the plugs or, according to the grass seed experts at Pennington, even leave them in the yard and allow them to break down.

- **Spike aerator:** The experts at Pennington note that spike aerators employ solid, spike-like tines to poke holes in the soil. These aerators leave the spikes in the soil. Some people wear spiked aeration shoes while walking around the yard to mimic the effects of spike aerators.

- **Slicing aerator:** According to Pennington, slicing aerators employ rotating blades that slice through thatch and down into the soil. These aerators leave the soil in the ground.

Aerators can be operated manually, though professionals tend to use motorized aerators. The machines are often heavy, so homeowners should consider their health and physical ability before deciding to aerate on their own.

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Exterior renovations that can improve home value

Renovating a home to improve its value can be a smart investment. Interior improvements, such as updating kitchens and baths, offer good return on investment, but there are plenty of exterior renovations that can add value to a home and give it that coveted “wow” factor.

Landscaping

Abundant and well-planned landscaping can instantly boost curb appeal. According to the landscaping company Lawn Starter, 71 percent of prospective home buyers say a home’s curb appeal is an important factor in their buying decisions. As buyers use the internet to look for their dream homes, there’s no denying a beautifully landscaped, nicely photographed property can entice buyers to click and read more about a house.

Address insects and minor repairs

Improving home value may come down to fixing areas of the home that can negatively affect its appeal to buyers. Hire an inspector to look at key components of the house and recommend what needs to be fixed. This way it is discovered before home buyers come in and do their own inspections. Termite infestations, deteriorating roofs and hidden water leaks are some things that might need fixing.

Improve the entryway

The front door is the focal point of a home’s exterior. Invest in a new door or paint it a striking color to add appeal. Remodeling magazine’s “Cost vs. Value Report

2019” indicates changing an entry door to a steel replacement can offer 74.9 percent ROI. Such a door provides visual appeal and added security — things buyers look for. In addition to the front door, make sure that the entryway has a level walkway, steps that are in good repair, accents that are free from rust or tarnish, and decorative plants.

Outdoor lighting

Outdoor lighting can add to the ambiance of a property and serve as a security feature. Utilize different lights, such as a bright light by the entry, uplighting in trees and shrubs for drama, a light-lined path to the door to improve visibility, and motion-detection lights to improve the security of the property.

Repaint (or reside) the exterior

A fresh coat of paint or new (or cleaned) siding can instantly give homes a facelift. Neutral, warm and inviting colors tend to have the widest appeal. Adding manufactured stone veneer to the home can offer a 94.9 percent ROI, says Remodeling. And after doing the front door and siding, investing in a garage door replacement offers the highest ROI of all exterior projects listed on the “Cost vs. Value Report 2019.” This improvement returns 97.5 percent when selling.

Knowing which improvements add value to a home can help homeowners tailor their efforts to those that are most financially beneficial.

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Container gardening tips

Gardening is beneficial in various ways. The AARP states that some of the health perks associated with gardening include improved mood, increased vitamin D levels (which benefits bones and immune system) and reduced risk of dementia. In addition, if gardening efforts include growing herbs, fruits and vegetables, it can be a cost-effective way to eat healthy.

For gardeners without sufficient space or for those with mobility issues, container gardening can be an ideal way to grow everything from flowers to vegetables. Better Homes & Gardens says most plants are not fussy about the containers in which they grow so long as some of their basic needs are met. This means watering correctly for the type of plant, and ensuring sufficient drainage.

The following are some other ways container gardening efforts can prove successful.

- Watch water. Planet Natural Research Center says plants with thin leaves typically need ample water, and plants with thick leaves need less. Use this as a guideline to gauge water needs.
- Size correctly. Plants should be sized to the container. Consider dwarf varieties of certain plants if your containers are small.
- Choose the right soil. Fill containers with a commercial potting soil rather than soil from the garden. Garden soil can dry into a solid mass, while commercial mixtures have

See **Tips**, Page 17B



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Did you know?

When planning spring landscapes, homeowners should always group plants with similar water needs together. According to the U.S. Department of Energy, grouping plants with similar water needs together helps to conserve water, which can be an especially useful strategy if or when drought restrictions go into effect in summer. Homeowners also can embrace additional strategies to landscape with water conservation in mind. For example, aerating soil helps to improve water flow to plants' roots and reduces water runoff, helping to ensure that plants get all of the water they need while reducing the likelihood that homeowners will have to use excessive amounts of water to keep plants healthy. In addition, using low-water-using types of grass can help homeowners who live in areas prone to drought conserve water while still maintaining lush, green lawns.

Tips • from page 16B

amendments like peat moss, vermiculite, compost, and other ingredients to help with soil texture and moisture retention.

- Mix it up. When planting containers of flowers and other greenery, Good Housekeeping says to include "a thriller, a spiller and a filler" as a good rule of thumb. The thriller is the focal point, the spiller a trailing plant, and a filler has smaller leaves or flowers to add bulk and color.

- Poke holes. Drainage holes are essential so that soil will not become waterlogged. Holes don't need to be large, but there should be enough of them so that excess water can drain out readily.

- Select the right container material. Container materials may be affected by gardeners' budgets, personal taste and other factors. For those who live in hot climates, selecting a light-colored container can help prevent further soil heat absorption.

Container gardening is a healthy and enjoyable activity that can pay dividends in various ways.



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Tips to successfully grow tomatoes

Slicing into the first tomato of the season is a much anticipated moment for gardeners. Tomatoes are among the most popular fruit or vegetable plants grown in home gardens. Much of that popularity may be credited to the fact that red, ripe tomatoes have a delicious, juicy flavor that serves as the basis for all sorts of recipes. And since tomatoes can just as easily be grown in a full backyard garden or in a container on a patio or balcony, tomatoes appeal to gardeners regardless of their living situations.

While tomatoes are relatively easy to grow, they are prone to certain problems and pests. Knowledge of what to expect when planting tomatoes and how to start off on the right footing can help produce a season's worth of delicious bounty.

- Wait until after the last average frost date. Tomatoes can be grown from seeds outdoors in warm areas, but tomato gardeners often find success starting seeds indoors six to eight weeks before the last frost date. Gradually introduce seedlings to the elements for a few hours each day, increasing the duration of time outside. Then they can be transplanted outdoors when temperatures are consistently over 60 F.

- Choose a sunny spot. Tomatoes love to soak up sunlight, according to The Home Depot. Place the plants in a sunny spot so they can thrive.

- Space out plants. The experts at Better Homes and Gardens say to leave anywhere from 24 to 48 inches

between plants to accommodate for growth and ensure the plants will not get stunted.

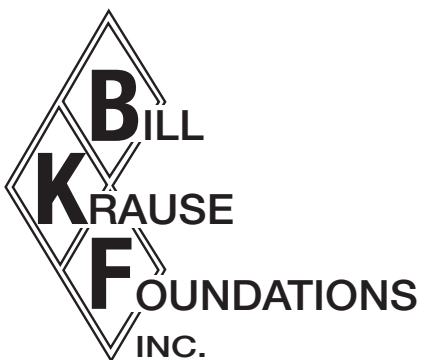
- Plant deeply. Tomatoes tend to root along their stems. If transplants are long and lean, dig a trench and lay the stem sideways in the dirt, and then bend the top of the plant upward. Snip off the lower branches and cover with soil up to the first set of leaves. This will produce extra root growth and stronger, more vital plants.

- Give the plants support. Tomato cages or stakes can help keep the leaves and fruit from touching the ground, which can cause rot and, eventually, death to the tomato plant.

- Lay down a layer of mulch. Tomatoes grow best when the soil is consistently moist. Mulch can help retain moisture from watering and rain. Mulch also will help prevent soil and soilborne diseases from splashing on the leaves and plants when it rains. While you amend the soil, make sure that it drains well and is slightly acidic.

- Prune away suckers. Tomatoes produce "suckers," which are leaves that shoot out from the main stem. Removing these leaves promotes air circulation and keeps the plant's energy focused on growing fruit.

Tomatoes are a rich addition to any garden. A few simple tricks can help even novice gardeners grow delicious tomatoes.



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What can and cannot be composted



Avid gardeners know that compost can add vital nutrients to soil used in gardens, container plants and lawns. The fact that compost is so versatile and nutrient-dense may not even be its most admirable quality. Made from items used in and around the house, compost costs just about nothing to produce.

The raw materials that make up compost come from organic waste. These can be disposables from the garden and kitchen, as well as other areas around the house. According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency, yard trimmings and food scraps add up to 20 to 30 percent of the municipal solid waste in the United States. Turning waste into compost not only helps the landscape, but also the planet.

Compost is relatively easy to make, and there are scores of materials that can be put into compost. But it is just as essential to know which ingredients cannot be used in compost.

Okay for compost

Most organic materials, or items that were once living, can be used in compost. Plant-based items used in cooking, such as potato peelings, carrot skins, banana peels, cocoa hulls, coffee grounds and filters, corn cobs, apple cores, egg shells, fruit peels, kelp, and nut shells, can be added to compost.

Other items from around the house, like unused kitty litter, hair, shredded newspapers and cardboard, leaves, flowers, paper, pine needles, ashes, and sawdust, can be successfully added to compost. Stick to items that are not treated heavily with chemicals.

Should not be used in compost

Inorganic and non-biodegradable materials cannot go into compost. These are items like plastic, glass, aluminum foil, and metal. Pressure-treated lumber, although a natural material, is treated with preservatives and often pesticides that can be harmful if they leech into the garden.

The small-gardening resource Balcony Garden Web indicates coated or glossy printed papers, such as those from catalogs, magazines, wrapping paper, marketing materials, and business cards, should not be added to compost piles because of the chemicals and inks used in these pages.

Planet Natural Research Center says to avoid pet droppings from dogs and cats. Animal products like bones, butter, milk, fish skins, and meat, may decompose and start to smell foul. Maggots, parasites, pathogens, and other microorganisms can form in the compost. These materials also may attract flies and scavenger animals. Plus, they decompose very slowly.

Any personal hygiene products should be avoided because they are tainted by human fluids and that can pose a health risk.

While weeds are not harmful in compost piles, there is the risk that seeds can germinate and then infiltrate garden beds when the compost is used. The same can be said for tomato plants and some other hardy fruits and vegetables.

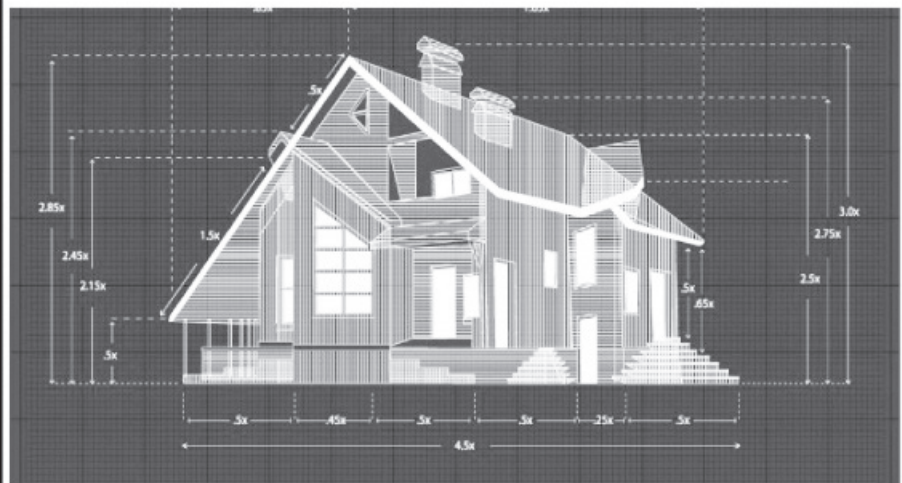
Compost is a winner in the garden and around the landscape. Learning which ingredients can and can't be added to compost piles is useful for any gardener.



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Tips when planting shade trees

Beautiful landscaping can add instant curb appeal to a property. But beauty isn't the only thing that makes idyllic landscaping attractive to homeowners. Some landscaping features, such as shade trees, save homeowners money while adding aesthetic appeal.

The U.S. Department of Energy notes that shading is the most cost-effective way to reduce solar heat gain in a home. Shading also cuts air conditioning costs, which tend to be expensive in areas with warm, humid climates. In fact, the DOE notes that well-planned landscapes can reduce unshaded homes' air conditioning costs by anywhere from 15 to 50 percent.

When planting shade trees, one of the first decisions homeowners will need to make is which type of tree, deciduous or evergreen, they want to plant. Deciduous trees are those that seasonally shed their leaves, while evergreens are trees that keep their leaves throughout the year. Deciduous trees can help

keep homes cool in the summer by blocking sun, and those same trees can be beneficial in winter after they shed their leaves by letting the sun in and keeping homes warm. But evergreens also can be beneficial in winter by blocking wind, potentially preventing cold air from making its way into a home through cracks in walls or around windows.

When planting shade trees, techniques vary depending on which type of tree homeowners ultimately choose to plant.

Planting deciduous trees

The DOE says that deciduous trees that are between six and eight feet tall when planted will begin shading the windows of a home within a year of being planted. Depending on the species of the plant and the home, those same deciduous trees may begin shading the roof within five to 10 years of being planted. When planting deciduous trees, homeowners should

keep these tips in mind.

- Plant trees to the south of the home. When planted to the south of the home, deciduous trees can screen between 70 and 90 percent of the summer sun while still allowing residents to feel summer breezes.

- Consider sun angles. Homeowners who want to shade their homes from low afternoon sun angles should plant trees with crowns that are lower to the ground on the west side of their homes.

- Cool air before it reaches your home. Shrubs and groundcover plants can be planted to cool air before it reaches a home.

Evergreen trees

Planting evergreens to block wind is known as "windbreaking," which lowers the wind chill near a home. Wind also can be used to cool a home in summer. But these benefits can only be realized when evergreens are strategically planted.



- Location, location, location: The DOE advises planting evergreen trees to the north and northwest of the home to stop wind. In addition, to get the most bang for your windbreaking buck, the distance between the home and windbreak should be two to five times the height of the mature tree.

- Plant trees on either side of the house. Planting trees on either side of the house will direct cooling winds toward the home in the summer.

Shade trees can help homeowners reduce their energy bills, making them valuable and attractive additions to any landscape.



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How to bring beneficial bees back

Bees, birds and butterflies play integral roles in pollinating many of the crops humans rely on for sustenance. The National Pollinator Garden Network, through the National Wildlife Federation, recently launched the Million Pollinator Garden Challenge, an effort to increase the amount of nectar and pollen food sources as the organization aims to reverse the alarming decline of pollinators such as honey bees, native bees and monarch butterflies.

Many people are afraid of bees because of their propensity to sting. Unlike their wasp and yellow-jacket cousins, honeybees and bumblebees are much more docile and content to hop from bloom to bloom without paying humans any mind. The only time such bees may resort to stinging is if someone inadvertently steps on them.

Bees are beneficial for yards. Gardener's Supply Company says one out of every three bites of food humans take depends on a pollinator. That's because about 150 crops grown in the United States depend on pollinators. Even though there are 4,000 species of native or wild bees in the continental United States, many populations are in decline. According to the Pollinator Partnership, various areas of North America have lost more than 50 percent of their managed honeybee colonies in the past 10 years.

Bringing these important pollinators back will take a little work, but it is possible.

- Plants that offer cover can be attractive to bees that desire a respite from the sun and heat. Coleus and other ground cover offerings can be handy.

- Offer water in shallow dishes, as even bees need a cool drink to stay hydrated.

- Bees like various plants, so plant more than one species. Some plants that bees tend to like include alyssum, aster, geranium, bee balm, poppies, and clover.

- When planting, include some native species.

- Brush piles, dry grasses and dead woods offer nesting areas for bees.

- The Gardener's Supply Company also says that bees find blue, purple and yellow flowers most appealing. Opt for more of these hues when planning gardens.

- Above all, avoid using pesticides in the yard. Even organic ones can be toxic to bees and other pollinators, and they may contribute to colony collapse disorder.

With these techniques in mind, homeowners can attract more bees to their yards and gardens, which can benefit bees and humans alike.

"A cynic is a man who, when he smells flowers, looks around for a coffin."

— H. L. Mencken



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Seven things to consider when buying a shed

Backyard sheds can be useful assets. Sheds can create storage space in the garage, basement or other areas of the house that have become gathering spots for gear typically used outdoors. Sheds are ideal for housing mowers, tools and even pool-care equipment. But they can be put to other uses as well, such as being key spots to engage in hobbies or even as a child's clubhouse.

Various factors should be considered before building or buying a shed. A storage shed can be a significant investment. Once placed, sheds may remain in their dedicated spots for years to come. That means careful thought should go into the planning process.

1. Check your local building codes first. Before you accumulate building materials or order a shed, be sure to know the ins and outs of shed codes. The codes may impact the shed's placement, construction, the materials used, size, and numerous other factors. It's much easier to amend plans beforehand than

See **Shed**, Page 23B

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Shed • from page 22B

to face the hassle and expense after learning you did things incorrectly.

2. Choose placement wisely. Spend several days assessing the yard and thinking about the uses for the shed. If you plan to store pool floats and chemicals inside of the shed, it should be located close enough to the pool to be convenient. Look at the lay of the land. If there is a soggy patch of land that can turn swampy under the shed's foundation, that is a poor location choice. If you need access to electricity, placing it far away from the house could necessitate running expensive wiring.

3. Consider the design. Just because a shed is for storage doesn't mean aesthetics should be overlooked. Choose a shed style that complements your home. You may also want to match certain architectural features, like arched doorways or dormers. Design also may relate to practicality. For instance, storing a riding mower inside may necessitate dual doors that open widely.

4. Invest in quality materials. Spending a little more and using quality materials can ensure it lasts long enough to be cost-effective. The right materials will be resistant to splitting, cracking, decay, and insect damage.

5. Prepare the site well. A proper foundation for the shed is almost as important as the shed itself. You cannot just drop the shed on the lawn and leave it, as the shed can sink or structural issues may arise if it is placed on a weak base.

6. Blend into the environment. Surround the shed with shrubs or plants so that it blends into the yard and complements the space.

7. Deck out the interior. Use every storage tool at your disposal to maximize floor, wall and even rafter space for storage. Plan where items will be kept and customize the storage options around those locations.

Sheds can be an asset and improve storage capability in the backyard.

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Home & Garden

WED., APRIL 22, 2020 ■ PAGE 24B

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Key to keeping cool is AC maintenance

Few things beat summer heat better than walking into a comfortably chilled air conditioned home. Air conditioning is often taken for granted, but sorely missed when it is not working. The key to keeping cool all summer long is to ensure that air conditioning systems are functioning properly.

Maintaining an AC unit can save money and protect homeowners' investments. Without regular attention, an AC unit will lose its efficiency, needlessly wasting both energy and money as a result. Poor maintenance also can lead to system failure just when it is needed most. According to the U.S. Department of Energy, the average lifespan of an air conditioning unit is about 15 to 20 years. Home Advisor says homeowners can pay between \$500 and \$4,000 for central air conditioning, with the final cost depending on the unit, additional installation items, such as ductwork, and installation charges. With regular maintenance, homeowners can keep their units humming properly and avoid premature replacement costs.

So what can homeowners expect as it

pertains to air conditioner maintenance? The following are some oft-needed checks and fixes.

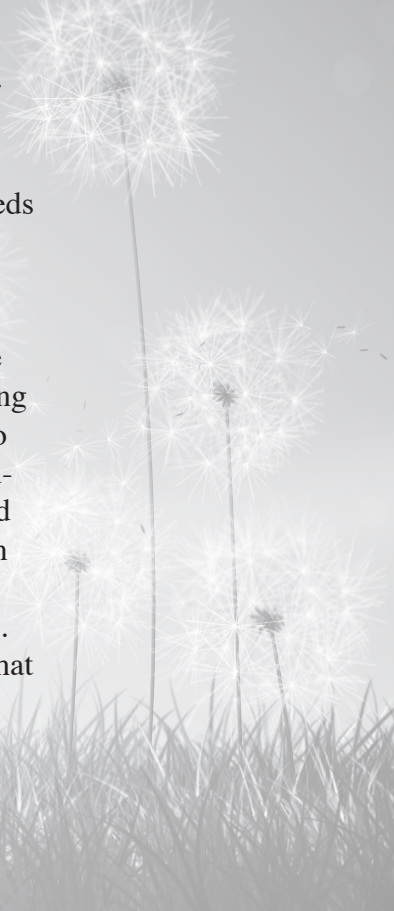
- Keep it clean. Vacuum the fins and coils of the AC unit on the external compressor/condenser fan with a soft-bristled brush, advise the experts at Family Handyman. This may require unscrewing the metal box surrounding the unit to access the fins. Remove any accumulated debris that may be impeding air flow. Afterward, go inside and change the filter that is installed with the evaporator that's located in a central duct near the furnace. Inspect the filter periodically to see if it is soiled and needs replacement. Timing can vary depending various factors, such as the time of year, the accumulation of dust and whether or not pets live in the home.

- Straighten coil fins. The fins on the condenser are easily bent and that can affect the flow of air through the coils. If you cannot easily straighten them, then consult with an HVAC professional to do so.

- Check the thermostat. Ensure that the

Why weeds can be found everywhere

The ubiquitous nature of weeds can make them seem like they can grow anywhere, and that's because they can. Weeds can grow anywhere there's room for them to sprout, including gardens, sidewalks, driveways, and parking lots. One of the things that helps weeds spread so much is how productive they can be at producing seeds. An actively growing weed plant will produce thousands of seeds and disperse those seeds throughout the season. One of the more recognizable weeds is the dandelion. During its growing season, a dandelion can effectively spread its seeds thanks in large part to the wind, which can blow seeds all over, thereby allowing a single dandelion to spread its seeds far and wide. Penn State Extension notes that successful weed plants share many characteristics, including an ability to reproduce both sexually and asexually. Successful weed plants also are clever in terms of getting around, as their seeds can attach to people and animals and even float on water. Weeds also put up a fight when they're confronted by humans. Humans who try to pull weeds may instead break them. The broken weeds can then resprout, ultimately spreading their seeds again. The resiliency of weeds also is evident in their ability to stay dormant for long periods of time. For example, weeds can stay in the soil for years before germinating, proving that these unwelcome guests aren't just pesky, but also patient.



Maintenance

• from page 24B

thermostat is still working properly. You also may want to upgrade an old thermostat to a programmable or smart thermostat that enables you to remotely set and adjust the temperature.

- Consider an in-line duct booster. HVAC professionals can guide you through the advantages of an in-line duct booster for forced-air cooling. This can increase the flow of cool air into a room that always seems hotter than the rest. Another option is a vent or register booster fan that sits on top or replaces a traditional floor or wall register.

- Deal with condensation. Condensation from air conditioning coils can puddle around the furnace if the condensate drain tube is clogged. Clearing it out will help prevent puddling and the formation of bacteria-laden water in the system.

Periodic maintenance is necessary to ensure uninterrupted service on a home AC unit.



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Vegetable gardening is making a comeback

Vegetable gardening is making a comeback, and this new fascination is like the Victory Garden rage of yesteryear. Not just because of COVID-19, another contributor to this fascination is the fact that more and more people are concerned with what they put on the family table. When you grow it yourself, you control what goes in the soil and on the plants, and you get to pick a much broader selection of vegetable varieties. They taste a whole lot better home grown.

If you're thinking of growing a vegetable garden this year, you are not alone. Start small and expand as your interest and time permit. No summertime garden is complete without tomatoes. Also, bush cucumbers will fit in small gardens and so will the bush summer squash varieties. They can be planted in nontraditional garden areas like flowerbeds or as a small addition to the landscape. You can interplant lettuce plants with your impatiens and harvest them long before the impatiens covers the area. You'll get some salad greens and kill two birds with one stone. Taking care of the impatiens ensures the lettuce is never neglected. In short, a vegetable garden can find its way into every area of your home's landscape — whether it's confined to its own area, combined into the annual



by **Sandi Hillermann McDonald**
Hillermann Nursery & Florist

or perennial gardens that you already have, or planted in containers on your deck or patio - it will provide the ultimate in fresh vegetable taste, and the safest vegetables you can produce for your family table.

Hang out your hummingbird feeders the first of this month. Use a solution of one-part sugar to four-parts water for the nectar. Change the solution frequently to keep it from fermenting. Food coloring is not needed, nor

is it recommended for the birds. Asparagus and rhubarb harvest can begin. Keep your hoe sharp. Start cucumber, squash, and cantaloupe and watermelon seeds indoors this month. The last week of April is a good time to try an early sowing of warm season crops in the garden such as green beans, sweet corn, etc. You can begin to plant transplants of tomatoes, eggplants, peppers and sweet potatoes outdoors now. This can continue through the month of May. This is truly the year of the garden. So, reap your own harvest and enjoy the scrumptious flavors of your own produce. Remember, that Natural Gardening will keep your family safe, so check out what organic options are available to you! There are many.

Enjoy!

See you in the garden...

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Did you know?

Many lawns contain a mixture of the roughly one dozen types of different grasses. According to the lawn care experts at Scotts®, knowing which type of grass they have in their yard can help homeowners more effectively manage and care for their lawns. But with so many lawns containing a mixture of grasses, how can homeowners know exactly what's making up that green carpet in their yards? Scotts® notes that lawns typically fall into one of two categories: warm-season grasses and cool-season grasses. Warm-season grasses are those that thrive in regions where the climate tends to be especially warm, such as the southern United States. Cool-season grasses are those that are at their best in climates that experience extreme temperature fluctuations. For example, cool-season grasses are most likely to be found in the northern United States, as much of this area of the country experiences cold winters and warm, and in some places very hot, summers. Homeowners who are uncertain about which type of grass they have can consult a lawn care professional for advice. Homeowners who learn which type of grass is in their yard can use that information to determine how frequently they should mow and water their lawns and which type of fertilizer is best-suited to their lawns.



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