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SMART HOME LIVING

Today's smart homes feature a range of devices that communicate with one another, forming an integrated system to improve our daily lives.

These interconnected devices may include household appliances, climate control units, various security features, lighting systems, window coverings, radios and televisions, among other things. But how do they work?

SMART THERMOSTATS

Smart thermostats have become a widely embraced upgrade and they make for a relatively easy transition into the world of home automation. These devices integrate with apps on your smartphone or digital in-home assistants, allowing you to adjust temperatures on command. Smart thermostats can be programmed to turn on and off at certain times and can even learn your habits so they optimize climate control settings based on your lifestyle.

APPLIANCES

Upgrading to smart appliances is the next logical step. Higher-end versions of ranges and refrigerators come equipped with Wi-Fi connectivity, which allows for remote monitoring and control. Many of these smart appliances incorporate touch screens to change settings, cameras that enable their owners to check inside or access the ice level in a freezer. There are range hoods these days that function as a central communication hub within the home, incorporating

integrated touchscreens for managing other smart devices or inputting things like favorite family recipes. Plus, there's no more worrying whether you left the stove on when you can turn it off remotely from your phone.

LIGHTING

Automated lighting can be very useful for those who frequently travel, creating a form of theft prevention since your home will appear to be occupied. These systems can turn on lights remotely before you arrive. Some systems let you control the brightness or color of your lights using voice commands. Other lighting systems connect a range of products beyond the average bulbs.

INTEGRATING EVERYTHING

For a smart home to operate efficiently, a central system is required to manage connected devices. This may be achieved by adding various digital personal assistants, such as Amazon's Alexa or Google Home. Some home security or cable systems have their own individual integration capabilities. Once you've selected a platform, identify devices in your home that are compatible with the system. If you've chosen a digital assistant, appliances can be voice-activated. Once connected, you can give commands like temperature adjustments or turning lights on or off from anywhere in the room.

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SAVE MONEY and the Earth

There are plenty of home improvement options that are both budget and earth friendly.

You can do both by purchasing next-generation options like LED lighting and specially formulated paints. But sometimes saving the planet involves simpler things, like cultivating green space and recycling. It can all work hand-in-hand to lower your bills while protecting the environment for future generations.

EFFICIENT LIGHTING

Switching to LED lights can significantly reduce energy consumption, since they use up to 90 percent less power than traditional incandescent bulbs. Simply replace the old standard bulbs with LEDs as they burn out, and you'll be making an easy yet impactful upgrade. Studies show that lighting your home with LED bulbs can lead to annual savings of about \$225 on your energy bill.

SPECIALIZED PAINTS

Whether you're painting an accent wall or redoing much larger spaces, choose paints with low amounts of volatile organic compounds. These are chemicals present in many paints and other products that are released into the air as unwanted gases. Exposure to higher VOC paints can lead to immediate and long-term health concerns.

SOLAR OPTIONS

Over the past decade or so, the price

of solar panels has declined by more than 70 percent. Installed panels can power your entire home or just specific areas that demand higher energy consumption, such as the HVAC system and water heaters. Solar attic fans effectively expel heat trapped above the ceiling, lowering your bills while extending the life of roofing and insulation.

REUSE AND RECYCLE

Consider repurposing or using reclaimed materials in your home improvement projects. Whatever the material, it just has to be structurally sound and readily available in the necessary quantities. Not sure where to get started? Check out online platforms such as Facebook Marketplace, Craigslist or Freecycle. Your community might have thrift options or recycle stores.

GREEN SPACE

Enhance the beauty of your home and reduce grocery expenses by establishing a home garden. They help prevent erosion and contribute to soil fertility. When choosing outdoor plants, look for options that are friendly to pollinators and will thrive with the local ecosystem. Apartment or condo dwellers can create container gardens for salad items or herbs. Select indoor plants that act as natural air purifiers, and they'll improve the quality of air in your home.

TACKLING a Home Addition

With higher interest rates and ballooning costs for construction materials, it may be smarter to add on to a house rather than build or buy a new one.

Do you have a large yard? Consider building a new stand-alone apartment. This space can serve as an office or rec room, accommodate guests and older children, or even create a new income stream by welcoming renters. Here's how to maximize the potential of your property:

SECONDARY DWELLINGS

Secondary dwellings or accessory apartments are also referred to colloquially as an in-law suite. They work as a self-sufficient living area within an existing single-family residence. These spaces have a separate entrance, and typically feature a living space, kitchenette, bedroom and bathroom. They may be stand-alone structures, converted space over a garage or built out within a basement.

RENTAL INCOME

Adding an accessory apartment can be a smart financial decision. By leasing the secondary dwelling, either for overnight stays or through longer-term leases, homeowners can generate extra income that may assist with mortgage payments. They can serve as a valuable financial resource for those who want to offset maintenance

expenses or property taxes. Using platforms like Airbnb and VRBO, it's never been easier to rent out these spaces.

HOME OFFICES

In the post-pandemic workplace, we've seen a marked increase in remote and flexible work schedules. But trying to get things done in a hectic home environment can be a challenge. Accessory apartments provide a dedicated area for a new home office or studio that's both spacious and private. Having a separate workspace can boost productivity.

RULES AND REGULATIONS

Don't jump right into construction. Before you start, consult local zoning regulations and building codes. Cities, counties and some neighborhood associations have their own legal requirements, permitting processes and building guidelines for secondary dwellings. Make sure you're in compliance with fire codes, safety standards and parking requirements, as well. The best way to make sure is to hire professional architects and contractors. Talk to officials at your local planning departments to find out more.



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A kitchen in the process of being renovated. White upper and lower cabinets are visible, with the countertop area currently being a wooden frame. Large windows on the left side provide natural light. The overall atmosphere is bright and airy.

UPGRADING YOUR OLD KITCHEN

© ADOBE STOCK

Renovating your kitchen within a budget isn't easy. It takes effective planning and a focus on enhancements that offer the biggest bang for the buck.

Here's how to transform your kitchen into a functional and stylish space without breaking the bank:

PAINT

One of the most cost-effective ways to rejuvenate a kitchen is to simply apply a fresh coat of paint. If you're only painting the walls, select a color that complements your kitchen's appliances, flooring and cabinetry. If you want a bigger wow factor, paint the walls, cabinets and ceiling to transform everything. You'll be bringing the space back to life, while making everything appear brighter, welcoming and more spacious.

CABINETS

A bit larger project might involve refreshing the kitchen by updating your cabinets. Invest in new cabinetry, or consider refinishing or repainting the existing units for a more budget-friendly transformation. Again, select complementary colors or finishes based on the kitchen's overall style. Replacing cabinet hardware with modern knobs or handles can work as a low-cost but impactful upgrade.

BACKSPLASH

Consider upgrading the backsplash. It's a small but meaningful change. Be on the lookout for affordable and visually appealing materials such as peel-and-stick options. Subway tile is a timeless option. You'll find

materials in a variety of colors and patterns, making it easy to customize the space to your taste. Soon, you'll have a new focal point that will add to the kitchen's overall ambiance.

FAUCETS

Replacing an outdated faucet can introduce a modern touch and improve functionality. There are plenty of budget-friendly options, many of which also have handy pullout sprayers. Or upgrade to touchless for added convenience.

LIGHTING

Upgrading the lighting fixtures in your kitchen can transform its atmosphere. Swap out old bulbs for energy-efficient LED, pendant lights, or track lighting.

Focus on task lighting in work areas, while adding ambient lighting elsewhere to foster a warm and inviting environment.

You'll end up with a kitchen with better overall feel and functionality.

OTHER IDEAS

Elevate the aesthetic appeal of your kitchen by integrating a few stylish accents. Replace outdated curtains or blinds with new options that introduce a splash of color or texture. Consider investing in attractive yet budget-friendly kitchen accessories, such as decorative jars, colorful dishware or a statement rug. These small changes can infuse everything with character and excitement.



DECORATING WITH FALL ELEMENTS

Fall is the perfect time to bring the beauty of nature indoors.

Pinecones, acorns, colorful branches and dried flowers offer endless inspiration for cozy, eco-friendly decor. Using natural elements celebrates the season's textures and colors and creates warm, welcoming spaces without relying on store-bought decorations.

BRINGING THE OUTDOORS IN

One of the simplest ways to start decorating with natural elements is by taking a walk. Parks, trails and even backyards are full of seasonal treasures during autumn. Look for vibrant maple leaves, sturdy pinecones, seed pods, ornamental grasses and interesting branches.

Be sure to collect responsibly. Only take what has already fallen and avoid gathering from protected areas or private property without permission. Shake or brush off debris before bringing items inside to avoid bringing in unwanted pests.

Natural materials can be used alone for a minimalist look or combined with other decor pieces for added effect.

IDEAS FOR ECO-FRIENDLY FALL DECOR

- Pinecones: Arrange pinecones in clear glass vases, bowls or wooden trays. Add a few small candles for a rustic centerpiece. Pinecones can be used to create wreaths, garlands or place card holders for fall gatherings.

- Acorns: Fill decorative jars or scatter acorns along a mantel for a subtle autumn touch. Acorns can

be painted gold, copper or white for a more refined look while still staying true to their natural roots.

- Branches: Tall, colorful branches placed in large vases make striking entryway pieces. Birch, dogwood or maple branches with vivid leaves add height and drama to any room. Bare branches can be strung with tiny lights for a cozy glow.

- Dried flowers: Harvest late-summer blooms like hydrangeas, lavender or sunflowers and dry them for long-lasting arrangements. Dried grasses and seed heads, such as pampas grass or coneflowers, lend an earthy elegance to fall decor.

Mixing and matching natural elements can create dynamic displays that change throughout the season. Add fresh finds as you discover them or swap out arrangements to reflect shifting colors outdoors.

SUSTAINABLE AND STYLISH

Decorating with nature's bounty is beautiful and sustainable. It reduces waste, minimizes reliance on synthetic materials and often costs little to nothing. At the end of the season, many natural items can be composted or reused for winter projects.

Natural fall decorations bring authenticity and charm to homes, creating spaces that feel both festive and grounded. With just a few simple finds and a little creativity, it is easy to celebrate the season's beauty indoors.

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SQUIRREL-PROOF YOUR GARDEN

Squirrels may be charming with their acrobatic leaps and fluffy tails, but they can quickly become a backyard nuisance once fall arrives.

Newly planted bulbs, ripening produce and festive outdoor decorations are all at risk from these energetic visitors. Fortunately, a few simple strategies can help keep fall gardens and displays safe without harming local wildlife.

MAKE YOUR GARDEN LESS INVITING

The first step to squirrel-proofing a garden is removing easy temptations. Pick up fallen fruit, nuts and seeds regularly. Use closed containers for compost and secure trash can lids. Feeding birds can draw in squirrels, so consider using squirrel-proof bird feeders or offering seed blends less attractive to them, such as safflower.

Mulching fall plantings can be another useful tactic. A thick layer of mulch protects bulbs from winter freezes and masks their scent, making them less tempting to squirrels on the hunt for easy meals.

PROTECT PLANTINGS AND DECOR

Physical barriers are one of the most effective ways to prevent squirrel damage. Covering newly planted bulbs with wire mesh, such as chicken wire, keeps squirrels from digging them up while still allowing plants to grow through. Simply lay the mesh over the planting area, stake it down and cover it with a thin layer of soil or mulch.

For garden beds, raised containers with protective netting can be a smart alternative, especially for tender young plants. When it comes to outdoor fall decor, anchoring pumpkins and decorative items securely can discourage curious squirrels from nibbling or carrying them off.

Repellents offer another layer of defense. Many gardeners have success with commercial squirrel repellents that use natural ingredients like capsaicin. These sprays can be applied around gardens and on outdoor decorations but may need reapplication after rain.

ENCOURAGE NATURAL DETERRENTS

Nature can lend a helping hand in the battle against squirrels. Motion-activated sprinklers and ultrasonic repellents can startle intruders without causing harm. Some homeowners report success using garden statues of natural predators, such as owls or hawks, to keep squirrels wary and away.

Plant selection can play a role too. Squirrels tend to avoid daffodils, hyacinths and alliums, making them ideal choices for fall bulb plantings. Incorporating these into garden designs can help protect more vulnerable plants nearby.

With a few adjustments, it is possible to enjoy a thriving fall garden and festive outdoor displays without sharing everything with the local squirrel population. A little prevention now can save a lot of frustration later in the season.

Create a

BATHROOM OASIS

Bathrooms can very easily be transformed into a spa-inspired sanctuary.

After a long day at work, imagine the sense of tranquility you'd find after making strategic bathroom upgrades. With the right materials and accessories, you can make it happen. Some may opt for small renovations while others go for a complete remodel. Either way, a lifetime of relaxation awaits.

NEW COLORS

Select a calming color palette that gives you a sense of serenity and relaxation. That usually means soft, muted shades, with many choosing some form of blue, green or earthy colors. Mix and match them on tiles, walls and accessories to establish a unified feel reminiscent of a spa. Integrate natural elements that stand out against hard surfaces like wooden or bamboo accessories to complete the look.

LIGHTING

Establishing a soothing ambiance begins with lighting. Choose soft, warm light that replicates the gentle illumination of candlelight. Implementing dimmer switches allows you to manage brightness levels, creating a tranquil environment. Consider integrating recessed lighting around the ceiling's perimeter for an ethereal effect. Highlighting essential areas, such as the vanity or bathtub, with subtle lighting fixtures can enhance the overall spa-like

atmosphere. Scented candles can serve a dual purpose, providing both soft light and aromatherapy.

BATHTUBS

Elevate the space with a free-standing bathtub that encourages relaxation. Deep soaking tubs allow for complete immersion, and that's a perfect setting for unwinding.

Consider models with built-in jets to create a massage-like experience. Scented candles, plush towels and luxurious bath salts can add to the serene atmosphere. Consider adding a rain showerhead instead of the same old standard fare.

BATHROOM STORAGE

It's not the sexiest part of this remake, but storing away brushes, toiletries, hair dryers and charging devices will greatly improve the room's general ambiance.

Consider installing electrical outlets inside of cabinets for a more clutter-free experience.

FINISHING TOUCHES

Heated flooring and towel warmers can guard against the chilly days to come. Consider soothing elements like aromatherapy with scented candles or essential oil diffusers for an elevated sensory experience. Plush bathrobes and towels add another layer of luxury. Plants or small water features add a nice finishing touch.



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PROTECT YOUR HOME from Storms

Fall weather can be unpredictable, and thunderstorms are often part of the season's changing patterns.

Preparing your home now can help minimize potential damage and give you peace of mind when the next big storm rolls in.

CHECK YOUR DRAINAGE

One of the first steps in storm preparation is ensuring water can flow safely away from your home. Clean out gutters and downspouts to remove leaves, twigs and other debris that can block water and cause overflows. Clogged gutters can lead to roof leaks and foundation issues.

Check that downspouts are extended several feet away from your home's foundation. If pooling water is an issue, consider grading the soil around your home or adding splash blocks and extensions.

Inspect basement window wells and outdoor drains to make sure they are clear and ready to handle heavy rains. Proper drainage is one of the best defenses against water damage.

SECURE OUTDOOR ITEMS

Outdoor furniture, grills, garden tools and decorations can become dangerous projectiles in high winds. Before a storm hits, secure loose items by bringing them indoors, storing them in a shed or anchoring them securely.

Patio umbrellas should be closed and secured, and lightweight furniture can be tied down or moved to a protected area. Take a walk around your

yard before a storm is forecast to spot anything that could blow away or cause damage.

TRIM TREES AND SHRUBS

Trees and large shrubs add beauty and shade to a property, but they can also pose a risk during fall storms. Strong winds and saturated ground can cause weakened branches to break or trees to topple.

Inspect trees around your home for dead or overhanging branches. Hiring a certified arborist to remove dangerous limbs or assess tree health is a worthwhile investment. Keeping trees properly trimmed helps reduce the chances of roof damage, broken windows or power outages during storms.

PROTECT WINDOWS AND DOORS

While full storm shutters are rarely necessary outside hurricane zones, it is smart to check the seals and weatherstripping around your windows and doors. Repair any cracks or gaps that could let in water and wind.

For extra protection, keep sheets of plywood on hand if you live in an area prone to high winds. Even temporary coverings can help protect vulnerable windows during an unexpected severe storm.

Taking a little time to prepare can help ensure your home weathers the season's thunderstorms safely. With a few proactive steps, you can reduce damage risks and enjoy the beauty of fall without worry.



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GETTING READY FOR WINTER

As the seasons change, your car and truck care needs to too. Now is the time to prepare vehicles for the rugged winter months.

Comprehensive winterizing doesn't just ensure that your car or truck is ready for the everyday challenges associated with cold weather. You're also putting the safety of your family and yourself first.

CHECK THE TIRES

Your tires need to be ready for any conditions your vehicle may face, based on the climate where you live. Some winters are defined by rain, while others see heavy snowfall. In either case, your tires will need good treading to stay gripped to the road. A simple way to gauge tread depth is the penny test: With the head side of a penny facing you, insert the body of President Abraham Lincoln into the tread. If the top of his head can be seen, your tires are in good condition. If you can see Lincoln's entire head, however, your tires need replacing.

If you live in an area that frequently experiences severe winter weather, consider switching from regular all-season tires to winter or snow tires before difficult driving conditions set in.

WINDSHIELD AND WIPERS

Inspect the windshield for any cracks or chips that may develop into larger issues,

particularly in cold weather, since they can dangerously impair visibility. Hire a professional to make these repairs. Depending on your insurance coverage, their service call could be at no cost. If you deal with heavy ice and snow, consider transitioning to a winter-grade windshield wiper fluid that resists freezing. There are specially designed wiper blades that stand up better to winter conditions.

ESSENTIAL FLUIDS

Make sure your antifreeze and coolant levels are adequate to protect the engine. Check this during your next oil change. You may need to switch to an oil with higher viscosity for winter conditions specific to your region.

EXTRA SUPPLIES

Expand your standard, comprehensive roadside emergency kit with a winter-ready kit that includes a selection of essential items that address this season's unique demands. This may include snow and ice removal tools, traction aids like cat litter or sand, a tire pressure gauge and cold weather survival gear. The emergency kit should contain jumper cables, a first aid kit, a flashlight, basic tools, a cell phone charger, non-perishable snacks and water.

TIME TO DECLUTTER

Busy summers can lead to the accumulation of a lot of things in our vehicles.

Take advantage of the changing seasons to clear out the clutter, while making sure you have all the necessary documents and equipment in place so you're well prepared for a winter journey.

GLOVE COMPARTMENT

It can be tempting to use your vehicle's glove compartment as a temporary storage space for napkins, snacks, pens and pencils, receipts or wrappers because of its convenient location. Instead, optimize this space for more important items by tossing out unneeded items. Make sure you have all needed documents and they're up-to-date, including the car's registration and proof of insurance. They include details that need to be readily available in situations involving accidents or interactions with law enforcement.

Other helpful items can include relevant medical documentation,



with information regarding allergies and any required medications for yourself, other drivers or regular passengers. Having this handy could prove invaluable in the event of an accident where you are unable to communicate. If there's room, keep your owner's manual in the glove compartment, as well. (If not, store it away in the trunk.)

This book is essential to sorting out the problem if dashboard lights are activated. The manual will explain the appropriate steps to take. It also serves as a valuable resource for tracking your vehicle's maintenance schedule.

TRUNK

Note that many manufacturers

of contemporary vehicles no longer provide a spare tire or the tools necessary for repairs. Some used vehicles have lost these key items along the way, as well. If needed, invest in your own spare tire to ensure you are prepared for any roadside emergencies. A full-sized tire is preferable, when possible, since it does not have the speed limitations associated with smaller donuts. Keep safe extra fluids on hand, including brake fluid and pre-mixed antifreeze, in case your vehicle requires maintenance while you are away from home.

INSIDE

Don't forget the cabin of your car or truck. Consider hiring a professional detailing service to vacuum the carpets and polish all interior surfaces. Many modern cleaning products are specially designed to help protect the interior from regular wear-and-tear as well as damage from the sun.

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WHEN IT'S ICY

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There's an undeniable wonder at the sight of snow and ice. That is, until you're dealing with it out on the road.

When you're behind the wheel, these wintry conditions present significant challenges. Even the most seasoned drivers can be caught off guard, potentially resulting in expensive crashes, serious injuries or even death. That's why it's so important to prepare for winter and adjust your driving.

DRIVING DIFFERENTLY

Whenever possible, experts always advise people to remain at home during inclement weather – and that includes drivers with extensive experience in winter conditions. Others out on the road may not have the same level of expertise, and unexpected situations can always arise. If staying home is an option, do so to minimize risks.

For those who must venture out, begin by reducing your speed. Adjust your driving technique to accommodate the decreased traction on snow or ice. Accelerate and brake gradually to avoid skidding. Don't forget that stopping distances are significantly longer on slick surfaces as compared to dry roads. That means you'll need to modify your following distance accordingly. Turn off cruise control, as this system doesn't compensate for challenges posed by winter conditions.

PREPARING FOR WINTER

Before inclement weather arrives, equip your vehicle with winter tires and check your antifreeze levels. Have at least one good ice scraper and brush in the car. Be ready to attach traction devices like snow chains, if they are permitted in your area. Never leave home without cold-weather essentials, including extra clothing, hats and mittens, blankets, cell phone chargers, water and food in case you become stranded in harsh winter conditions. Keeping at least a half tank of fuel at all times is strongly suggested.

IF YOU'RE STUCK

Tell someone your destination and planned route before leaving in bad weather. Should you get stuck, it's usually best to remain with your vehicle, since it provides shelter. You could become disoriented when walking during a storm. Increase your visibility by attaching a brightly colored cloth to your vehicle or displaying it in the window as a signal for help. Avoid exerting yourself too much. Keep the lights on at night to alert other drivers. Be sure that your exhaust pipe is clear to prevent the dangerous accumulation of carbon monoxide inside your car or truck.

Don't Forget Your **BATTERY**

Tucked away under the hood, it's easy to forget the spark that powers crucial elements of your vehicle.

Address any issues with your battery before you find yourself on the side of the road during the colder months. Sometimes, they run down because of natural wear-and-tear. In other cases, the vehicle may have simply been out of use for too long. Here's a checklist of essential maintenance tips.

WHEN TO REPLACE IT

Vehicle batteries typically have a lifespan of three or four years, depending on several factors. They naturally lose power over time, and older batteries may require additional attention. Periodically inspect your battery and its connections, especially if you've had your vehicle for several years. Examine all cables linking the battery to the vehicle for signs of damage or corrosion. Make sure the battery cables fit securely. If corrosion is causing them to loosen, use a wire brush

to clean the affected areas.

Many local auto parts stores offer complimentary testing services to evaluate your battery's charge. While you're there, replace any needed connectors, cables or other battery components. If your battery is three years old or older or shows signs of wear, it may be best to replace it to ensure optimal performance. Consider investing in a portable battery charger to keep in your vehicle's trunk for emergencies.

MAINTAINING A CHARGE

Batteries can lose their charge if a vehicle is parked for an extended time. If you plan to store your vehicle during the fall and winter months, a trickle charger may be beneficial. This device connects your battery to a wall outlet, providing sufficient power to prevent charge loss. Of course, the most cost-effective way to maintain your battery charge is to have someone drive your vehicle for approximately 15 minutes each day. This practice helps sustain the battery and keeps other components of the vehicle and engine functioning smoothly.

If daily driving support isn't an option, consider disconnecting the negative battery cable. Just remember that this approach has its drawbacks, as you will likely lose your vehicle's time and stereo settings. There may be other issues with its in-vehicle computer, as well.



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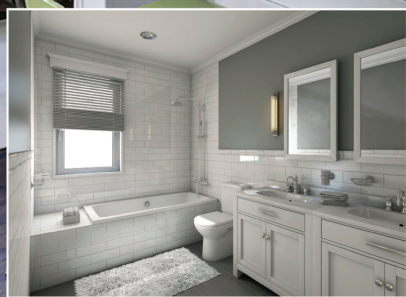
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