

# Spring HOME & GARDEN



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# Unique features for outdoor living spaces

Outdoor living spaces are wildly popular. A 2023 study conducted by Brown Jordan Outdoor Kitchens found that 63 percent of homeowners indicated they would prioritize an outdoor living space if they were to remodel their homes.

Homeowners cite a multitude of motivations regarding their interest in upgrading their outdoor living spaces. The 2024 U.S. Outdoor Trends Study from Houzz Research found that more than half of homeowners who participated in the study (51 percent) want to renovate to improve aesthetics, while 37 percent hoped to enhance entertaining spaces. One-third view renovating outdoor spaces as a great way to extend the living space of their homes. Homeowners who share these motivations and are committed to renovating their outdoor living areas can look to these unique features to fulfill all three goals.

► **Water fountain:** Water fountains can serve as stunning focal points in outdoor living spaces. Outdoor fountains are ideal for anyone hoping to create an outdoor oasis, as few sights and sounds promote a calming atmosphere as effectively as softly



flowing water in a cast stone fountain. Fountains also attract birds, which can add to the soothing sounds of a backyard escape.

► **Shade structure:** Gone are the days when homeowners' most accessible option to create shade on patios and decks were

umbrellas extending out from the center of outdoor dining tables. Pergolas and gazebos are now available in a wide range of shapes and styles, making these a must-have for homeowners who want to entertain while ensuring guests remain comfortable on hot days.

A hardtop gazebo with roof hooks to accommodate fans, lights and even plants can serve as an aesthetically appealing safe haven from summer sun.

► **Hammock:** A hammock is a simple yet unique, functional and affordable feature to consider

for an outdoor living space. If the existing landscaping allows, situate a hammock between two tall, sturdy trees. Such a sight can contribute to a welcoming and calming ambiance in an outdoor living space, and provide extra room to lounge and relax beneath the shade of trees.

► **Game zone:** If entertaining is the primary motivation behind an outdoor living space renovation, then designate part of the space for games and activities. A designated bocce court will draw visitors who want to relax and enjoy a little friendly competition away from dining areas and other spaces. A small putting green can allow golfers to work on their short games, and such spaces can offer ample opportunities for fun if homeowners are inclined to host putting contests during backyard barbecues. Whatever game tickles homeowners' fancy, designating a space exclusively for games can up the entertainment value of an outdoor living space.

The popularity of outdoor living spaces remains high. Homeowners hoping to enhance their existing spaces can consider a number of unique features to meet their goals.

## Options to consider for exterior audio

Outdoor entertaining areas are increasingly coveted by homeowners looking to blend the comforts of indoors with the accessibility to nature backyards provide. Homeowners do much to enhance the comfort and functionality of backyard spaces, and one way to elevate these spaces is through the installation of audio capabilities.

The ability to listen to an audio book while floating in the pool or stream a party playlist while hosting a barbecue enhances outdoor spaces. Individuals have various options to consider when seeking to upgrade their outdoor sound capabilities.

► **Portable Bluetooth speakers.** Bluetooth technology revolutionized the way various devices exchange data. Bluetooth utilizes short-range radio waves to connect and share information without a need for wires. That means it can connect devices like smartphones and computers to items like headphones and speakers. Homeowners who want a simple way to bring audio outdoors can look to portable speakers, which range in size from tabletop versions to larger, tailgate-style speakers. Many offer quality sound that is easily queued up when needed.

► **Wireless stationary speakers.** Similar to portable

speakers, wireless stationary speakers designed for the outdoors employ Bluetooth technology through portable speakers or a networked computer Wi-Fi connection. Each are mounted to deck railings or are placed around the yard. Interference can affect these types of speakers, depending on placement and distance from the device that is playing the music. They may be sufficient for the casual listener.

► **Wired outdoor speakers.** Wired outdoor speakers need to be hooked up to an amplifier inside a home with wires. Although it sounds complicated, typically it's a job a do-it-yourselfer can

handle; otherwise, qualified technicians can do it for homeowners. Wired systems may not come with the same hassles of connectivity dropping or even having to replace/recharge batteries, depending on the model chosen. Plus, once they are installed, homeowners have little to do other than utilize the speakers and enjoy their time spent outside with music, sports games, podcasts, and more.

► **Cone size and wattage matters.** Cone size and wattage of the speakers affects the ability of the speakers to provide quality audio, according to Outdoor Speaker Depot. Larger cone size will offer



superior, low-frequency response, which helps in large backyards. The larger the cone, the more bass it will provide. A greater wattage range also enables a better volume increase and improved sound quality at lower volumes. For 300 to 500 square feet, wattage of 80 to 100 might

suffice. Larger areas will need wattage of 150, 175 or higher for clear, sharp sound.

Homeowners should discuss audio needs with an electronics professional, who can help them choose outdoor speakers that will make exterior living spaces more enjoyable.

# Choosing the best foods for backyard **birds**

Feeding wild birds can be a popular and rewarding hobby. Such a hobby facilitates a connection with nature and helps to ensure local wildlife gets the sustenance it needs to survive.

According to estimates from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, around 50 million Americans engage in bird feeding each year. When feeding birds, it's important to choose quality foods to ensure health and survival, particularly during months when the weather is harsh. Here are some factors to consider when setting out food for birds.

## Choose wisely

When selecting bird feed, homeowners should look for feed that is high in fat and protein. Black oil sunflower seeds (BOSS) are a popular choice because they offer high caloric value and are easily opened by the greatest variety of species. The

Cornell Lab of Ornithology reports that BOSS, which are small, thin-shelled seeds, attract more than 40 types of North American birds, making it the most universally accepted food.

For smaller birds, like goldfinches and pine siskins, nyjer (thistle) seed is an ideal choice.

## Offer essential fats

It's key for birds in colder climates to maintain significant fat reserves to achieve the correct body temperature. Suet cakes, which are rendered beef fat mixed with seeds or fruit, can be the meal birds need. Suet provides essential calories for birds like woodpeckers, nuthatches and chickadees when insects are scarce. Homeowners should choose commercially produced suet cakes or raw suet, as homemade varieties made from cooking grease might melt and mat birds' feathers,

affecting their insulation.

Shelled peanuts and crushed nut meats, which are the kernel of nuts, can offer high-energy fats for titmice and jays.

## Avoid certain foods

Although we've all seen people casting bread out to wild birds, bread products are particularly discouraged as bird food. They fill birds' stomachs without providing necessary nutrients. Table scraps containing excessive salt or sugar also should be avoided.

## Maintain avian hygiene

Bird feeders can concentrate flocks, which can be fun to watch. But it also increases the risk of disease transmission among birds. The Audubon Society and similar conservation groups emphasize that studies show poor feeder



hygiene can increase rates of disease like salmonellosis. Feeders should be cleaned weekly with a mild bleach solution (one part bleach to nine parts water) and completely dried before refilling.

Hosing off the area to wash away bird droppings also can keep feeders and surrounding areas sanitary.

Choosing nutrient-dense, high-quality seeds and fats and maintaining a clean

feeding station can ensure that a backyard remains a haven for wild birds. Those with additional questions about what to feed birds should consult with a wild bird food retailer.

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## 3 ways to get more use out of a garage

Even though no two homes are the same, rooms have a tendency to take on similar characteristics regardless of which property they're a part of. Kitchens tend to be popular gathering spaces, while basements have become go-to spots for game rooms and watch parties.

Garages also tend to share certain characteristics between homes, and one notable attribute is the tendency to become difficult-to-navigate dumping grounds for a wide range of items, including lawn and garden tools, children's toys, sporting goods, and seasonal home decor. Though there's nothing wrong with utilizing a garage as a storage space, the following are three simple ways homeowners can get more out of these spaces.

**1. Utilize the wall space.** The walls in a garage have lots of potential. Effective use of walls within a garage can ensure garden tools, small toys and other items do not accumulate on the floor. Such accumulations contribute much to the reputation of garages as dumping grounds for miscellaneous items. By clearing the floors of clutter, and utilizing wall spaces to store items, homeowners can open up the spaces to serve any number of functions, including home gyms, art studios or even parking spaces to protect vehicles from the elements. A storage organizer system with various hooks can be mounted on a garage wall to free up floor space, while shelving

can be hung to store paint cans, power tool batteries and other items.

**2. Look upward.** If garage ceilings extend several feet above the height of homeowners' vehicles, then the spaces above where cars might be parked can be converted into storage space for large recreational items, like canoes or kayaks, or seasonal decor that does not need to be accessed on a regular basis. A simple kayak hoist utilizing a pulley system clears floor space and allows kayaks to be stored overhead. Lifting storage racks work in similar fashion and make for great additions for anyone who needs to store containers full of seasonal decor but does not want to do so by stacking items on the floor. A hand crank system for a lifting storage rack makes for easy and safe access.

**3. Install new lighting.** Without ample lighting, garages may not be conducive to recreational pursuits like painting, crafting or even exercising. A lighting upgrade is a relatively affordable renovation that can make a big difference, illuminating spaces not exactly known for brightness, especially if there's no windows. If you want to spend time in the garage during winter and stay warm, then some new lighting can make that possible.

Homeowners whose garages are currently serving as cluttered storage closets can do much to get more out of these useful spaces.



## How to make a laundry room a more functional space

Functionality is important when designing the interior spaces in a home. Homeowners who redesign their interior spaces can emphasize functionality to help reduce clutter and create a more efficient and even calming space.

Laundry rooms may not be the most glamorous rooms in a home, but they do get lots of usage, particularly in homes with children. Because laundry rooms tend to be well-trafficked areas, it makes sense for homeowners to make them as functional and user-friendly as possible. With that in mind, homeowners can consider these tips to make laundry rooms more functional spaces.

► **Purchase laundry pedestals**

Laundry pedestals make useful additions to a laundry room. Many homeowners place their washing machines and dryers on top of pedestals with storage drawers, which can be used to store everything from dryer sheets to clothes irons to stain removal kits. Pedestals can be particularly useful in cramped laundry rooms where the only means to adding storage is to go up and not out.

► **Install a freestanding laundry sink.** A laundry sink also adds function to a laundry room by enabling homeowners to hand wash certain clothes and apply stain removal products in the same space where the rest of their clothes are

being cleaned. Installing a laundry sink is a relatively inexpensive job, but the cost may go up if new plumbing, venting or electrical work is necessary.

► **Add a countertop work space.** If you already have ample storage and won't be placing the washer or dryer atop a laundry pedestal, then installing some countertop above the appliances can add function and aesthetic appeal. A countertop workspace above a dryer provides an accessible space to fold laundry the moment it dries, reducing the likelihood that clothes will become wrinkled and ensuring you won't put off folding.

► **Install floating shelves.** Floating shelves won't cost

a lot of money, but they can be ideal in cramped laundry rooms. Shelves provide a space to store detergent and other items that may not fit inside laundry pedestals, including baskets.

► **Add hanging storage.** Some articles of clothing should not be dried in a dryer for fear of shrinking the fabric or destroying the item. In such instances, some readily accessible hanging storage capacity can make the laundry room more functional. Items can be hung on hangers or over a hanging rack suspended from the ceiling if space is minimal.

Laundry rooms are heavily used spaces in a home, so it makes sense to take steps to make these areas as functional as possible.

# Prevent **pest** problems

Pests can be problematic for homeowners. Pests can be frightening, and an infestation can result in property damage if it is not discovered or treated promptly. According to Green Pest Management, termites can hollow out beams, beetles can tunnel through hardwood, and rodents can chew through wiring and insulation. It doesn't take long for damage to escalate. And homeowners may not know issues are building until problems have become visible.

To address pests effectively, both inside and outside of the home, homeowners should prioritize prevention and physical barriers first. Chemicals and professional pest treatment services may be necessary if initial efforts are not enough. Here are some strategies homeowners can try.

▶ **Check the perimeter.**

Pests can enter a home through small gaps in the foundation, as well as around windows and doors. Use silicone caulk around windows and stuff steel wool in gaps around plumbing pipes.

▶ **Address moisture issues.** Many insects are attracted to dampness. It's important to fix leaky faucets immediately and use a dehumidifier in basements or crawl spaces to make the environment less hospitable to pests.

▶ **Manage crumbs and trash.** Pests like an easy food source, so move dry goods into glass or sealed plastic containers. Clean up crumbs around the kitchen, empty catches in the sink drain readily, and be sure to take out the garbage before it gets full and malodorous; otherwise, you might be luring pests indoors.

▶ **Create a buffer zone outside.** Try not to plant

vegetation too close to the home. While mulch is coveted for its use in landscaping, it can act as a highway for termites and ants. Gravel or bare dirt may be better against the house.

▶ **Eliminate standing water.** Clear gutters and address low-lying areas of the landscape. Turlock Mosquito Abatement District says mosquitoes grow in standing water, and they can develop into biting mosquitoes in amounts of water as small as that needed to fill a bottle cap. Tip and toss out any water to prevent mosquito breeding.

▶ **Use natural repellents.** Peppermint oil might deter spiders and rodents near entry points. Diatomaceous earth is a fine powder made from fossilized, microscopic remains of hard-shelled aquatic organisms. While used primarily in some pool filtration systems, DE also



can dehydrate insects with exoskeletons, like ants or roaches.

If pests become problematic and first-line treatments are not working,

consult with a professional pest company to see what might be the answer.

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# Put some spring in your **cleaning** step

Spring is the season of nature's rebirth. Trees and flowers begin to bloom anew each spring, and young animals can be seen frolicking with their parents. During a time when it seems like the entire planet gets a refresh, many homeowners turn their thoughts to refreshing their homes as well.

As the days lengthen and the weather warms, spring cleaning takes center stage. Spring cleaning is more extensive than simply washing away grime, as cleaning a home often offers a psychological reset for the coming months. A clear strategy can make the task of spring cleaning feel less daunting, and these tips can help cut down on clutter and other interior annoyances that have arisen after months spent indoors.

## Declutter before cleaning

The rule of thumb when



starting on spring cleaning is to combat clutter before cleaning. Trying to clean around clutter is inefficient and may result in throwing in the towel prematurely. It is important to remove as much as possible from

each room before you begin cleaning. As homeowners move through each room, they can assess whether they've used items in the last year or whether they serve any functional or aesthetic purposes. If not, they can be

trashed or donated.

## Move top to bottom

It's important to follow the rules of science when spring cleaning. That means that dust and debris will be affected by gravity. Engaging

in a top-down approach will help make cleaning more efficient. Beginning at the ceiling and working down towards the floors will help people avoid having to clean the same surface twice.

Using a duster or a microfiber cloth, individuals can clear cobwebs from corners and dust from crown molding. Fingerprints will accumulate near light switches and door handles, so those areas should be wiped down, too.

Homeowners can conduct a thorough cleaning of heating and cooling output and intake vents as they likely have gathered dust over the winter. A down of floor moldings can get to any area near the floor or under furniture that doesn't get frequent cleaning.

## Do a kitchen reset

Focusing attention on the kitchen, which tends to be the busiest room in the house, is a wise idea for

spring cleaning plans. This is the time for individuals to pull everything out of the refrigerator and pantry and check for expiration dates. Wiping down the shelves means cleaning away any accumulated food drips or spills. Additional areas to consider include behind the refrigerator, inside the dishwasher filter and inside the microwave.

## Focus on air quality

It's key to replace the HVAC system filters come springtime, as well as any air purifiers in the home. This will help reduce allergens and ensure that the cooling system will run efficiently when it's time to turn it on.

Spring cleaning takes place each year. Prioritizing decluttering and following a systematic path through the home helps people eliminate stress and mess at the same time.

# How trees and plants can change the look of a **landscape**

Spring is home renovation season, and no area of a home is off limits. That includes home exteriors, particularly in regard to landscaping.

Lawn and garden centers draw crowds on spring weekends, as homeowners are anxious to get out in the yard after spending more time indoors over the winter. Plants and trees provide a simple and unique way to transform the look and feel of a property. As homeowners ponder what can be done to freshen up their landscapes, they can consider these benefits of incorporating new plants and trees into their properties.

► **Add some pops of color.** There's no shortage of colorful plants to add some pops of color to a property. Azaleas, lilacs, pansies, and, of

course, rose bushes can add a wide range of colors to a landscape, providing undeniable and awe-inspiring curb appeal when the plants bloom.

► **Native plants won't compromise their neighbors.** When choosing plants for a landscape, it's important to pick those accustomed to the local climate. A non-native plant might be able to withstand local conditions, but it also might compromise other trees and plants on a property. When choosing new plants and trees for a landscape, work with professionals at a local lawn and garden center to identify native plants that can handle local weather conditions and do so without putting existing plants on the property in jeopardy.

► **Trees can add considerable**

**privacy.** Homeowners who don't want fencing, or those whose towns or homeowners' associations won't allow fencing, may look to trees to add the privacy typically provided by fences. The growth rates of trees vary by species, so homeowners who want instant privacy should look for trees that are already tall and/or fast-growing. Needlepoint holly (which reach an average height of 10 to 15 feet) and sweet viburnum (25 to 30 feet at maturity) are fast-growing species to consider when planting for privacy. Green giant arborvitae are a popular privacy tree, as they can reach significant heights and widths within a few years of being planted. And while it's always good to consult a lawn and garden center for advice on the



compatibility of a given tree with the local climate, green giant arborvitae are known to thrive in U.S. Department of Agriculture hardiness zones five through eight, which cover a significant portion of the United States.

► **Evergreens keep a property green throughout the year.**

Homeowners who lament the loss of color each fall when their existing trees shed their leaves can keep a property green throughout the winter by choosing evergreen trees for landscapes. The New Jersey Conservation Foundation notes that evergreen trees excel at

conserving moisture, which allows them to keep their leaves and maintain that distinct and appealing green color throughout the winter.

Various plants and trees can help homeowners change the look of their landscapes without busting homeowners' budgets.

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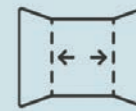
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# How to boost home value before selling

People considering buying or selling a home are facing a unique market. The real estate market has been in flux for several years, and high interest rates have made it more expensive to borrow.

The Mortgage Bankers Association is projecting that 30-year mortgage rates will level out to 6.5 percent for the foreseeable future. That means that people who have been waiting for changes in the real estate market could be disappointed, and hesitant buyers may finally just bite the bullet and buy even if mortgage rates are not

where they hoped they'd be in 2025. Homeowners with properties they are considering listing for sale would be wise to make certain changes that will help garner the best prices from buyers.

## Make kitchen and bath improvements

The kitchen is the heart of many homes. Real estate agents may recommend that homeowners make minor to moderate kitchen upgrades like resurfacing cabinets, upgrading countertops and changing fixtures or



hardware to give the room an overhaul.

Homeowners also should look to bathroom updates as smart investments that can improve home value. Katie Severance, author of *The Brilliant Home Buyer*, characterizes kitchens and baths as “money rooms” that add the most value to a home.

## Declutter the home

Homeowners should clean out items they no longer need. Decluttering can make a space feel bigger, which is beneficial in a market where open concept floor plans remain popular among home buyers.

When buyers walk through a prospective home, they want to envision themselves living there, something that is more easily

done if the home isn't overrun with the current homeowner's belongings.

## Get to painting

Painting a home is a cost-effective renovation with a lot of oomph. Freshly painted rooms appear clean and updated, says HGTV, and that can appeal to buyers. Homeowners should choose neutral colors to accommodate the widest array of potential buyers.

## Improve the landscaping

The exterior of a home is the first thing potential buyers will see as they roll up to view a property or look at a listing online.

Homeowners should start by evaluating and enhancing the landscaping. Ensure the lawn is well-maintained and add plants that provide color without a lot of maintenance.

## Expand usable space

Homeowners can think about adding to the usable space in a home. This translates into finishing basements or attics or even converting garages to rooms. Or it may involve adding a three-season room.

Homeowners can consider a number of improvements to increase the resale value of their properties.

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# Tips to renovate on a budget

Renovations around the house require an investment of time and often considerable amounts of money. Findings from the 2024 U.S. Houzz & Home Study show that home renovations are becoming more expensive. The median renovation spending for homeowners has gone up 60 percent since 2020. Angi, a home services website, reports the average renovation cost for homes between 1,250 and 1,600 square feet is \$51,772, but the final cost of home renovations depends on the scope of the project.

Homeowners who are conserving funds can rest assured that it is possible to make meaningful changes both inside and outside a home without breaking the bank. Here are some ways to renovate a home on a budget.

- **Create a budget and don't waver.** Figure out exactly what you can afford for a renovation and then make that your maximum dollars spent. Research comparable projects in your area and be honest about whether you can afford the renovation as-is or if you must adapt ideas to fit your price. Make sure to build in a cushion of around 15 to 20 percent for any unforeseen expenses that may arise once a renovation is underway.

- **Maximize an existing floor plan.** This Old House suggests looking for ways

to maximize your current layout before you invest in major renovations like an expansion. Bring in a designer with an eye for utilizing space. For example, see how you might be able to replace shelves with pull-out drawers in the kitchen. Moving furniture around or rethinking floor plans also can help to lower costs.

- **Balance DIY with hiring contractors.** You can save money by tackling some projects yourself, but only if you are confident in your renovation skills. Rather than risk making costly mistakes and having to redo things, hire well-vetted professionals but ask if there's any DIY work you can do to cut costs.

- **Check clearance and resale stores.** Shop discount stores for building materials to save money. For example, if a builder ordered too many cabinets they may offer them to Habitat for Humanity ReStores, which are nonprofit home improvement stores and donation centers. Checking the clearance and mark-down sections of other stores may yield considerable savings on items needed for a renovation. Warehouse retailers like Costco or Sam's Club also can be great places to find certain home improvement materials and furnishings.

- **Take advantage of free services.** Certain stores



may offer things like free consultations with designers who can show you what a renovation can look like. This is advantageous to the stores because once you see the potential you're more likely to buy the products, even if it's not mandatory.

- **Resurface instead of redo.** Certain items can be made to look new with minimal effort. Paint is a relatively inexpensive tool that can transform walls and more. A good hardwood flooring company can buff out a floor and put a new coating instead of an entirely new floor. Kitchen cabinets can be resurfaced instead of replaced as well.

Finding ways to perform home renovations on a budget may require some creative thinking, but it's possible to get results at the right price point.

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## Tips for winterizing exterior living areas

When the summer entertaining season draws to a close, homeowners need to ensure their outdoor living areas can handle weather that's right around the corner. Although outdoor furniture and other items tend to be durable, the impact snow, wind and ice can have on them may lead to damage over time. That is why many homeowners take steps to winterize their outdoor spaces and protect their belongings. Here's a look at how to prepare for the winter to come.

- **Furniture:** Cover or store furniture to protect it from the elements. Covering it with weather-proof covers can be adequate if storing items indoors is not possible.

- **Deep clean:** Items that will be covered or stored should be thoroughly cleaned prior to being removed from spaces for the season. Lingering dirt and moisture can cause damage.

- **Insulate and drain:** Don't risk damage to pipes, which can freeze and crack in the cold. Shut off the water supply to exterior faucets and drain water lines to prevent pipes from freezing and bursting. Use foam pipe insulation to prevent freezing and cover any exposed pipes.

- **Apply mulch:** After cleaning up garden debris, think about applying mulch to

garden beds and cover tender plants to protect them from the weather.

- **Check gutters:** Be sure that gutters and downspouts are clear of leaves and any additional debris. If gutters and downspouts are not cleaned, ice dams may form on the roof and cause water damage.

- **Inspect and repair:** Inspect walkways and driveways for any damage and make repairs now so water will not seep in and cause further issues with freeze-thaw cycles. Consider applying a sealant to protect surfaces from snow and ice.

- **Pools and spas:** It's essential to follow the industry or manufacturer recommendations for closing down swimming pools and spas for the season. While covers may not be essential in all climates, covering can help prevent leaves and other debris from getting in the water. Water should be expelled from pipes and tubing to prevent freezing and bursting. If space allows, consider moving the pool pump indoors to prolong its longevity. Turn off the electricity to the outlet where the filter is plugged in.

There may be additional, region-specific steps to winterize a property, but these pointers are a good starting point to protect outdoor spaces.



## How to decide between a deck or pavers in an outdoor remodel

Outdoor living spaces have become sought-after commodities among homeowners. A 2022 survey of homeowners conducted by the New Home Trends Institute found that open yards are less appealing to home buyers than they once were. The survey noted that just 28 percent of respondents chose open yards, while 65 percent preferred patios and 55 percent chose decks. Green spaces remain popular, but the survey indicates that many would-be home buyers also want an outdoor living area to make the most of their home exteriors.

Homeowners aspiring to transform their home exterior spaces typically must decide between a deck or pavers when the time comes to plan such areas. That's a personal choice homeowners must make, but those without strong feelings on either option can consider these tips as they try

to decide if a deck or pavers are for them.

- **Determine your budget.** Budget is a notable variable with any home renovation project, and the addition of an outdoor living space is no exception. The materials homeowners choose will ultimately determine the cost of each project. For example, composite decking materials tend to cost significantly more than wood decks, but that higher price tag also comes with less maintenance and typically a longer life span. Pavers may prove less expensive than composite decking, but those cost savings may be negligible if a yard requires extensive excavation to prepare an area for a new patio. It requires patience, but gathering estimates of the various materials can serve as a good starting point when planning an outdoor living space. In addition, homeowners must recognize that material costs can

fluctuate considerably over time, as such prices are often contingent on a range of variables, including supply chain issues. So it's best to gather estimates in a short period of time to make the most accurate price comparisons.

- **Identify your vision for the space.** Homeowners who have a vision for their outdoor living space, even if they are not sure about which material they prefer, may find the process goes more quickly and even more smoothly than those who are unsure about what they want. Those who prefer a flexible multi-use space may be best going with pavers, as the spaces can be easily converted and areas simply designated as one might differentiate between rooms inside the home. For example, an outdoor living room can be separated with the installation of a pavilion and fireplace, while kitchen and dining areas

can be separate spaces on the same patio. Decks tend to be less flexible, which might make them ideal for homeowners who prefer an outdoor dining area but don't need a more expansive entertaining space. Of course, decks can be as big as homeowners choose, which can make the spaces more multi-functional.

- **Recognize both may be in your best interest.** Homeowners also should know that many outdoor living spaces feature both a deck and a paver patio. Homeowners may like an elevated deck that steps down to a patio, which can easily distinguish between the spaces and establish the area as a multifunctional space.

Homeowners planning outdoor living space projects may find themselves choosing between a deck and pavers. Each option can work, and homeowners may even want to combine the two.

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**Population:** 36,927 (2024 Census)  
**Median household income:** \$172,606 (2020-2024)  
**Median value owner-occupied home/condo:** \$855,600 (2020-2024)  
**Tax rate:** \$12.31 residential; \$24.18 commercial (FY2026)  
**Town Hall:** 36 Bartlet St., 978-623-8200  
**Police Department:** 32 North Main St., 978-623-3500  
**Fire Department:** 32 North Main St., 978-623-3700  
**Department of Public Works:** 978-623-8700  
**Youth Services:** Cormier Youth Center, 40 Whittier Court, 978-623-8360  
**Elder Services:** Robb Center, 30 Whittier Court, 978-623-8320  
**School Department:** 978-247-7000  
**Library:** Memorial Hall Library, 2 North Main St., 978-623-8400

## HAVERHILL

**Incorporated:** 1870  
**Website:** haverhillma.gov  
**Population:** 68,291 (FY2024)  
**Median household income:** \$88,326 (2024)  
**Median value owner-occupied home/condo:** \$453,900 (2024)  
**Tax rate:** \$10.61, residential; \$19.17, commercial (FY2026)  
**City Hall:** 4 Summer St., 978-374-2300  
**Police Department:** 40 Bailey Blvd., 978-373-1212  
**Fire Department:** 4 Summer St., 978 358-1311  
**Department of Public Works:** 307 Kenoza Ave., 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

## METHUEN

**Incorporated:** 1725  
**Website:** cityofmethuen.net  
**Population:** 54,272 (2024 Census)  
**Median household income:** \$113,310 (2020-2024)  
**Median value owner-occupied home/condo:** \$499,700 (2020-2024)  
**Tax rate:** \$10.40 residential; \$20.08 commercial (FY2026)  
**City Hall:** Searles Building, 41 Pleasant St., 978-983-8500  
**Police Department:** 90 Hampshire St., 978-983-8698  
**Fire Department:** 250 Howe St., 978-983-8940  
**Department of Public Works:** 41 Pleasant St. #205, 978-983-8545  
**Youth Services:** Recreation Department, 10 Ditson Place, 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

# Cost-effective curb appeal boosters

One shouldn't judge a book by its cover. However, that often is hard to do, particularly when it comes to homes. Curb appeal bears significant influence regarding how a property is perceived. A property that is neat and aesthetically appealing probably will be preferable to one that looks like the homeowners did not maintain it.

Boosting curb appeal is a common focus of sellers before listing a property. But what can those who don't have big budgets for major overhauls do to improve their curb appeal? Plenty of projects can offer maximum output with minimal investment.

## Refresh the front door

Painting the front door can add brightness and

improve the look of a home's entryway. Most exterior paint costs between \$30 and \$40 per gallon, so this is undeniably a budget-friendly improvement. If money allows, replacing the door altogether will generate bang for your buck.

## Improve or add landscaping elements

Landscaping should be designed to highlight the home's best features. It should look symmetrical and feel manicured. If it's not possible to plant new flowers or bushes, simply cleaning up debris and weeds, and trimming existing greenery can make it feel neater and more polished.

## Clean up

Power-washing the siding, cement walkways and



garage door can create instant impact. It's amazing how much dirt and mildew can reduce the luster of

a home. Cleaning off years of grime can be a fast and inexpensive refresh.

## Reseal the driveway

Make sure the driveway

is clean and tidy. If it has cracks or discoloration, filling in cracks and applying a new coat of sealer will make a big difference. Homeowners can hire someone to reseal the driveway or do the work on their own.

## Add more lighting

Updating front porch lights and accent lights around the property will cast a more positive glow on a home, both literally and figuratively.

## Add a seating area

If space by the front door allows, add a bench or some chairs to create a welcoming seating area. A potted plant or two nearby will help the area seem intentional.

Improving curb appeal doesn't have to cost a lot of money. A few easy touches can boost the look of any property.



# Is a sunroom right for you?

There is no denying the appeal of a sunroom. Sunrooms bring more of the outdoors inside by bridging the gap between home and yard. Demand is shifting, with more than 61 percent of homeowners now preferring four-season insulated rooms for year-round use, according to Market Reports World. A sunroom has the potential to offer a roughly 50 percent return on investment and can cost anywhere from \$22,000 to \$72,000 on average.

A sunroom addition is a significant investment and a decision not to take lightly, as it changes both the interior floor plan and backyard space. To decide if a sunroom really is a worthwhile endeavor, it's important for homeowners to consider the footprint of their homes/yards, how they plan to use the space, and the amount of sun the home receives.

## Home footprint

Professionals with the National Association of Realtors say that a sunroom should not consume more than 30 percent of the remaining backyard and urge homeowners to avoid over-developing a lot. If installing a sunroom will leave a homeowner with only a small patch of yard afterwards, the result

can feel heavy and unbalanced. It also won't match the neighborhood. Another consideration is the local zoning ordinances where a person lives. The City of Los Angeles, for example, warns that most towns require a setback between the sunroom structure and the property line. It's also important to look at the home's roof and whether or not the sunroom will fall right under the eaves or if it will require an expensive tie-in to the existing roof.

## Utility

It is vital that homeowners determine how they will use the space and when. This will dictate the type of sunroom that should be built. A three-season room is typically uninsulated with only single-pane glass. This is ideal if someone is looking for a screened-in retreat without all of the bugs and a little weather protection. Four-season rooms are fully insulated and tie into a home's HVAC system. This space will be functional all year long, but it is a more expensive undertaking as well.

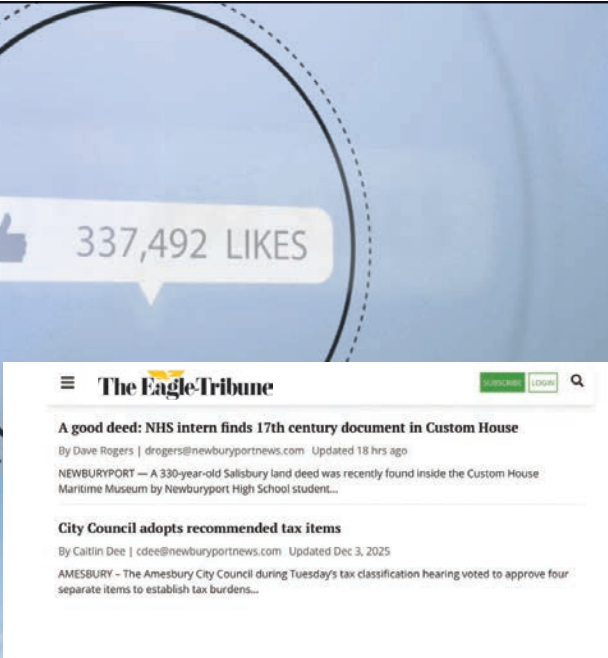
## Light evaluation

The purpose of a sunroom is to benefit

from the sun. The value of the space will depend entirely on which way the room faces. North-facing sunrooms have soft light with minimal heat or glare that likely can be used all day. Morning people can appreciate an east-facing sunroom while drinking coffee or reading, and the space will cool down in the afternoon. South-facing rooms will be bright most of the day and may need high-end HVAC hookups or shades to stay comfortable, even in cooler months. West-facing sunrooms are great for watching sunsets, but the hot afternoon sun must be considered. UV-rated glass to prevent floor fading and even sunburn likely will be needed.

It is important to work with a company that specializes in sunrooms. Such firms are experienced in helping homeowners design and ultimately build these spaces to avoid common pitfalls, advises Champion, a window, sunroom and home exterior company.

In general, a sunroom is not a DIY project since it typically involves a major structural change. It can be a viable addition to a home when built correctly to remain durable through every season.



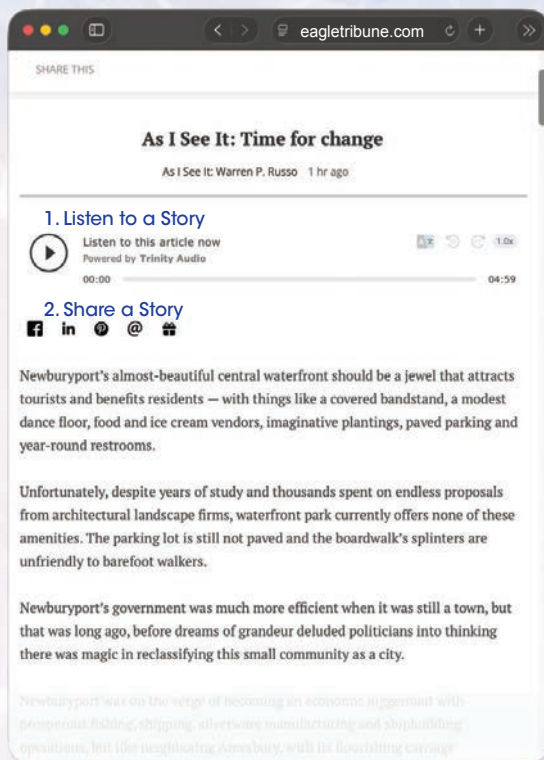
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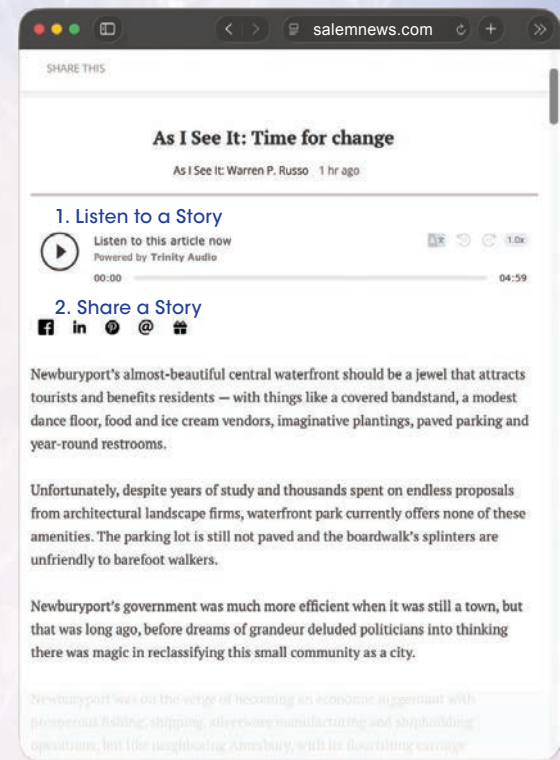
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# Bite back at mosquitoes in the yard

Mosquitoes are winged pests no one wants to have around, except for bats and other animals that eat them for dinner. The World Mosquito Program says mosquitoes can spread a number of nasty diseases, including malaria, dengue, West Nile virus, chikungunya, yellow fever, and Zika. Pet owners likely are aware that mosquito bites can transmit diseases like heartworm.

Vector Disease Control International says mosquitoes are some of the most adaptable and successful insects on Earth. Although male mosquitoes only live for six or seven days as adults, females with an adequate food supply can live up to five months or longer. Adult female mosquitoes lay an average of 50 to 200 eggs at one time, ensuring the population continues to thrive. Unless people take adequate precautions, mosquitoes can be anything from a nuisance to a real danger. Controlling mosquitoes around the home

helps improve health and comfort. These strategies can help.

## Eliminate standing water

Mosquitoes require stagnant water sources in order to reproduce. Regularly emptying, scrubbing and turning over items that can hold water can help control populations. This includes flower pots, tires, bird baths, and any other vessels that can hold water. For those with ponds or water features on their properties, circulating the water with a fountain or pump can prevent mosquito breeding. Introducing fish that eat mosquito larvae also can help.

## Sow the right plants

Mass Audubon says certain scented plants help to repel mosquitoes. Incorporating them around outdoor living areas can keep mosquitoes at bay. Such plants include lemon balm, eucalyptus, marigold,



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garlic, sage, lemon verbena, scented geranium, catmint nepeta, lemon-grass, and others.

## Tidy the yard

Mosquitoes love to hide in tall grass and debris. Mowing the lawn and addressing weeds or

other natural litter can help deter mosquitoes from hanging around.

## Replace outdoor lights

Opt for yellow-colored lights outdoors, which are less likely to attract mosquitoes and other flying insects.

## Turn on a fan

When entertaining outdoors, use a box fan to blow toward people, which will make it harder for mosquitoes to fly and land on people since they tend to be weak flyers.

## Professional mosquito control services

Sometimes it may be necessary to call in the professionals to treat yards to control mosquitoes, particularly at homes that abut streams or other natural areas where a large number of mosquitoes can be found. Treatment solutions often include products that are both safe for people and their pets. Season-long applications will help tame the number of mosquitoes throughout the duration of the warm weather.

Mosquitoes are a part of warm weather, but they don't have to compromise the comfort of outdoor living spaces.

# Potential threats to pet health in your own yard

Homes are often characterized as sanctuaries for their residents. Though such characterizations often are made in reference to humans and their domiciles, homes also should be safe spaces for pets.

Pet owners go to great lengths to ensure their pets are healthy and happy, and that typically includes efforts to ensure their home interiors are free of hazards that could affect their furry friends. But there are various threats to pet health in a yard as well. Recognition of those threats and what can be done to minimize them can ensure exterior spaces are as safe for pets as areas inside the home.

• **Mulch:** Mulch is found in many yards, as it adds aesthetic appeal to a landscape and helps soil retain moisture, which can safeguard trees, plants and flowers

from drought and the dog days of summer. But some mulch contains theobromine, a chemical compound that can be toxic and may even be lethal to dogs when ingested. Pet owners are urged to use mulch that does not contain theobromine, which is typically found in cocoa mulch.

• **Flower:** The mulch around flowers can be toxic to pets, and so can the blooms themselves. Lilies, tulips, hydrangeas, and azaleas are just some of the popular flowers that can cause stomach upset in pets. Pet owners are urged to speak with their veterinarians about flowers and plants native to their areas that might be toxic to pets.

• **Wildlife:** A collaborative study from researchers at the University of Michigan, the University of Washington and University College London published in



2024 warned that the overlap between humans and animals will increase considerably over the next half century. Climate change and

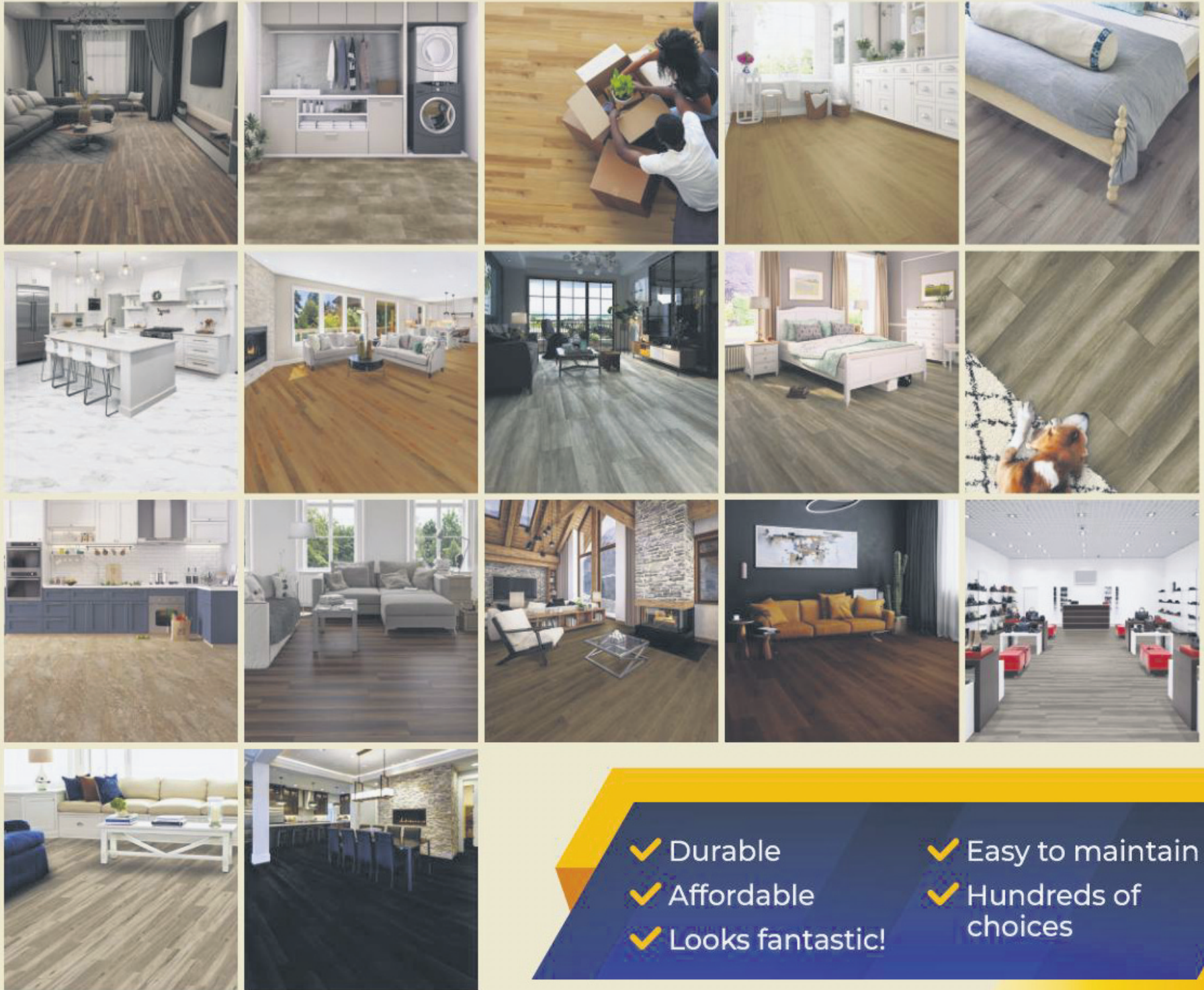
human population growth are driving forces behind that increase, which suburban homeowners may already be witnessing. As

more and more wooded areas are leveled to create additional housing, wildlife such as deer, racoons, opossum, foxes, and more

are losing their habitats and subsequently being seen with greater frequency in suburban neighborhoods. Wildlife can carry disease that can make domesticated animals sick, and some wildlife might go on the attack when they encounter cats or dogs in backyards. Monitoring pets whenever they're outside, sealing garbage cans so wildlife is not attracted to the yard and keeping compost piles free of foods that might draw wildlife to a yard are some of the ways to reduce the chances of interactions between wild animals and domesticated pets.

These are just a handful of threats to pet health that might be lurking in your backyard. Always keep an eye on pets when they're outdoors and speak with a veterinarian to identify ways to minimize backyard threats.

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