Life at HOME

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Pandemic market: COVID-19 triggers real estate boom

Homeowners know that the process of buying a home can be both exciting and nerve-wracking. The anxiety associated with buying a home has hit new heights during the outbreak of COVID-19. Historically low interest rates and limited inventory have made 2020 an especially unique time to buy a home. It’s also a competitive and potentially expensive time to buy a home.

While the economic consequences of COVID-19 have been severe, the Federal National Mortgage Association, also known as Fannie Mae, forecasted a significant increase in median home prices in March 2020. City dwellers have scrambled to buy homes outside of urban centers, where social distancing is more difficult and the risk of getting COVID-19 appears greater than it is in suburban or rural settings. That’s led to a lot of competition among prospective buyers.

Prospective homebuyers willing to enter the hectic fray and shop for a home during the coronavirus outbreak may benefit from knowing what to expect as they search. Get ready for virtual tours. Buyers might once have scoffed at the notion of buying a home they’d only seen in videos, but virtual tours have become the new normal in the wake of the pandemic. An April survey from the National Association of Realtors found that home tours had declined sharply. While 98% of Realtors reported taking clients on home tours as recently as February, that number had declined to 63% by April. As many regions pause their reopening plans, prospective homebuyers should ready themselves for virtual tours as opposed to in-person home tours. Expect limited inventory. While home prices are up, many people are holding onto their homes. The NAR reports that total housing inventory at the end of May 2020 was down nearly 19% from the end of May 2019. Buyers will have less inventory to choose from, so those intent on buying may need to prioritize what they need in a home and focus on finding properties that can fulfill those needs.

Expect to move quickly. Realtors have seen homes sell within days — even hours — of being listed, and that has put pressure on buyers to move quickly. It also highlights the importance of finding a home inspector who knows the pandemic. Ask around for recommendations, but make sure you have these two important professionals lined up before beginning your search. Doing so will give you a better chance of buying in an unusual time.

Make the best down payment you can afford. A high down payment makes buyers look better no matter the state of the economy. An offer with a high down payment looks like a stronger offer, and that can make the difference between winning and losing a potential bidding war.
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In recent years, brown anything in a living space was considered by some arbiters of decor as drab and outdated. But this fall, the hue is back in favor, in part because of the unsettled, anxious state of the world.

“Brown traditionally makes people feel comfortable and safe, and those are feelings that many of us are looking to our homes to provide.” interior designer Dawn Hamilton said. It’s just one of the trends in decor this season, when the pandemic has made home an even more essential space for living, working, studying and more. Also on the watch list: flexible rooms, indoor and out.

Cozy palette
Hamilton said today’s brown palette is being used in new ways, as a neutral in all kinds of materials, and as an accent color. “Brown feels very earthy and rich. It’s warm and inviting, and has the same grounding properties as black, although it’s not quite as harsh,” she said.

New York designer Becky Shea also cites brown’s organic versatility: “It’s a tone that works cohesively with neutrals, as well as dark, bold tones like navy, graphite and black.”

Eilyn Jimenez is adding a mocha brown vanity to the guest bathroom of a “minimalist, French chateau-style” home she’s designing. “It adds a layer of depth with a vintage feel,” she said.

Don’t overdo brown, but blend it with modern materials like marble for beautiful juxtapositions, she said. “Bringing it in with light woods, leathers and other natural materials can help make a space feel timeless,” Jimenez said.
Melissa Morgan of M Interiors thinks brown's rebirth is "a reaction to years of very light, tonal interiors. Clients are looking for warmth and sanctuary in their homes more than ever."

Lighter, yellowish browns, like caramel, often work well in leather.

"In upholstery, we consider saddle leather to be a form of brown that's like a trusty pair of blue jeans — it goes with everything," designer Brynn Olson said. Soft browns and caramels are also appearing in pillows, lamps and drapes. Canning is on trend, too, said Amy Leferink of Interior Impressions in Minnesota. As for furniture, Olson likes the effect of brown stains on walnut and white oak. A beautifully stained built-in is timeless, she said. "Natural walnut will always feel fresh, and we love to pair it with bright white decor, such as plaster vases, for a sophisticated pairing of textures," she said.

That brown-and-white combo has been a favorite of decorating icons, including Billy Baldwin, said New York City designer Glenn Gissler. Baldwin's apartment in Manhattan featured a mix of glossy brown walls, white and chartreuse furniture, and brass accents. Inspired, Gissler recently painted a New York loft in a deep, rich brown, with columns and ceilings in crisp white. A long, tuxedo-style sofa in milk chocolatey velvet anchors the space, along with tonal modern art. Colors like purples and blues, of any intensity, also complement brown.

**Comfort and flexibility**

"Home has always been a refuge for recharging and relaxing; it's going to become even more so," architect Jeffrey Dungan said. The ideal room now, he said, converts easily from family room to office, studio, guest room or self-quarantine space. Outdoor spaces, too, must be flexible. "Can we design outdoor spaces that still have privacy, which become oases to enjoy fresh air and sunlight without being in public?" Dungan said.

Some designers say that because of quarantining and the variety of uses expected from rooms, they're getting requests for more self-contained rooms. "We'll be saying goodbye to one of the main trends of recent years: open-plan spaces, with the entrance, living room, dining space and kitchen united," Ukrainian architect Sergey Makhno wrote recently in Dezeen magazine. He said some clients want a separate entrance area, where shoes, clothing and belongings can be separated from the main living areas.

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Tips to prepare for your next renovation project

The planning process is one of the most exciting parts of a home renovation project, and with social distancing maximizing time spent indoors, now is the time to dream big and get ready.

Whether it’s a basement makeover, a pool addition or even building a new house from scratch, here are some tips to get started.

**Factor in your lifestyle**

Think about your priorities and lifestyle. Do you work from home without a proper home office? Do you enjoy cooking and entertaining? Is your backyard living up to its potential as an extension of your home? Asking these kinds of questions can help you determine the most beneficial focus for your next project.

**Educate yourself**

Take advantage of this extra time you have to learn about materials, processes and new innovations. You can make smarter purchasing decisions by finding out the answers to key questions: Is this material mold resistant? How long will it last? Is this a passing fad, or will it stand the test of time?

**Consider sustainability**

Products and materials that reduce your carbon footprint don’t just help the planet — they’re often better for your wallet, too. When doing your research, look for energy-efficient appliances, windows, walls and more to build a greener home that will last longer and save you money in the long run.

**Disaster-proof your design**

The pandemic has taught us that sometimes the worst can happen. From natural disasters to fires and flooding, we need our homes to offer as much protection as possible. Whether you’re planning an extension to your home, pools and spas for your backyard, or a custom-built home, insulated concrete forms are a smart investment. An eco-friendly alternative to traditional materials like wood, ICFs are disaster resilient, designed to withstand wind, fire, tornadoes and more.

**Budget for smart splurges and savings**

Budgeting is one of the most important parts of the planning process, because you want to spend your hard-earned money wisely. You’ll want to splurge on items that will boost your property value, like energy-efficient features, creating more living space and a solid foundation. Upcycling and repurposing furniture, going the do-it-yourself route for simpler projects like painting, and spending more on nicer hardware but less on cabinets are clever ways to save.
Balancing ACT
Problem solving, patience put to the test as work life settles into the home

By Breanna Edelstein
STAFF WRITER

The concept of bringing work home has reached unprecedented levels amid the coronavirus pandemic.

When many businesses shuttered without exception in March as the region united to stop the spread of COVID-19, employers and their staffs were forced to examine the logistics of doing business from home.

More than six months later, the need to fit work and personal time into the same space has become a daily juggling act.

For estate planning attorney Sara Blais, the shift from her office to home early on in the pandemic meant welcoming clients to her driveway in Andover, where she introduced them through face masks to her husband, Travis Blais, and their nanny.

“We were super busy come COVID. Everyone wanted their affairs in order,” Blais said. “The problem came about with signing the documents. You needed two witnesses and a notary, in person.”

And so, her circular driveway became a drive-thru conference room.

“I’m a notary, and my husband and nanny would be the witnesses,” she said.

“Unconventional, but it’s what we had to do. Clients had never known where I lived before this.”

Attorneys Sara and Travis Blais, of Andover, look over some work in their home office as their five children go about their day. They enjoy working from home but admit it can sometimes be a challenge to get work done amid the regular routine of life.

They range in age from 7 to 15, were attending school remotely in the backdrop of the unconventional legal dealings; joined by a pet bearded dragon, two guinea pigs, two dogs, a hamster and a fish.

Blais’ husband, who is also an attorney, shifted his work life full time to their home, too.

“We were lucky in the sense that we had redone our home office a little over a year ago. We typically shared it on alternating days, but all of a sudden, we both needed it full time,” Blais said. “And the kids needed their own spaces to work in the house, too.”

Though the pandemic spared Blais the tension of rush-hour traffic to and from Boston and the need to shuttle kids to three different schools, new stressors emerged.

“Our days started to run together,” Blais said. “There was nothing to remind us to stop working.”

“Clients know you’re at home just like they are, and your laptop or phone is right there,” she said. “They want answers, regardless of what time it is. It’s more of an issue than ever. And there’s no shutting it off.”

On top of those family and work responsibilities, Blais is PTO president for Andover’s elementary and middle schools.

She does not foresee the 24/7 demands and need for innovative multitasking ending soon.

Neither does her neighbor Amy Whitehead, the director of donor relations at Phillips Academy in Andover, who describes a similar daily routine at her home.

“My job has gone electronic in ways I would never have expected,” said Whitehead, whose job largely centers on fundraising. “There’s no start and end time at this point. The boundaries have definitely come down, and I honestly don’t see it changing any time soon.”

Her husband, Michael Novaria, is working full time from home as an attorney, and their twin boys are just beginning fourth grade.

“I do a lot of reporting, letter writing, and all of the personal correspondence with donors comes from my office,” said Whitehead, who manages a two-person staff.

“As an employer, I’ve had to figure out not only how to do my job in this new way, but how to motivate my team and balance my family’s needs under the same roof,” Whitehead said.

She learned the best way to do that is to “have frequent check-ins” and “make sure the lines of communication are constantly open.”

“It’s really important to me as a manager to communicate that I understand the world and their home life is not normal,” she said. “I care about work getting done, but not even at a certain time of day. If you have to do school with your kids during the day, that’s fine if you need to work later.”

She acknowledged the strain that comes with such a nonstop schedule.

“There were days in the spring when both my husband and I were on Zoom calls, the kids were on Zoom calls, the were kids on Zoom calls,” she said. “Everyone just kept working and working. It’s been a lot of buying boosters for the Wi-Fi and finding places to set everything up comfortably in corners of the house.”

Blais described the bulk of 2020 as “having the rug pulled out from under everyone.”

“I’m typically a huge planner. I have to be. We live by this big calendar,” she said. “But I’ve kind of stepped back and said, ‘We’re going to have to take this day by day.’”

Travis and Sara Blais pose for a family photo with their five children, Xavier, 15; standing, left, and, seated, from left, Amelia Condon, 12; Julian, 7; Mallory, 9; and Reagan, 11, along with some of their pets.
Forget rooms with a view, rooms with a door in demand

BY MELISSA RAYWORTH
ASSOCIATED PRESS

Without warning this spring, millions of parents found themselves working from home while their kids attempted to do schoolwork under the same roof. The changes happened so quickly that families — especially those with small space — could only make the best of it with hastily arranged solutions.

More than six months later, many interior designers are helping clients make more considered decorating changes, big and small, to serve the whole family during the new school year.

Interior designer Everick Brown says a priority for his clients in the suburbs has been finding enough quiet space and privacy to effectively work, study and take zoom calls.

We all used to want a room with a view, Brown said. “Now everybody’s just searching for a room with a door,” he added.

He’s also focusing on health and wellness. A portable standing desk can easily be moved from room to room so family members can share it when one needs a break from sitting.

There are also desktop risers that turn any desk or even the kitchen table into a standing desk for part of the day.

For families with younger kids, interior designer Linda Kitson suggests finding a work table and chair scaled to a child’s size, just as elementary school would have. Properly sized seating lets kids sit with their feet on the floor, which may help them concentrate and stay on task.

If a low table and small chair aren’t available, try placing a stool or sturdy box under the table to create a solid resting place for little feet.

For adults, too, ergonomics matters: Be sure to use a desk or table and chair at the right height, so your feet can rest solidly on the floor and your back is supported.

Sometimes the answer is using a room in a completely new way.

Kitson has a client with two daughters who each had their own bedroom. They’ve now moved the two kids into one room — letting them choose a new paint color together to make the space feel like it belongs to both of them — and put desks in the other bedroom to create a shared classroom.

It’s a temporary shift that can easily be undone if normal schooling resumes soon. In the meantime, it allows both girls to spend their school day in a space with plenty of natural light and a view out a window, rather than tucked away in a basement playroom.

And even if an entire room can’t be repurposed, there are ways to give each family member a workspace that serves him or her. It doesn’t have to be large: “48 inches wide by 24 inches deep is about all you need to accommodate notes and a pencil, and your laptop or iPad, and then a desk light,” Brown said.

“What we’re really looking at is basically a 4-foot-by-4-foot space,” he said.

Some families might find that working near one another, rather than in separate rooms, is better — especially those with young kids who may need some assistance with technology during the day.

A lot of times when kids are left to their own devices or in their own room, they get distracted really easily,” interior designer Jenny Dina Kirschner said. “So sometimes it is nice to have that communal working space.”

For one client, Kirschner carved out an open workspace within a living room by placing a desk along the back of the sofa. With ample shelving and closed storage along the wall behind the desk, this section of the living room becomes a micro-office that blends with the decor of the rest of the room.

While kitchen tables can be practical workspaces, there can be a downside to this solution.

“When it becomes something of a command center, then they need to pick up and move that stuff every day. And you’re sitting with somebody else’s work staring at you, and they might be thinking, ‘Oh, I need to go back to work after dinner’,” Kitson said.

Managing that work/life balance is just as important as managing space, she said. “We don’t just need to work and study at home this year, she said. We need to have fun, too.”

Interior designer Terri Fiori said that allowing a child to choose beautiful but calming colors for their bedroom can help create a workspace the student is excited about.

“If your home has a window seat, she said, you can let kids spend part of the day studying there (or use it yourself). A view of the outdoors can help focus and boost everyone’s mood.

Kitson even helped one client create an obstacle course that their two young boys can use for fun, physical breaks from their school day.

For daily exercise, Kitson said, and hopefully return to their desks ready to focus on another hour of school, while their parents are working.

Interior designer Everick Brown says as families carve out space for handling school and work from home, it’s valuable to factor in plenty of natural light and an appealing backdrop beyond the computer screen for occasional breaks, as seen in this home workspace he created in Harrison, New York.

JONATHAN BISHOP/Everick Brown Design via AP

Interior designer Everick Brown says as families carve out space for handling school and work from home, it’s valuable to factor in plenty of natural light and an appealing backdrop beyond the computer screen for occasional breaks, as seen in this home workspace he created in Harrison, New York.
Take it outside to give an extra boost to home values

Renovating a home to improve its value can be a smart investment. Interior improvements, such as upgrading 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 LawnStarter, 71% of prospective homebuyers 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.

**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 homebuyers 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 in a striking color to add appeal. Remodeling magazine’s “Cost vs. Value Report 2020” indicates that changing an entry door to a steel replacement can offer a 69% return on investment. 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. Use 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 face-lift. Neutral, warm and inviting colors tend to have the widest appeal. Adding manufactured stone veneer to a home can offer a 95.6% return on investment, according to Remodeling magazine. And after doing the front door and siding, investing in a new garage door offers the second highest return on investment of all exterior projects listed on the “Cost vs. Value Report 2020.” This improvement returns 94.5% when selling.

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Kitchens and bathrooms remain among the top picks for homeowners looking to upgrade because their functional contributions to the household can’t be overstated and they typically provide high return on investment. If you’re weighing a renovation project for either in-demand space, consider some of these on-trend ideas from Doug King, president of the National Association of the Remodeling Industry.

**KITCHENS**

- **Bigger functional spaces:** Not only do many kitchen renovations result in added square footage, they also add practical features to make living and entertaining more comfortable and enjoyable. When it comes to physical space, a popular choice is removing or relocating walls to make the room larger. This extra space can be instrumental in adding an island or peninsula for bar seating, which many homeowners view as a necessity when it comes to entertaining. Other features like icemakers, tall wine refrigerators and walk-in pantries are high on the frequent request list. Another growing trend is a kitchen designed for two, complete with a second full-size sink, dishwasher and microwave drawer, along with a larger island.

- **Clever storage:** Making the most of storage space has always been a top desire, and homeowners are getting increasingly clever about how to maximize their cabinetry. Drawer organizers are in high demand, along with pull-out waste baskets that hide recycling bins within. Another popular approach is large base cabinets with pivoting shelving mechanisms for storing large items like mixers and other taller countertop appliances. Making use of every inch of space is common; even the toe-kick area for drawers is proving useful to hold smaller items or put kid-friendly essentials in easy reach.

- **Feature-rich appliances:** Appliance manufacturers are adding all kinds of bells and whistles, and those features are increasingly attractive to homeowners. Upper-end appliances are becoming more mainstream as homeowners discover features that the more expensive models offer for ease of use and comfort. Larger freezer and column-style refrigerators are especially growing in popularity.

**BATHS**

- **Spa-like setting:** One long-term trend that is still in top demand for the master bath is design that mimics a serene spa. This plays out in cooler colors like white, blues and grays. Glass tiles are taking on a bigger role, with many homeowners using them as artistic focal points in showers or opting for pebble-like tiles that spill from walls onto the floor.

- **Upscale practicality:** Little touches that may have once gone unnoticed are now trending as opportunities to add elements of style. For example, curbless showers with offset lineal drains are preferred to traditional centered circular versions. Similarly, homeowners are upping the ante with lighting, such as fixtures integrated with fans and mirrors and even below floating vanities for ambient light at night. One more place you might find lighting: on the bidet, which is also an increasingly hot addition in the master bath.

- **A splash of tech:** Whether it’s used to control smart features or simply add entertainment like TV or soothing music, technology has a permanent place on the list of bathroom trends. The available features make it easy to orchestrate a full escape from the daily grind of life.

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TOWN HIGHLIGHTS

ANDOVER
- Incorporated: 1646
- Website: andoverma.gov
- Population: 36,356 (2019, est.)
- Median household income: $148,125 (2018)
- Median value owner-occupied home/condo: $608,400 (2018)
- Tax rate: $15.01, residential and open space; $27.14, commercial/industrial and personal property (fiscal year 2020)
- Town offices: 36 Bartlet St., 978-623-8200
- Police Department: 32 N. Main St., 978-475-0411
- Fire Department: 32 N. Main St., 978-475-1281
- Department of Public Works: 978-623-8700
- Youth Services: Cormier Youth Center, 40 Whittier Court, 978-623-8241
- Elder Services: Senior Center, 30 Whittier Court, 978-623-8320
- School Department: 978-247-7000
- Library: Memorial Hall Library, 2 N. Main St., 978-623-8400

HAVERHILL
- Incorporated: 1870
- Website: ci.haverhill.ma.us
- Population: 64,014 (2019, est.)
- Median household income: $67,579 (2018)
- Tax rate: $13.60, residential; $24,58, commercial (fiscal year 2020)
- City Hall: 4 Summer St., 978-374-2300
- Police Department: 40 Bailey Blvd., 978-373-1212
- Fire Department: 4 Summer St., 978-373-8460
- Department of Public Works: 978-374-2360
- Youth Services: Citizens Center, 10 Welcome St., 978-374-2388
- Elder Services: Citizens Center, 10 Welcome St., 978-374-2390
- School Department: 978-374-3400
- Library: Haverhill Public Library, 99 Main St., 978-373-1586

LAWRENCE
- Incorporated: 1847
- Website: cityoflawrence.com
- Population: 80,028 (2019, est.)
- Tax rate: $12.43, residential; $26.80, commercial/industrial/personal property (fiscal year 2020)
- City Hall: 200 Common St., 978-620-3000
- Police Department: 90 Lowell St., 978-794-5900
- Fire Department: 65 Lowell St., 978-620-3400
- Department of Public Works: 978-620-3090
- Youth Services: Recreation, 200 Common St., 978-620-3252
- Elder Services: Senior Center, 135 Haverhill St., 978-620-3540
- School Department: 978-975-5905
- Libraries: Lawrence Public Library, Main Library, 51 Lawrence St., 978-620-3600; South Branch, 155 Parker St., 978-620-3650

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TOWN HIGHLIGHTS

METHUEN
- Incorporated: 1725
- Website: cityofmethuen.net
- Population: 50,706 (2019, est.)
- Median household income: $74,912 (2018)
- Median value owner-occupied home/condo: $324,300 (2018)
- Tax rate: $13.44, residential; $26.59, commercial (fiscal year 2020)
- City Hall: Searsors Building, 41 Pleasant St., 978-983-8565
- Police Department: 90 Hampshire St., 978-983-8698
- Fire Department: 24 Lowell St., 978-983-8940
- Department of Public Works: 978-983-8545
- Youth Services: Recreation, 41 Pleasant St., 978-983-8590
- Elder Services: Senior Center, 77 Lowell St., 978-983-8825
- School Department: 978-722-6000
- Library: Nevins Memorial Library, 305 Broadway, 978-686-4080

NORTH ANDOVER
- Incorporated: 1855
- Website: northandoverma.gov
- Population: 31,188 (2019, est.)
- Median value owner-occupied home/condo: $484,500 (2018)
- Tax rate: $13.74, residential; $18.53, commercial (fiscal year 2020)
- Town Hall: 120 Main St., 978-688-9501
- Police Department: 1475 Osgood St., 978-683-3168
- Fire Department: 785 Chickerling Road, 978-688-9590
- Department of Public Works: 978-685-0950
- Youth Services: Joseph N. Hermann Youth Center, 33 Johnson St., 978-682-9000
- Elder Services: Senior Center, 120R Main St., 978-688-9560
- School Department: 978-794-1503
- Library: Stevens Memorial Library, 345 Main St., 978-688-9505

SALEM, N.H.
- Incorporated: 1750
- Website: townsalemnh.org
- Median household income: $83,343 (2018)
- Median value owner-occupied home/condo: $310,200 (2018)
- Town Hall: 33 Geremonty Drive, 603-890-2000
- Police Department: 9 Veterans Memorial Parkway, 603-893-7040
- Fire Department: 152 Main St., 603-890-2200
- Department of Public Works: 603-890-2150
- Youth Services: Recreation, 1 Sally Sweet’s Way, 603-890-2140
- Elder Services: Senior Center, 1 Sally Sweet’s Way, 603-890-2190
- School Department: 603-893-7040
- Library: Kelley Library, 254 Main St., 603-898-7064

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Saturday 3 p.m.-10 p.m.
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Gardens provide an idyllic escape from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. In fact, many gardening enthusiasts typically cannot wait for the spring thaw so they can spend the next several months tending to their plants under the warm sun. But a gardener’s work is never truly done, and the work to make gardens stun in the spring actually begins during the preceding fall.

Preparing gardens for winter is an important step that can help homeowners ensure their gardens return to full strength in the spring. The tasks necessary to prepare gardens for winter may depend on what homeowners are planting, but the following are some general maintenance suggestions that can keep gardens safe.

**Remove weeds and debris**

Weeds and debris are unsightly and detrimental to plant life in spring, but they also can be harmful in the winter. Weeds and debris left to linger in gardens through the winter provide overwintering spots for insects and can contribute to disease. So it’s imperative that weeds and debris are removed before the ground hardens in winter. Don’t wait until the ground hardens, as that can make it hard to remove the roots of weeds, adversely affecting the garden as a result.

**Prepare the soil**

The Farmers’ Almanac advises homeowners to gently till the soil in their gardens so they can expose any insects before they settle in for the winter. Once garden soil is exposed, add a layer of compost, leaves, aged manure and, if necessary, lime, gently tilling it into the soil. According to the North Carolina Cooperative Extension, the only accurate way to determine if lawn or garden soil needs lime is to test it. Lime makes soil less acidic and reduces soil pH. Low soil pH makes it hard for certain plants to grow, but acidic soil is ideal when growing blueberries. Test the soil for lime and amend it depending on what you hope to grow in the spring so it’s ready to thrive when winter ends.

**Remove dead or diseased plants**

Dead or diseased plants should not be left in the garden through the winter. These plants can attract insects and are vulnerable to disease, which can make it hard for the garden to thrive in the spring.

**Protect fruit trees**

If you have fruit trees, install mouse guards around the base to prevent mice and voles from killing the trees over the winter. If left to their own devices over the winter, mice and voles may eat the bark of fruit trees, killing the trees as a result. The Farmers’ Almanac notes that mouse guards made of fine mesh hardware cloth can effectively protect fruit trees from hungry mice and voles.
Do your homework when selecting a contractor

Outside of the home itself, remodeling is typically one of the largest investments you can make as a homeowner. While some projects can be tempting to tackle yourself, many larger-scale projects may require hiring a qualified professional. Because remodeling your home is a big undertaking, it’s important to take steps to ensure the professional you hire to perform the work is qualified to complete it to the highest standards of quality and integrity.

Consider these tips from the experts at the National Association of the Remodeling Industry to help you make an informed decision when hiring a remodeling contractor.

Get recommendations

One of the best ways to find qualified, professional help is through word-of-mouth referrals. Ask your relatives, friends, neighbors or co-workers — particularly if they’ve recently renovated their own homes — if they have any previous experience with companies they would recommend. Also, consider searching online for reviews of companies in your area.

Stay local

It’s often best to consider established local remodeling companies first, as they are typically more compelled to perform high-quality work, which allows their businesses to thrive and remain in the community. Local professionals are also likely to know permit requirements and building codes in your community, which can change from year to year.

Follow your design aesthetic

Whether your home features a midcentury modern, contemporary or farmhouse design style, it’s critical to choose a remodeler who is knowledgeable in the construction and design of the style of your home. Additionally, a company that specializes in remodeling kitchens may not be suited for a bathroom or bedroom project.

Ask to see licenses and insurance proof

Many states, but not all, require contractors to be licensed, bonded and insured. Ask for copies of licenses and insurance certificates for any remodelers you’re considering to make sure they’re current. Most states also require contractors to carry workers’ compensation, property damage and personal liability insurance for their crews. Contact your local licensing agencies to ensure the contractor meets the minimum requirements.

Check references

Once you’ve narrowed your list of potential contractors, ask for a list of references you can contact and a portfolio of work. A typical reference list includes 10 or more jobs with dates, as well as the customers’ names, addresses and phone numbers, and a portfolio should also contain at least 10 projects with photos of the space before work began, during the project and after completion. If possible, also consider visiting a current job site to see firsthand how the contractor operates.

Search for complaints

Because you can’t always rely on a portfolio or references, it’s important to also check with your local consumer affairs office or the Better Business Bureau to ensure there are no complaints on record for the contractors you’re considering, which may help further narrow your list.

Compare apples to apples

While every remodeling project involves a number of different factors, be sure all contractors you solicit bids from are using the same scope and quality of work requirements. Discuss any significant variations in price or timelines, and be wary of any substantially lower estimates.

— Family Features
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