A lush garden scene with a stone path, various plants, and a metal chair in the foreground. The garden is filled with greenery, including ferns, hydrangeas, and other flowering plants. A stone path winds through the garden, and a metal chair with a decorative backrest is positioned in the foreground. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and inviting.

# Home & Garden

# Getting ready to sell

## First impressions set tone when potential buyer enters home

By **ELSIE HODNETT**  
Home staff writer

First impressions can make all the difference when you are trying to sell a home.

"The first impression usually sets the tone for someone entering your home," said Nancy Locklar, owner and Realtor of Realty Executives Complete. "It will either give them positive thoughts or make them look for negative things."

Locklar said if the house looks really nice, a potential buyer usually enters with an open mind.

"If it looks shabby, they are more likely to look for things wrong with the house and think the owner hasn't performed routine maintenance," she said. "People form an impression before they ever set foot in the house."

Maria Price, real estate agent with RE/MAX Southern Homes, agreed that having "curb appeal" is a must.

"With some people if they don't like the curb appeal, they don't want to look at the house," she said.

Anna King, owner, Realtor and broker with ERA King Real Estate Company, said it is important to have a good



Bob Crisp/The Daily Home

**When preparing to sell your home, curb appeal is a must.**

first impression — and for most buyers that first impression now comes from the Internet.

"It is important for the Realtor to have as many pictures of the house, both inside and outside,

as possible to post on the Internet because that is where 92 percent of all consumers get their first

impression," she said.

King said sellers should research prospective real estate companies and

agents before hiring one.

"Know who you hire," she said.

King said choosing the right agent, one that utilizes every form of technology, is one of the smartest things a seller can do.

"People want to see pictures and not text," she said. "The consumer is looking to see the house before actually going out there. If they see a house on the Internet with only a couple pictures of the outside, they assume there is something wrong with the house."

King said as technology changes, the consumer expects more.

"The expectation of the consumer is more than it was even a year ago, and the agent has to be able to deliver those expectations," she said.

Locklar said there are several things sellers should do to ensure the outside of the house is presentable.

"Make sure the grass is cut," she said. "Trimming the edges of the lawn and sidewalks adds that extra edge to make things look as clean and crisp as possible. It implies that you go the extra mile and that you are proud of your property."

Locklar said ensure the bushes are trimmed and

See Selling, Page 3



Bob Crisp/The Daily Home

**When making a first impression, keeping the landscaping in good condition is important.**



Bob Crisp/The Daily Home

**De-cluttering is one of the main things sellers should do on the inside of the house.**

## Steps you should take before erecting a fence

Fences serve many purposes on a property and can even add visual appeal and value to a home. A fence can effectively delineate property borders, serve as a safety barrier and keep pets and children from wandering into the street.

According to Zillow, an online real estate database, erecting a fence on a property in an area where fences are common usually increases the value of the home, putting it in line with similar properties nearby. However, this may only be the case if the fence is installed professionally and matches other fences throughout the neighborhood.

Homeowners planning to install a fence should first secure a copy of their property surveys. A survey of the property is often conducted upon purchasing a home and/or when the land and home is being assessed. If you do not have a survey, you can hire a professional to conduct one.

The survey will be handy because it clearly marks property lines. Depending on the local regulations, fences may need to be installed a certain number of inches or feet within the property line. Your municipality and building code office will be able to guide you further as to what is legal. Reputable fencing companies that work in the community should also have a good understanding of fencing regulations.

A permit is typically needed to install a fence. Either

your contractor or you will need to apply for the permit before construction can begin. It is best to follow the law so that the fence can be installed in a manner that is consistent with local regulations and will not be subject to potentially costly removal.

As a courtesy, speak with your neighbors about your fencing plans. The fence will separate your properties from one another, and your neighbors may have certain feelings about what they want to look at. Even if a neighbor is not sharing the cost, it is a good idea to discuss fencing with your neighbors in an effort to reduce the likelihood of conflict down the road. Fences have been points of contention between neighbors, and you don't

want a previously amicable relationship to turn sour.

In some instances, neighbors will be excited about the prospect of a fence and may want to share the cost. Fencing contractors may offer discounts for multi-home installations, so it pays to inquire with the neighbors for that reason alone.

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Take down as many personal pictures and photos as possible. It makes a room look larger and makes it look cleaner.

### Selling

From Page 2

that there are no spider webs or wasp nests.

"If you have vinyl siding, keep it pressure washed," she said. "You can also pressure wash the driveway — it can change the appearance of many older driveways."

Locklar said make sure all shutters and wood trim are painted and replace any wood rot.

"Keep your mailbox in good repair and clean," she said. "It's usually the first thing people see when they pull into the driveway."

Price said planting flowers also gives the home a warm, inviting feel.

"It never hurts to have a fresh-smelling aroma inside the house as well — flowers, candles or another scent to give the house a fresh smell," she said.

Locklar said the main thing sellers should do on the inside of the house is to de-clutter.

"Take down as many personal pictures and pho-

tos as possible," she said. "It makes a room look larger and makes it look cleaner. People are really drawn to cleaner homes. If you have a lot of stains in the carpet go ahead and have the carpets cleaned."

Locklar said painting walls that have stains or dings can make a world of difference.

"Neutral colors are good because it lets people envision their own colors," she said. "Don't do bright, loud colors because that makes it hard to sell a home."

Locklar said keep the home as clean as possible and keep the closets organized.

"De-clutter smaller closets so they look larger — even if you have to stack boxes in the garage," she said.

Locklar said do not smoke in the house and also eliminate any pet odors in the house.

"The smell of smoke



Bob Crisp/The Daily Home

**Having a real estate agent who uses all forms of technology is important. Many buyers want to view pictures of the home online before making a visit in person.**

and pet odors will keep people from walking through the house — they will turn around and walk out," she said.

Contact Elsie Hodnett at [ehodnett@dailyhome.com](mailto:ehodnett@dailyhome.com).

## Landscaping mistakes to avoid

When designing their landscapes, homeowners may envision grandiose gardens and lush lawns that are the envy of the neighborhood. But such designs can be difficult to maintain, and homeowners often find they are not worth the time or money.

Avoiding such costly mistakes allows homeowners to fully enjoy their lawns. The following are a few landscaping mistakes homeowners may want to avoid so they can spend more time enjoying their landscapes and less time working around the yard.

- Planting the wrong trees and shrubs: When planting new trees and shrubs around your property, choose varieties that won't overwhelm the property by growing too large. Such trees and shrubs can mask other elements of a landscape, and they can also take a substantial amount of effort to maintain. Avoid spending too much time pruning trees and shrubs by opting for those that only grow to a particular size.
- Choosing non-native plants: It's always best to choose plants that are native to a particular region. Native plants have already adapted to the local climate, meaning they can withstand the worst weather that climate

has to offer without homeowners having to put in much effort. For example, if you live in an area where drought is common, avoid planting trees, shrubs, flowers, or grass that need ample amounts of water. Instead, opt for those varieties that can survive without significant amounts of water. Exotic plants might add aesthetic appeal to a property, but that appeal is often short-lived or costly to maintain when a plant is not in its native climate.

- Too much lawn:

While a large and lush lawn appeals to many homeowners, a yard that is all grass can be difficult and expensive to maintain. Lawns without trees are susceptible to damage from the hot summer sun, and homeowners often respond to that threat by overwatering their lawns. Overwatering not only weakens root systems, but it also leads to higher water bills.

Homeowners can downsize their lawns by planting more trees around

the property, adding a garden in the backyard or even adding landscape features.

See Mistakes, Page 4

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# Need an awning? Evans is the place to go

BY SHANE DUNAWAY  
Home staff writer

Residents of Talladega and St. Clair counties seeking assistance with outdoor furnishings can look to neighboring Calhoun County for their needs.

Eugene L. Evans Manufacturing Company crafts custom-made canvas awnings for doors, patios and specialty purposes as well as patio covers, sunrooms, roller shades, clear vinyl panels and ornamental iron handrails.

Company President, Chief Executive Officer and General Manager Eugene Evans Jr. said his father, Eugene Evans Sr., started the company on April 1, 1950. The company services a 70-mile radius area throughout Alabama and Georgia.

"When my dad first started this business, there was such a demand for all this because people didn't have air conditioning," Evans said. "Air conditioners hadn't been invented by then, so people wanted awnings for all the windows of their house to keep the hot sun out. They'd open up their windows and put box fans in the windows. That's how they would cool the house."

The average retail price for a canvas awning produced by the company costs approximately \$900 and takes anywhere from two to four weeks to complete.

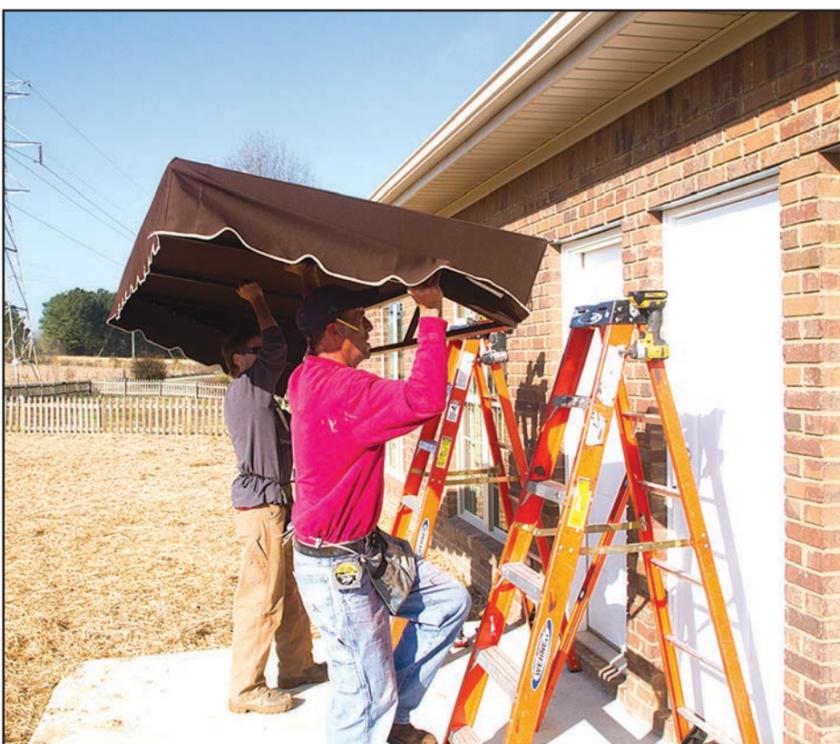
"People use these to protect their family and friends whenever they go in and out of the house to keep the rain off them," Evans said. "Also, they're great to help protect the doors and wood around your doors. So many

See Evans, Page 5



Brian Schoenhals/The Daily Home

Eugene L. Evans Manufacturing Company employees Ken Griffin and Randy Webb drill holes in an awning ready for installation at a residence in Pell City. The company produces an average of 300 canvas awnings a year.



Brian Schoenhals/The Daily Home

Ken Griffin and Randy lift an awning and prepare to line it up against its installation point. Awnings made by the company take an average of two-to-four weeks.

## Simple ways to limit weed growth

Weed growth in a garden cannot only prove unsightly, but also ultimately harmful to plants and vegetables. When weeds appear in a garden, they have already begun to steal nutrients and water from surrounding plants, and if allowed to grow tall, they can also block sunlight from reaching the plants.

Unfortunately, weeds can be resilient, and there is no way to guarantee they won't grow. But gardeners can take several steps to limit the growth of weeds so the plants in their gardens can grow strong.

- Work the soil regularly. When weed roots are removed from the soil, weeds die. But just because you hoed or tilled the soil last month does not mean new weeds won't grow in and start robbing your plants of essential

nutrients and minerals this month. The garden should be cultivated regularly, and you should pay particular attention to the soil after the garden has been watered. If weeds are allowed to go to seed, the garden can quickly be overwhelmed by them, as young weeds tend to grow in quickly and a little water might be all they need to sprout. So make a point to routinely cultivate the soil with a hoe or tiller, being careful when working on soil around growing plants.

- Lay down black plastic. Some gardeners may want to avoid laying black plastic down in their gardens for fear that such a weed deterrent robs the garden of its natural beauty. While that might be true, the black plastic also

See Weeds, Page 6

## Mistakes

From Page 3

tures to their property.

- Planting without a plan: When planting new trees around a property, some homeowners plant without first considering the ideal locations for new trees. This can prove an expensive mistake. Planting too close to your house may eventually threaten your home's foundation, as roots grow deeper and deeper into the ground. Planting too close to a home also may prove a security threat down the road, when the tree has grown to full height. Such trees may threaten the home during a storm, so consult a landscaping professional when planting new trees so the trees are located in a place that does not threaten the value of your home or the safety of its residents.

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Brian Schoenhals/The Daily Home

Eugene L. Evans Manufacturing Company employees Ken Griffin and Randy Webb install an awning onto a residence in Pell City. The average retail price for an awning equals \$900.

**Evans**

From Page 4

door frames and window frames these days are just made out of cheap wood, and if you don't keep it protected from the elements, within five to seven years it starts rotting out down at the bottom. We get a lot of calls from people who want to protect the wood around their doors and windows."

The company produces three types of patio cover roofs — insulated, non-insulated and corrugated, open-rafter roofs.

The retail price for a

10-foot by 20-foot patio cover totals \$2,500, but Evans noted the price can vary due to size and material costs. Evans said patio cover orders can be completed in less than a week.

"Patio covers are ideal for giving people a place out of the sun and rain to entertain, barbecue, throw parties and sit outside without being bothered by the hot sun and rain," Evans said. "A nice feature about them is being able to hang bird feeders, plants, wind chimes and other stuff from them."

In a year, the company

makes roughly 300 canvas awnings and 200 patio covers.

Sunrooms aren't produced as frequently compared to other products

offered, with approximately a half-dozen produced in a year. For a sunroom, the retail price ranges from \$12,000-\$15,000, and it takes a minimum of three

weeks to set up a sunroom.

"They're a very cost-effective way to enclose a concrete slab or deck because with the insulated roof, you can heat and cool the area," Evans said. "It's just like adding another room on to your house at about half the price. I've got one at my house by the lake, and it's nice to see the geese come flying in while I'm out there exercising on my treadmill or stationary bike."

At its peak, the company boasted 26 full-time employees. Though the company now employs eight full-time employees, Evans insisted the staff remains the backbone of

the company.

"The thing that makes this company so successful is the personnel," Evans said. "I've been so fortunate to have experienced people. Having good personnel that can do a great job, get the work done and satisfy our customers makes all this possible."

For more information about the services Eugene L. Evans Manufacturing Company has to offer, contact Evans at 256-237-5821 or 1-800-321-4414.

Contact Shane Dunaway at [sdunaway@dailyhome.com](mailto:sdunaway@dailyhome.com)

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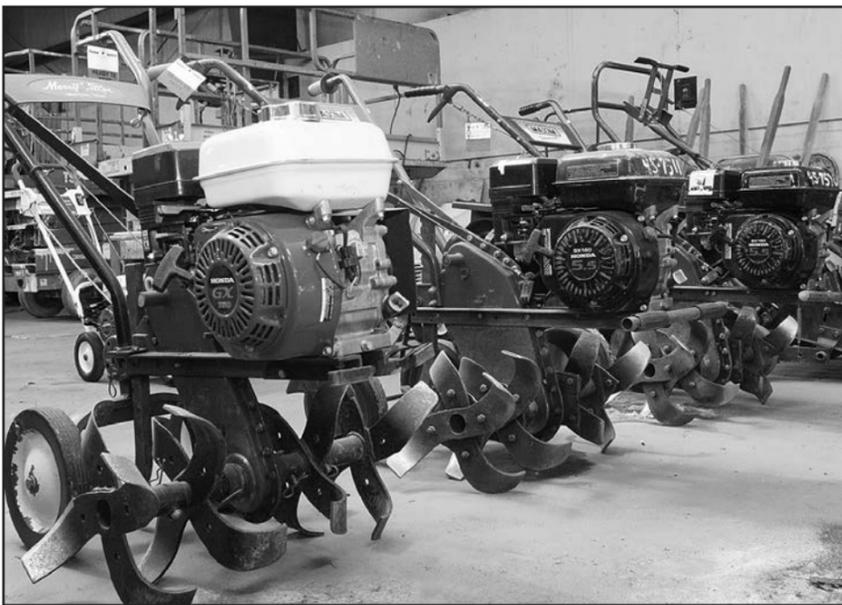
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Taylor Rental in Talladega has a variety of Echo line trimmers and equipment to help get your yard in shape for the spring and summer.

In addition to being the season for whipping your yard in shape, this is also the time to get that garden started; Taylor Rental has what you need.

# Taylor Rental has what you need for home and garden

By CHRIS NORWOOD  
Home staff writer

So you're getting your yard ready for planting and gardening, and getting the house ready for spring cleaning. Most likely, there will be various pieces of equipment involved that you may not happen to own outright. You find yourself wondering why you should have to shell out the big bucks for a piece of equipment you are only likely to use for a couple of hours maybe once a year. Well, the short answer is, you don't. Taylor Rentals, located next to the old Food World Shopping Center on Battle Street in Talladega, almost certainly has everything you need, for as long as you actually need to use it. According to Frances Barber, some of the more popular rental items include tillers for lawns, gardens and flower beds; edgers, line trimmers, hedge clippers, pruners and "pretty much anything else you would need to help get your yard whipped into shape. For larger projects, we also have things like tractors and skid loaders. We're seeing a lot of people doing work on their driveways this year, probably because of all the rain and snow we've seen this year."

Floor sanders have been a popular item for indoor rental this year, especially for people who are tearing out old carpet and refurbishing the original hardwood floors underneath. On the other hand, if you want to keep your carpet clean, they can rent you the shampooers for that, also. "We also rent out a lot of pressure washers this time of year, either to remove dirt and mold that have built up, or to get a house ready for repainting." And if painting is on your to-do list this year, Taylor's can also rent you the equipment for that, including airless sprayers. You will be on your own for the actual paint, however. "We have paint for the striping machines, but that's about it," Barber said.



Brian Schoenhals/The Daily Home

While most yard work involves simple mowing, trimming and pruning, some jobs will require much heavier equipment; Taylor Rental can provide those as well.

The standard rental agreement is for a 24-hour period, she said, "but the industry says 6 hours is about the maximum amount of time that most things are used. Some of the things we rent out are metered, but most aren't. After all, if you have the right equipment, the job doesn't take as long." Rental costs range from about \$30 for a line trimmer to about \$75 for a pressure washer. "March is typically a big month for us, but it really depends on the weather," Barber said. "March and April are generally the months people start planting and planning out their home improvement projects. And of course, we're also heading into wedding season, and the season for family reunions and picnics. We've got everything you need for those, too."

## Weeds

From Page 4

robs many weeds of their ability to grow in. Some weeds may be especially stubborn and grow in under the plastic, forcing their way through the holes cut into the plastic for the plants to grow through. But laying black plastic covering over the garden before it's planted is often an effective way to limit weed growth.

- Lay mulch in vegetable gardens. Mulch can serve multiple benefits in a garden. Many people find mulch aesthetically appealing, but mulch serves more practical purposes as well. Mulch made of organic materials, such as bark chips or grass clippings, is often too heavy for weeds to push through, making it difficult, if not impossible, for weeds to sprout in the garden. But mulch also conserves moisture in the soil, strengthening plant roots as a result. Stronger roots can lead to a healthier garden.
- Cut down on plants' elbow room. The more space between plants, the more room weeds have to grow. So decreasing the space between plants can limit weed growth. But spacing plants too closely together can make it difficult for vegetables to grow in as well. Spacing rec-

ommendations will likely be included on packaging when buying seeds, but reducing those recommendations by an inch or two may allow the plants to grow in strong while limiting weed growth at the same time. Garden weeds can put plants in jeopardy and rob gardens of their beauty. But there are a handful of ways gardeners can limit weed growth without harming their plants.

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# Some bugs overwinter indoors

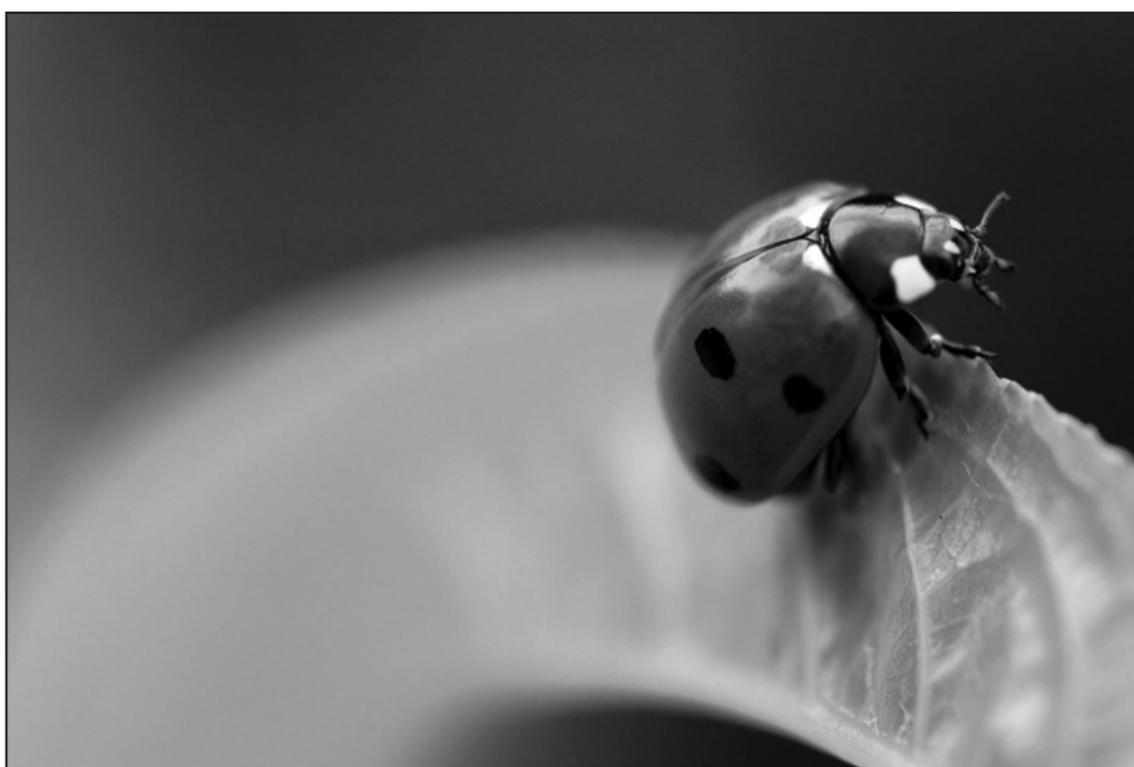
Winter weather may not be enticing to some people, but many people enjoy the absence of insects when the mercury drops. When temperatures dip, insects that do not have the benefit of body fat need to find different methods to riding out the chilly weather. Like bears and ground-hogs, some insects hibernate, while others move to warmer locations for survival. Although insects may be less prevalent outdoors, homeowners often see an increase of insect activity indoors during the winter, when bugs seek out more cozy accommodations.

The following are some of the insects homeowners may see more frequently as colder weather arrives.

## Stink bugs

As the autumn air turns cold, brown marmorated stink bugs move indoors. According to Mike Raupp, a professor of entomology at the University of Maryland, data points to high numbers of stink bug populations in 2013. Home invasions may be greater than in years past thanks to favorable conditions this summer.

Stink bugs, which are native to areas of China and Japan, have a sustained presence in North America, having been observed in 41 states, including Hawaii. In parts of Maryland, West Virginia and Delaware, sci-



Ladybugs in the garden may be fine. However, ladybugs in the house are not always welcome.

entists have observed high numbers of stink bugs found piled six inches deep in some traps.

To keep stink bugs out, seal any cracks around the windows and doors with caulk. Patch any tiny holes in the walls and use foam sprays to patch up holes around outdoor electrical outlets.

**Ladybugs (Ladybird beetles)**  
Ladybugs, with their vivid red-and-black markings, may not cause concern when found in gardens. But when found in large numbers inside of the house, ladybugs should cause concern. They do not pose any health or infestation risks, but

they can be pests in large numbers indoors. Many ladybugs will leave the home in the spring when they're done hibernating. Otherwise, you can sweep them outdoors or remove them another way.

## Box elder bugs

These insects can enter the home through tiny

cracks or under doors. They also can sneak in on clothing or bags from outside. Box elder bugs are largely harmless, as they will not eat anything in the home or reproduce. But many people are put off by any black insects running around their homes. As with many other insects, finding the point of entry

and sealing it up is the key to keeping them out.

**Camelback crickets**  
The camelback cricket, also known as the camel cricket or spider cricket, is a strange-looking bug. It has the body of a cricket, but the long, arched legs of a spider. They are brown or striped, but unlike other types of crickets, these insects do not have wings, so they are silent and will not alert you to their presence with the familiar chirping noise. Furthermore, camelback crickets have spectacular jumping abilities.

They have poor eyesight and usually jump toward a predator attempting to scare it away. This can make the cricket seem aggressive. It will not harm people, but because they are omnivores, camelback crickets can eat just about anything in your home and also will eat their own. They like dark, warm, damp environments, so removing these conditions can reduce the number of crickets you find indoors.

To further prevent indoor insect populations, take preemptive measures in the fall. Spray the exterior of the home with an insecticide and keep mulch or damp leaves away from the perimeter. If insects become troublesome, consult with an exterminator.

## Weed out gardening myths from facts

Gardening is an age-old activity that was once a necessity but has transformed into a hobby for thousands of people. While gardening still serves practical purposes, many gardeners still consider it a hobby first and foremost.

Time-tested gardening techniques have prevailed, but there remain certain myths about gardening that are best dispelled. The following are some of the more common myths associated with gardening.

• **MYTH: Compost tea is more effective than traditional compost.** All over North America and the United Kingdom, gardeners have jumped on board the compost tea bandwagon. Compost tea is a fertilizer created by steeping compost in water mixed with sugar in brewing kits. The mixture is allowed to sit and aerate to encourage beneficial organism growth before it is sprayed on plants. According to supporters, compost tea suppresses disease and boosts plant yields. However, there is no evidence to suggest that compost tea works any better than adding compost in its normal state to the soil. In fact, leaving buckets of the "tea" around to ferment could actually create a breeding ground for E coli and other bacteria.

• **MYTH: Plants under stress should be fertilized.** This is not the case. Horticulturists advise that fertilizing plants that are not deficient in nutrients can actually add to existing stress levels for plants. Plants are not often stressed by a lack of food, but rather heat, faulty planting or space constraints. A fed plant will use the energy to absorb the nutrients instead of defending against a blight or establishing better root systems.

• **MYTH: Young trees need stakes.** It may be tempting to stake that little sapling to protect it against the weather and strong winds, but doing so may actually work against the foundling tree. Staking trees to inhibit swaying may not stimulate the tree

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# Chemscape owner knows his stuff

By DAVID ATCHISON  
Home staff writer

He knows his grass, weeds and bugs, and when it comes to lawn care Ryan Harper, owner and operator of Chemscape, knows his stuff.

"I'm sort of a one-man crew," said Harper, who graduated from Pell City High School in 2005 before heading to Auburn University where he earned his bachelors degree.

At Auburn, Harper majored in horticulture and minored in turf grass management.

He returned home and opened his own lawn care business, Chemscape.

"I wanted to do something that I could be my own boss," Harper said.

Chemscape provides residential and commercial lawn care needs, specializing in lawn fertilization, weed and insect control.

"I do mainly weed control and turf fertilization," Harper said.

He started his new business in 2013.

"I started a little more than a year ago," Harper said.

He said lawn care planning is important if you want beautiful looking lawn.

Harper said it is best to get a jump on lawn care in the fall, in preparation for the next spring, about October.

He said by early treatment, people can have a handle on weed control before spring arrives.

"I do it (lawn care treatments) year round," he said, adding that his business does pick up during the spring and summer.

Most of his lawn care treatment for weed and insect control is liquid. He uses a spreader for applying fertilizer to lawns.

If someone has a lawn problem, Harper can identify the trouble quickly and move forward with the proper remedy.

Sometimes the problem is as simple as too much water, other times it can be bug infestation.

"You'll start seeing insects early summer," Harper said. "You can spot them pretty quickly."

He said caution must be taken when applying a herbicide to your lawn. Too much herbicide can kill beneficial insects.

He said people who live on the lake need to be extra careful about what is applied to their lawns because of runoff.

Harper said some types of grasses do better in the shade while others need plenty of sunlight.

He said Fescue grass likes the cooler climate



Bob Crisp/The Daily Home

Ryan Harper is the owner and operator of Chemscape, a company that specializes in lawn care, fertilization, weed and insect control.



Bob Crisp/The Daily Home

Harper is shown spraying fertilizer on a lawn.

and shade can help it from dying out.

"Bermuda (grass) will not take to the shade at all," Harper said.

People should keep their lawns mowed regularly.

"You want to keep the proper mowing height, about 2 inches for most

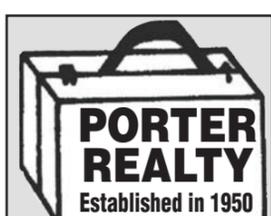
tuffs," Harper said. "You don't want to let it get 5-6 inches high and cut it."

He said during the driest parts of summer, it is also important to keep your lawns watered.

"But you don't want to over water," Harper said.

Contact David Atchison

at [datchison@dailyhome.com](mailto:datchison@dailyhome.com).



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## Myths

From Page 7

to grow thicker, lower trunks that will help the tree in the long run. The Royal Horticultural Society recommends that saplings be staked for around one year and then have the stakes removed to encourage the tree to be strong and stable on its own.

- MYTH: Water droplets and sunshine lead to burnt leaves. Gardeners have been told to resist watering their plants during the hottest times of the day. Many assume it's because water droplets lying on leaves will magnify the sun's rays and burn the leaves. According to Dr. Gabor Horvath at the Eoetvoes University in Budapest, water droplets will rarely damage plants because the drops are too close to the leaves to cause burning before they evaporate. Watering during the hottest points of the day is not advised because water evaporates and gets wasted.
- MYTH: Sand added to clay soil makes it looser and better for plants. Clay soil is a deterrent to gardening because it can be

so hard to dig and difficult to cultivate, but some feel it's best to add sand to the clay to make it a better soil mixture. You would need a great deal of sand to do this in the right manner, but many gardeners simply dig a hole, add sand and hope for the best. However, water runoff will pool in the sand and not be absorbed by the clay, potentially causing the plants to drown.

- MYTH: Adding compost or potting soil to the planting hole for a tree or shrub is beneficial. Gardeners frequently add compost or potting soil to the hole where the root ball of a tree or shrub will be placed. But this encourages the roots to grow only in this nutrient-rich

area, rather than spreading throughout the landscape to form a stronger and more durable root system. If you are going to amend the soil, do so evenly across the landscape.

- MYTH: Use gravel or rocks in the bottom of planting containers to improve drainage. Rocks and gravel can actually impede the growth of plants and take away space for roots to grow. The drainage may be affected as well, as water will sit above the gravel or stones and saturate the roots. Stick with plain soil for better drainage results.

A variety of gardening myths still prevail. Over time, behaviors can be changed if gardeners learn to separate myths from facts.

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# How to keep cats out of your garden beds



Cats make for wonderful pets, especially those that are content with life indoors, where they can spend hours lounging on a windowsill watching the world go by. But some cats spend a significant amount of time outdoors, where they forage for food and take refuge in and around a neighborhood. Frequently, outdoor cats will return to the same place over and over again. If that place is your flower bed, you may grow aggravated by your uninvited guest.

Once a cat has found a place to call its own, it can be difficult to persuade the animal to move. Cats can be attracted to planting beds because the soil is soft underfoot and may seem like the ideal environment to turn into an outdoor litter box. However, over time cat urine and feces can leave behind an offensive odor and damage plants. Other cats also may be attracted to the garden, creating territory "wars" or even more odor and activity. But homeowners can employ a variety of techniques to keep felines from digging in the garden.

- Keep leftover citrus peels. Orange, lemon and lime peels scattered around the garden may be offensive to cats, who will likely opt to go elsewhere rather than ignore the odor. Over time, the peels can be removed or allowed to break down into a natural fertilizer.
- Employ technology to surprise or startle the cats. Motion detectors that trigger lights or a sprinkler system can startle cats and keep them away from your garden.

- Make the garden uncomfortable to cats. Many cats do not like the feeling hard materials under their paws. Therefore, you can bury any number of items in the soil to deter padded feet. Some gardeners prefer to use chicken wire or rolled mesh around plants before covering the soil with mulch. The cats step on the dirt and feel the metal underneath, then move on. Branches, brambles, spiky holly leaves, or even rocks may keep cats from

## Experiment with different deterrents to keep cats out of garden beds.

finding the garden bed hospitable.

- Employ natural scented deterrents. Some say that cats will be repelled by human hair. Visit a salon and ask for hair clippings to distribute throughout the garden. Urine from predators, like coyotes, may scare cats off, as well. Some cats may not like the smell of marigolds, which can be planted alongside other flowers in an attempt to keep cats at bay.

- Erect barriers around the garden. Barriers can keep cats out of gardens. Erect a fence of lattice or metal to make it more difficult for cats to get inside the garden.

- Make other areas of your property more attractive to cats. Homeowners who don't mind the presence of cats on their property but want them out of the garden can take the unusual step of making another area on the property more cat-friendly. Plant catnip far away from the garden, giving cats a place to hang out without putting your garden in jeopardy.

## Animals, insects may help your garden

Planning and maintaining a garden requires a lot of effort, which can result in an aesthetically pleasing addition to the landscape. But that hard work can also fall victim to nature when local wildlife find a garden too mouth-watering to resist.

In an effort to rid a garden of unwanted pests, gardeners may unwittingly scare away animals and insects that might just protect the garden from more ill-intentioned animals. Not every creature that scurries is out to get prized petunias or to devour tomatoes. In fact, many can prove beneficial to gardens.

animals.

### Butterflies and bees

Butterflies and bees are responsible for pollinating the vast majority of plants. Avoid using pesticides that may diminish butterfly or bee populations. A beehive right next to a garden may not be practical, but don't make attempts to destroy it. Consult with a professional beekeeper to see what can be done to move the beehive without destroying it.

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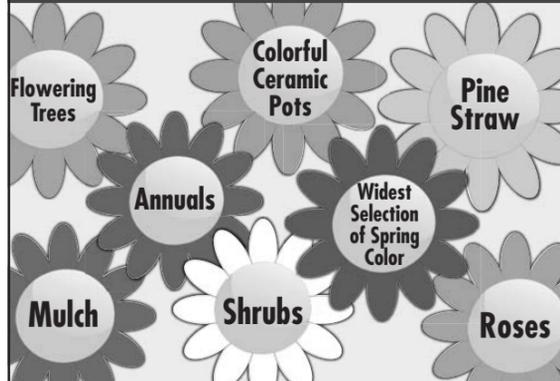
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### Bats

Bats have a bad reputation, as people unnecessarily fear bats because they believe them to be carriers of disease. But many bats feed off of insects or fruits and will not harm a human. The average brown bat can eat 1,000 mosquitoes in an hour, so it's easy to see why bats are good to have around. Mosquitoes are not only a nuisance but also harbor potentially dangerous diseases. Bats also may eat certain rodents, which can cut down on the number of animals burrowing in a yard.

### Frogs

Frogs and toads will prey on insects and make the local insect population more manageable. Toads eat mainly slugs, who feed on the leaves and fruits of many plants. Frogs and toads are attracted to water, so including a pond or another water feature in the garden will provide them with a habitat they like.

### Birds

While it is true that some birds can damage crops, many birds are content to feed on insects attracted to the garden, which helps to keep insect numbers in check. Chickadees, for example, will dine on aphid eggs, while larger birds may prey on mice or other rodents or simply scare them out of the garden. Jays and mockingbirds are known to be feisty and can even deter dogs and cats from a yard. Hummingbirds will sip on the nectar of flowers and help pollinate plants.

### Snakes

Snakes in a garden can be disconcerting to some people, but snakes are ideal predators who feed on insects and rodents several times their size. Snakes are the right size and shape to invade the burrows of pest

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# Mulch

4 main reasons to use it in your garden or landscape

By **BILL KIMBER**  
Home staff writer

If you think of a forest as being a great big self-perpetuating garden, it's easy to see how mulch works in the smaller setting of home gardens and landscapes. In the forest, leaves, limbs and branches fall to the ground, creating a ground cover that holds moisture and chokes out undergrowth and adds nutrients to the soil as it break down over time.

It works much the same way at home, said Bill Roberts, lead gardener of Sylacauga Grows.

Roberts said in the garden or landscape, mulch serves four purposes: "One, to keep down weeds; two, to hold moisture; three, for looks; and four, to keep Weedeaters from weedeating what you've got mulched. That goes for vegetables and trees. We lose more trees to damage from lawn mowers and Weedeaters than from any other cause, and using weed barrier or mulch will help prevent that."

He pointed out that weed barrier — water-permeable fabric you stretch over the ground — can be unsightly, so it should be covered with mulch.

"That mulch will decompose and turn into soil, and that means you've got soil on top of your landscape cloth, so the weeds can come up on top," Roberts said. "So you're going to have to take it off every now and then and put it back to keep the weeds from germinating. Nothing is simple!

"It's even harder to get the weeds out if they germinate on top of the landscape cloth, because roots will go through it, and then you've got to pull cloth and weeds up."

Pre-emergent weed killers can stop weeds before they grow.

"These just keep weed seeds from germinating.



Bill Kimber/The Daily Home

## A trailer load of pine straw waits to be used as mulch at the Sylacauga Grows Community Garden.

But you might not want to use that in your garden, especially if you're growing plants from seed, because they won't germinate either. You can get some specifically for gardens, but you have to follow the directions carefully on when to use them. You use them at a different time than on your lawn and shrubs."

Roberts said as mulch breaks down, it should be cleaned up to keep landscapes pretty, but it doesn't need to be discarded.

"As it decomposes, it loosens the soil and helps it retain moisture rather than getting hard and causing water to run off. I like to rake it out, clean up the area around the plants, put it back in and put new mulch on top of it. That way it loosens it up and moves it around, but it also keeps you from having to use as much new mulch."

He said there are several

different kinds of mulch, and each has its pluses and minuses.

"Typical ones are pine straw and bark. Straw is the best to me because it goes back into the soil faster. The downside is it decomposes fast so you have to replace it fairly regularly. Bark, on the other hand, lasts longer, but it floats and it attracts termites and other bugs.

"Some things they call mulch that are not mulch. Rubber mulch — made of ground-up tires — is pretty good for looks, but it doesn't help the soil at all. I prefer things that are going to be multipurpose."

Roberts said pine straw costs \$3 to \$4 per bale, or upwards of \$100 for a pickup truck load.

"If you don't mind having some leaves in it, you can go out in the woods and get some pine straw

yourself. Bales are nice because you can put them exactly where you want them, but I prefer going out in the woods."

According to the Alabama Cooperative Extension Service, "Summer mulches such as straw or mini pine bark nuggets should be placed around vegetable plants to help conserve moisture, cool the soil and control pesky weeds."

The service's publication ANR-1345 says, "Apply a 2- to 4-inch layer around young and emerged plants, and over the soil after it has warmed; do not apply too early as you might keep the soil cool and slow the growth of warm-season crops."

"Old newspapers can also be recycled and used as free biodegradable mulch in the vegetable garden. Layers of newspapers can

be placed down prior to adding other mulch. In a year, the newspaper will break down, adding valuable nutrients back into the soil."

The ACES publication points out that mulch is also essential in raised-bed gardening, in which water loss can especially be a problem.

Roberts has a simple solution for home gardeners who don't want to mess with mulch at all: grow vegetables in bags of garden soil.

"A trick we're doing with our kids at the area elementary school gardens is to cut drain holes in one side of the bag of soil, lay it flat on the ground, cut appropriate-sized holes in the up side, and plant lettuce seeds with a salt shaker. You can mix corn meal with the seeds so the kids can see where it's being planted. It's simple and fun, and they're so excited about it!"

Contact Bill Kimber at [bkimber@dailyhome.com](mailto:bkimber@dailyhome.com).

# Tips for keeping walls, woodwork clean

By **LISA A. FLAM**  
Associated Press

Walls can get dirty before you know it — from a splatter of spaghetti dinner to the crayon artistry of a roaming toddler to fingers simply reaching for a light switch.

It's easy to pass by walls and woodwork every day without a second glance, but spring-cleaning season is a great time to give them the attention they deserve.

Like many housekeeping tasks, regular cleaning can help avoid bigger cleanup work later on.

"It doesn't have to be as difficult of a job as it sounds," said Amy Panos, senior editor at Better Homes and Gardens. "The easier you can make it on yourself, the more likely you are to do it."

## DIRT AND SCUUFFS

Walls tend to get dirtiest around light switches and door knobs.

"Even if a hand looks clean, it still has a little dirt and oils that over time build up and eventually make that area of the wall dirty," Panos said.

Walls also get marked up from accidental kicks or the brush of a bag near the baseboards. Parents know how toddlers' hands often find their way to walls, either with filthy fingers or with crayons or markers.

These fingerprints and other blemishes are best tackled right away. "The sooner you can get to a mark that is noticeable, the easier it will be" to clean, said Sharon Grech, a color and design expert for

See **Tips**, Page 12

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Emily McLain/The Daily Home

Trends in paint color are moving toward grays, tans, grayish-tans and light blues.

## Neutral wall colors are now the in thing

By EMILY McLAIN  
Home staff writer

The days of dramatic prints on the wall are gone, and neutrals are in.

While wallpaper once reigned supreme as the best way to give life to a room, homeowners have had enough and are now turning to paints that act as a subtle backdrop to their furniture and accessories, according to Sue Thrash, co-owner of Thrash's Floors and More in Sylacauga.

"Wallpaper tried to make a comeback recently, but I think people remembered how hard it is to remove, so they're sticking with paint," Thrash said. "People are using a lot of light grays, pewter and tans."

In addition, Thrash said painting every room of your house the same color, or different shades of the same tone, is a growing trend.

"People used to have every room a different color, and it was these bright colors and prints," she said. "Now they're using more muted colors, not so bold. That way they can change the look of a room through accessories and color accents and not have to repaint. People are looking for colors that will last."

Thrash's sells Benjamin Moore paints and offers painting services. The most popular colors they sell as of late include grays like Coventry Gray, grayish-tans like Valley Forge Tan, or traditional tans like Berkshire Beige. For a hint of color, Palladian Blue is a popular light blue that still serves as a neutral backdrop.

If you prefer paint, but miss the pattern that wallpaper afforded, stencils are another option, Thrash said. They come in all shapes and designs and are customizable to whatever color combinations you choose.

A stencil like horizontal stripes works well for an entire room, while more intricate designs are perfect for an accent wall. An easy way to draw in more visual interest, stenciling is easy to do yourself with a little practice. Plus, it adds lots of character for a little money.

"Paint is one of the best tools for decorating, because it is such an inexpensive update," Thrash said. "A differ-

ent color can transform a room."

The move to more muted paint colors, intended to last through many years and potentially several redesigns of a room or home, is congruent with other trends in home décor. Overall, people seem to be spending the most money on elements that will last – flooring and furniture – and spending less on the interchangeable items – paint and accents like pillows.

"Years ago, everybody had carpet and vinyl, and they were covering hardwood floors with carpet," she said. "Now, though, people are making more of an initial investment putting in hardwood floors or ceramic tile because you never have to replace it if you take care of it."

In hardwoods, the trend is dark, hand-scraped wood with a distressed look. In tiles, the stone look is in, a cheaper alternative to real stone but with the same effect, Thrash said.

The trends in wall and floor coverings are to keep it classic and create a palette for decorators to use and interchange items they already have in new ways.

"Whether it's a neutral paint or hardwood floors, most people who are updating their home are definitely staying with things that are going to last," Thrash said.

Contact Emily McLain at [emclain@dailyhome.com](mailto:emclain@dailyhome.com).

## Tips

From Page 10

Benjamin Moore.

People are wary of cleaning or washing painted surfaces because they fear the process will remove the paint. But Grech said the technology has improved over the last decade, and paints now are more stain-resistant and durable for cleaning.

Still, it's important to use the right products.

To remove everyday marks, Grech suggested using a clean cellulose sponge with a little warm water.

"Just give it a good rub," she said. "Wait for it to dry and see if it's clean."

If the dirt is still evident, repeat the process using a dab of dish detergent and wipe the area dry with a clean sponge, rag or paper towel.

"Warm water does miracles with a sponge," Grech said. "You want to avoid using regular household cleaners that have ammonia and other products in them" because they can change the sheen of the paint.

Panos likes the ease of a foam eraser pad, like Mr. Clean Magic Eraser, though be sure to test it first in an inconspicuous area to make sure it won't remove the color or finish. Mr. Clean Magic Eraser is approved by the manufacturer for use on most paints, including flat and semi-gloss paint.

"They're quite incredible," Panos said. "They take care of a lot."

Don't forget doorways and trim, often coated in easy-to-wipe paints but in light colors like white and cream that make marks especially visible. Cleaning those areas can instantly make the room seem brighter.

"It really glistens," Grech said. "It's like putting on a nice lip gloss."

### DUST AND COBWEBS

While most people know to take care of an unsightly mark, many overlook cleaning the whole wall, Panos said. Once you have a fresh coat of paint, lightly dust the walls about every three months.

"You don't need to get a bucket and soap and sponge and completely wash down the walls," she said. "Make it easy on yourself by getting a tool with an extension pole so that you can stand on the ground and take care of the job in just a few minutes rather than having to drag out a ladder."

Clean the ceiling first, with a dust-attracting microfiber mop on the extension pole for smooth ceilings, or a slightly damp paint roller on the pole for a popcorn ceiling, she said. The walls can be cleaned from top to bottom with the mop (dry or slightly damp), and the baseboards hand-cleaned with a microfiber cloth.

"Keeping the environment as dust-free as possible is helpful for a good interior air quality," Panos said.

Grech recommends regular cleaning where dusts collect, such as on baseboards, and on window ledges, where it can mix with moisture and turn into a mess.

While cleaning the walls won't prolong the paint job, she said, it will help keep them looking their best.

"You want to clean the areas that are getting a little bit more abused to keep it fresh," she said.



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Gardening can be fun for children. Selecting plants that are hardy and sprout quickly may be the key to igniting a love of gardening in children.

# Get kids excited about gardening

Many adults understand the joy of gardening, but gardening can be equally fun for children. While some adults may feel that certain children do not have the patience or perseverance to see plants grow from seeds to adulthood, selecting plants that are hardy and sprout quickly may be the key to igniting a love of gardening in children.

Choosing seeds that sprout quickly can hold the attention of children who are new to gardening. Many different plants fit this bill. Beans, peas, sunflower seeds, and bell pepper seeds are easy to start and germinate quickly. In addition, many leafy vegetables, such as chard, lettuce, spinach, and mustard, germinate in three to five days. Herbs, such as basil and parsley, also sprout fast. All of these plants are good options for introducing children to gardening, as each provides quick gratification.

To further interest children, it is a good idea to plant seeds in a way that allows youngsters to monitor the progress of growth. Use a transparent container, such as rinsed-out glass jars and canisters, to house the plant. Such containers give kids an unobstructed view of the process, during which children can plot the progress of seed germination and easily spot root and stem development. Once the seedlings grow larger, they can be transplanted into different containers.

Many seedlings can sprout with water alone. Children can easily grow new plants from clippings of a mature plant left resting in a shallow cup of water, and seeds may not even need soil to germi-

nate. Kids may have luck sprinkling seeds on a dampened, crumpled-up piece of paper towel. Cotton balls also make a good place to nestle seeds. Either material will hold on to water, keeping the seeds moist until they sprout. Afterward, the seedlings can be carefully moved into a soil-and-compost mix. The paper towel and the cotton balls will decompose and add to the organic matter already in the soil.

Edible plants make good choices for children because kids can reap the rewards of their efforts. Herbs can be sprinkled onto food, or fruits and vegetables can be grown in containers and then served at mealtime. Kids can show pride in their accomplishments, especially if they have results on the dinner plate.

Children who want to

try something different can explore other types of plants. Aquatic plants, or those found at the pet store to grow in aquariums, can be easy to grow. They need little more than a container, fresh water and sunlight. Cacti and other succulents are also fun to explore. These plants are hardy in that they can stand up to moderate abuse, such as failure to water frequently enough. The unique appearance of cacti makes them focal points for an indoor garden.

A love of gardening that's fostered inside can also be explored outdoors. Set aside a plot of dirt where kids can sow their own seeds and tend to their own gardens. This hobby can help children learn patience and hard work while fostering an appreciation of nature.






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# Home projects perfect for spring

The rejuvenating spirit of spring makes this beloved season an ideal time for homeowners to take stock of their homes and properties and address any issues that arose during the winter. While some homes make it through winter unscathed, the harsh weather of the year's coldest season can add several tasks to homeowners' springtime to-do lists.

While some projects are best left to the professionals, others can be tackled even by those homeowners with little or no DIY experience. The following are a handful of projects tailor-made for spring.

## Inspect the gutters

Gutters tend to bear the brunt of harsh winter weather, and come spring gutters are in need of inspection if not repair. Winter winds, snow and heavy rainfall can compromise the effectiveness of gutters, which can easily accumulate debris and detach from homes during winter storms. In addition, gutters sometimes develop leaks over the winter months. As a result, homeowners should conduct a careful inspection of their gutters come the spring, being sure to look for leaks while clearing the gutters of debris and reattaching gutters that might have become detached from the home on windy winter days and nights. When reattaching loose gutters, make sure the downspouts are draining away from the foundation, as gutters that are not draining properly

can cause damage to that foundation and possibly lead to flooding.

## Take stock of roof shingles

Much like its gutters and downspouts, a home's roof can suffer significant damage over the course of a typical winter. Shingles may be lost to harsh winter winds and storms, so homeowners should examine the roof to determine if any shingles were lost (lost shingles might even be lying around the property) or suffered damage that's considerable enough to require replacement. Summer can be especially brutal on shingles, especially those that suffered significant damage during the winter. If left unchecked or unaddressed, problems with damaged shingles can quickly escalate into larger issues when spring rains and summer sun inevitably arrive, so homeowners should prioritize fixing or replacing damaged shingles as quickly as possible.

## Check for freeze damage

Frozen temperatures can be hard on humans and homes alike, but unlike humans who can stay inside when temperatures dip below freezing, homes are forced to withstand the elements throughout the winter. External hose faucets are often susceptible to freeze damage. To inspect such faucets, turn the water on and then place a thumb or finger over the opening of the faucet. If your thumb or finger can completely stop the flow of water, the pipe where the water



Each spring, homeowners should inspect their gutters to ensure the gutters are still attached to their homes and free of debris.

is coming from is likely damaged and will need to be replaced.

## Examine the lawn for low spots

Once a lawn has thawed out, homeowners can patrol their properties looking for low spots in the yard or even low spots within spitting distance of the home's foundation. Such spots increase the likelihood of flooding. Flooding near a home's foundation increases the risk of potentially costly

damage, while low spots on the lawn that go ignored can make great breeding grounds for insects, including mosquitoes, when the weather warms up. When low spots are detected, fill them in with compacted soil. Compacted soil can prevent spring rains from flooding a yard or damaging a home's foundation.

Assessing potential property damage is a rite of passage for homeowners in the spring. Though some damage is significant, oftentimes even nov-

ice DIYers can work their homes and properties back into shape in time to enjoy spring and summer.

# How to repair dead grass

A patch of dead grass on an otherwise lush lawn can be a frustrating eyesore for homeowners. Whether lawn care is your passion or just something you do to maintain the value of your home, dead grass can be exasperating.

But as unsightly as dead grass can be, addressing it and restoring the dead patches can be somewhat simple. Before you can restore grass, however, you must first identify the source of the problem. Grass often dies because of urine damage, which is typically characterized by a dead spot surrounded by otherwise green grass. Grub infestation might be at fault when dead grass appears, and such an infestation often produces patches of light brown grass that are scattered throughout the lawn. It's also possible that dead grass is a result of human error. If your lawn was overfertilized, then patches of gray-green grass may appear. Fungal disease is another common culprit behind dead grass, and such disease can manifest itself in different ways. Once you have identified why the grass is dead, which may require the help of a professional, then you can begin to treat your lawn.

## Urine damage

Urine damage is often limited to a particular area of the grass where your

See Grass, Page 15

# Orchid cacti are easy to grow, beautiful in bloom

By LEE REICH  
Associated Press

The biggest problem with growing orchid cacti is figuring out just what they are.

They are cacti, but are not spiny. Their spectacular blossoms are neither orchids nor orchid-like.

Sometimes orchid cacti are called epiphyllums, which is also the botanical name of some (but not all) orchid cacti. The word epiphyllum means "on the leaf" and refers to the way the flowers just pop out from the edges of the ... well, they look like leaves but they're really just flattened stems.

Enough with the semantics! The important thing is that fat flower buds on my orchid cacti's stems are about to

burst open into spectacular white, pink or scarlet blossoms. And coaxing forth these blossoms required very little effort on my part.

## This cactus likes moisture

Although orchid cacti, or epies (short for epiphyllums) as they are sometimes called, are true cacti, they are not native to deserts but to lush, tropical jungles. There, they nestle into forks in tree branches or into rock crevices where enough humus has accumulated to retain moisture. The plants enjoy soils that are both well-drained and retain moisture. I use my standard potting mix with a little extra perlite for drainage; you could also make up a mix using peat moss, com-

See Cacti, Page 15

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# Grass

From Page 14

family pet routinely relieves itself. Once a particular patch of grass has worn down, the pet may move on to another spot. But if you quickly notice a dead spot due to urine damage, you can train the animal to urinate elsewhere, limiting the damage it causes. When repairing the grass, dig a hole that's roughly four inches deep and fill it with fresh soil until it's level with the soil surrounding the dead patch. Then you can sprinkle seed on top of the freshly laid soil and water the spot. Grass should grow in and stay green so long as you prevent further urine damage.

### Insect damage

Addressing dead spots caused by insect damage can be a little more complicated, and some homeowners may prefer to hire a professional. If you want to handle the problem on your own, apply pesticide to the affected areas so the insects behind the problem are killed. Once the insects are no more, cut the grass, raking the affected area to remove the dead



Identifying the source of the problem is the first step to addressing dead grass.

grass and any additional debris. Scatter grass seed over the affected areas and then apply an appropriate fertilizer and water immediately. Professionals may know just the right fertilizer for your lawn, so even if you want to go it alone, visit a local lawn care cen-

ter to ask for advice about addressing your particular problem.

### Fertilizer damage

Fertilizer damage can also prove difficult to address, as applying fresh seeds too soon can kill any freshly growing seedlings. So grass that has been

damaged by overfertilization must first be allowed to fully die. Once that has happened, the grass can be cut and any remaining debris or dead grass can be removed. Seed can then be scattered, and you can even add some additional soil before laying down

an appropriate amount of fertilizer and watering the lawn immediately. If you don't trust yourself to use fertilizer correctly, then hire a professional to do the job for you. This will cost a little more, but you likely won't wake up to more dead patches of grass

down the road.

Dead grass can be unsightly and turn an otherwise lush lawn into a patchy eyesore. But addressing dead grass can be easy and can quickly restore a lawn to its green grandeur.

# Cacti

From Page 14

post, and perlite or sand.

Here, out of the jungle, the plants look right at home in hanging baskets, from which their arching, flattened stems, scalloped along the edges, can swoop up and out as fountains of greenery.

In contrast to the night-blooming cactus, an epiphyllum species that is spectacular and fragrant the few nights that it blossoms, the

flattened, green stems of orchid cactus are nice to look at year round.

On some of my plants, the stems are so thin they droop languidly right over the edge of the pots from their own weight. My white-flowered epi, in contrast, has sturdy stems that reach out a couple of feet in all directions before succumbing to gravity.

### Give them a rest

In return for flowers,

which last for weeks but usually appear only once a year, my epies ask for regular watering, occasional fertilizer and, once a year, a rest. The one period when epies should not be watered is, conveniently, beginning in fall when they begin their annual rest. It's always iffy watering a hanging basket indoors, when a little too much water means scurrying for a bowl to catch the dripping.

To set flower buds, the plants also allegedly need

to experience the naturally long nights of autumn and winter, so they mustn't be interrupted by artificial light after dark. I used to put my plants in a bright window in a cool corner of my basement and forget about them until ready to bring them upstairs and let water and warmth bring on the flowers. I've since found that merely not watering them at all from the time they are brought indoors in autumn is sufficient to induce flower buds. Swelling flower buds

indicate that it's time to start watering again.

In summer, the plants

like being outdoors in filtered shade such as they might enjoy in their native haunts.



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## Improve your home and diet with a vegetable garden

Planting a garden can add aesthetic appeal and functionality to a property. Vegetable gardens can transform landscapes while putting healthy and home-grown food on the table. By growing their own fruits and vegetables, homeowners have total control over what foods can be harvested, and they can ensure sustainable, safe practices are used to care for the plants.

Vegetable gardens can be compact or expansive, depending on how much space is available to cultivate. However, first-time gardeners may want to begin small so they can hone their skills and experiment to see which plants are most likely to thrive in their gardens. Expansion is always a possibility down the road.

### Choose a location

Spend some time examining your landscape. Vegetables generally need ample warmth and sunlight to thrive, so find an area of the yard that gets several hours of direct sunlight per day.

A sunny spot is good, but you also want a location with adequate drainage so your garden does not succumb to flooding or fungus during and after

heavy downpours. Don't place the garden too close to rain gutters or near a pool, where splash-out may occur. Select a location that is isolated from pets so the plants are not trampled and cats and dogs do not relieve themselves nearby.

### Decide what to plant

When deciding what to plant, consider what you eat and how much produce the household consumes, then choose vegetables that fit with your diet. Some vegetables, like peppers, tomatoes, eggplant, and squash, produce throughout the season. Others, such as carrots and corn, produce one crop and then expire. Plan accordingly when you purchase plants or seeds, as you want enough food but not so much that it will go to waste.

Choose three to four different vegetables and plant them in the garden. Select varieties that require similar soil conditions, so that you can adjust the pH and mix of the soil accordingly. This will serve as good practice, particularly the first year of your garden. After you have mastered the basics, you can branch out into other

produce.

### Know when to plant

Many of the foods grown in vegetable gardens, including tomatoes and peppers, are summer vegetables, which means they reach peak ripeness after the height of the summer season. Pumpkins, brussel sprouts and peas are planted to be harvested later on. These plants may be put in the ground a little later than others.

It is less expensive to start seedlings indoors and then transplant them to a garden when the time comes.

## How to guarantee your garden starts off on right foot

Many gardeners can't wait to soak up the spring sun and get their hands dirty in the garden. Such excitement is not just good for gardeners, but can benefit the garden in the months to come as well.

Early spring is a great time to get a head start on the gardening season. The following projects can ensure your garden gets off on the right foot.

### Clear debris

One of the best things you can do for your garden as winter winds down is to clear it of debris. Winter can be especially harsh on a landscape, and gardens left to the elements are often filled with debris once spring arrives. Dead leaves, fallen branches, rocks that surfaced during the winter frost, and even garbage that might have blown about in winter winds can all pile up in a garden over a typical winter. Clearing such debris likely won't take long, but it's a great first step toward restoring the garden before the time comes to plant and grow the garden once again.

### Examine the soil

Soil plays a significant role in whether a garden thrives or struggles. Examining the soil before the season starts can help gardeners address any issues before they plant. Ignoring the soil until a problem arises

can turn the upcoming gardening season into a lost opportunity, so test the soil to determine if it has any nutrient or mineral deficiencies. This may require the help of a professional, but if a problem arises, you might be able to adjust the acidity or alkalinity of the soil and still enjoy a successful gardening season.

Another way to examine the soil is less complex but can shed light on when it would be a good time to get back to work. Reach into the soil and dig out a handful. If the soil quickly crumbles, you can start preparing for gardening seasoning. But if the soil is still clumped together, it needs more time to dry out before you can begin your prep work.

### Initiate edging

Edging is another task gardeners can begin as they get ready for the season. Edge plant and flower beds, but be sure to use a spade with a flat blade or an edger designed for flower beds. Such tools will cut deep enough so grass roots that may grow into the flower bed are severed. Depending on how large a garden is, edging can be a time-consuming task, so getting a head start allows homeowners to spend more time planting and tending to their gardens once the season hits full swing.

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