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# 6 ways to make your garden more successful

Homeowners enjoy gardening for many different reasons. In addition to adding beauty to a property, gardens can offset grocery costs by yielding tasty produce. They also offer important habitats and food sources for both insects and animals.

While growing a vegetable or flower garden can turn into a rewarding hobby, or even a passion, gardening also can be overwhelming — particularly when the results are less than stellar. Novice gardeners have scores of resources at their disposal, including the advice of gardeners who have made mistakes and learned from them. The following guidance can make home gardens that much more successful.

## 1. Start small.

You may have visions of an expansive garden growing rows of crops or acres of flowers. But it is smart to start small and build on what you find successful, which includes plants that thrive in your lawn and garden.

This also is beneficial if you are unsure of vegetable

yields. Several blooming plants producing bushels of crops can be overwhelming, especially if you can't get to harvesting or cooking them in a timely fashion.

## 2. Assess the soil.

Plants need nutrient-rich soil to encourage extensive root systems and produce strong, hardy plants, according to the gardening resource GrowVeg. Nourish soil with organic matter, such as manure, compost, shredded leaves, and natural mulch. Add this organic matter in the off-season to give it enough time to be incorporated into the ground before spring. You can have your soil tested for pH and other characteristics that make it friendly or averse to plants at a local garden center.

## 3. Arm yourself with knowledge.

Do you know how deeply to plant seeds and how far apart to space plants? Are you aware of the sunlight needs of certain flowers or plants? If not, read the packaging and do your research so your

plants have the best chance of not only sprouting, but also surviving. Many people prefer to start seedlings indoors in late winter and then transfer those plants outdoors when they are stronger and more established.

## 4. Sit in your yard and observe.

Watch the way the sunlight dances over areas of your landscape. Take note of which areas get the most sun and shade. This will help you plan what to plant and where to plant it. Vegetable gardens tend to need ample sunlight to bear pick-worthy produce. You can give plants a leg up by growing them in optimal conditions.

## 5. Choose hardy varieties.

Certain plants have been bred to thrive in your climate, including heat-tolerant plants for climates with sweltering summer sun. Consult with a local gardening center to figure out which plant zone you are in and which plants will do best within that zone.

## 6. Use rainwater.

Rainwater contains fewer



contaminants and additives than tap water, which can benefit garden plants. Collect rainwater in rain barrels

and use irrigation systems to deliver it to the garden.

Home gardens can yield many gifts, from flowers to

fruit. Beginners can utilize some time-tested strategies to increase their chances of planting a successful garden.



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# Budget-friendly ways to upgrade your landscaping

An inviting, well-tended landscape can add significant curb appeal to a home. Such a landscape also can serve as a point of pride and welcome homeowners each evening as they arrive home from work.

Landscaping projects run the gamut from simple changes that can be accomplished on a weekend afternoon to more significant and costly undertakings that require the work of a professional. Budget-conscious homeowners may be looking for simpler projects, and the following are some less costly ways to upgrade a landscape.

- Add a pop of color with planters. Awe-inspiring colors can make a landscape stand out from surrounding properties. Flowers, bushes and plants may be the first thing homeowners consider when trying to add color to their lawns, but planters can

provide a more immediate way to give exterior grounds some color. Bold planters won't lose their color in a matter of weeks like many flowers do, and homeowners can switch planters so the colors align with the season. For example, some pastel planters can evoke the spirit of spring, while orange planters can be filled with mums to give a landscape an autumnal feel.

- Plant perennials around the property. Well-maintained perennials grow back each year, making them ideal for homeowners who don't have the time or desire to map out new gardening arrangements each spring. Planting perennials also is a great way to add color around the property without breaking the bank.

- Upgrade walkways. Though it's more expensive than adding planters and planting perennials, upgrading old and cracked walkways is a

great way to give a property a whole new look. According to the renovation experts at HomeAdvisor, homeowners typically pay between \$6 and \$12 per square foot for new concrete walkway installation. Homeowners working on a budget can target spots where walkways have already cracked and fix those areas first before continuing the project piecemeal until all the old walkways have been replaced.

- Plant to create privacy. Homeowners spent more time at home than ever before during the pandemic, and some might have grown tired of seeing what their neighbors are up to. Fencing might be the first solution homeowners consider when looking to make their landscapes more private. But new fencing installation can be expensive, costing homeowners between \$1,667 and \$4,075 on average,



according to BobVila.com. A more costly and natural solution is to plant trees around the perimeter. Speak with a local landscaping professional,

who can survey the property to see which trees might thrive and provide the privacy homeowners want. Creating an inviting land-

scape doesn't have to break the bank. Various small and relatively inexpensive projects can change the look and feel of a home's exterior.

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# Exterior renovations that can improve home value

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

## Landscaping

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

## Address insects and minor repairs

Improving home value may come down to fixing areas of the home that can negatively affect its appeal to buyers. Hire an inspector to

look at key components of the house and recommend what needs to be fixed. This way it is discovered before home buyers come in and do their own inspections. Termite infestations, deteriorating roofs and hidden water leaks are some things that might need fixing.

## Improve the entryway

The front door is the focal point of a home’s exterior. Invest in a new door or paint it a striking color to add appeal. Remodeling magazine’s “Cost vs. Value Report 2019” indicates changing an entry door to a steel replacement can offer 74.9 percent ROI. Such a door provides visual appeal and added security — things buyers look for. In addition to the front door, make sure that the entryway has a level walkway, steps that are in good repair, accents that are free from rust or tarnish, and decorative plants.

## Outdoor lighting

Outdoor lighting can add to the ambiance of a property and serve as a security feature. Utilize different

lights, such as a bright light by the entry, uplighting in trees and shrubs for drama, a light-lined path to the door to improve visibility, and motion-detection lights to improve the security of the property.

## Repaint (or reside) the exterior

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

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



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## 7 things to know before replacing your windows

The decision to replace windows often comes down to aesthetics and necessity. Drafty windows can reduce energy efficiency in a home, requiring HVAC systems to work harder to keep interiors comfortable. The harder the HVAC must work, the more homeowners will pay in energy costs.

Old windows also may be points of entry for water and insects. Despite the importance of windows, Money magazine advises that new windows make up only a fraction of the home's total exterior "envelope," resulting in only about 5 to 15 percent of total energy savings.

But there are still plenty of reasons to invest in new windows.

1. Vinyl or aluminum may be best. Lumber is farmed rather quickly today and solid wood products may not stand up to elements as well as wood used a half-century ago. To avoid rot, vinyl windows often are an affordable and durable choice. Homeowners also have the option of wood windows with aluminum cladding, which are long-lasting.

2. Moisture problems indicate windows need to be replaced. Condensation that shows up as fogging between double-pane windows or on the inside of windows indicates that the windows are starting to fail. If installing a vapor barrier in the basement or crawl space, ventilating properly when showering or cook-

ing, or using a dehumidifier indoors does not remedy the situation, it might be time to replace windows.

3. Windows add curb appeal. Beyond functionality, replacement windows immediately update the look of the home and can improve curb appeal since they are one of the most prominent features on the exterior of a home. If a house needs an update, replacing windows and can be a quick and affordable update.

4. Consider other energy-efficient upgrades. Sometimes older windows can be salvaged, especially if they are not damaged and only moderately drafty. Replacing panes, sash cords, weather stripping, and even glazing may be less expensive than replacing a window. Plus, older homes with attractive windows complement one another. To keep energy bills down, think about adding insulation to the attic and basement — which is a good idea even if you are replacing windows.

5. The wrong windows can adversely affect home value. The National Association of Realtors says



homeowners get about 73 percent of their replacement window investment back when they resell a home. But choosing the wrong windows might lower the value of the home. It's important to match the look of the original windows, including window material and the divided light pattern (the number of panes in each window) with the original windows.

6. Think about soundproofing, too. When upgrading windows, also think about how certain windows can cancel out noises and make homes more soundproof. Some windows can help reduce outdoor distractions like leaf blowers or lawn mowers.

7. Proper installation is key to longevity. Replacement windows are only as good as their installation in many cases. Poor installation and orders of standard rather than custom sized windows could result in poor fitting and seals. Homeowners should carefully vet and review window replacement contractors to find the best professionals for the job.



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# What to plant when privacy is a top priority

A backyard oasis can feel like an even more welcoming retreat when the area is private. Homeowners and their families often find that a backyard is most relaxing when they cannot hear or see their neighbors, and creating such an environment can be as simple as planting some privacy trees.

Fencing is an option when homeowners are looking to make their backyards more private. But HomeAdvisor reports that the average cost to install a privacy fence is just under \$3,000, and those costs can be considerably higher depending on where homeowners live and how big a fence they need. Privacy trees can be considerably less expensive, and homeowners can spread out those costs by planting over time, an option that's not possible when installing fencing.

When planting privacy trees, homeowners can consider these varieties that can do the job while also providing some aesthetic appeal.

- **Emerald arborvitae:** The Arbor Day Foundation® notes that the emerald arborvitae is unique among arborvitae because it maintains its green color even in the coldest months of the year. The emerald arborvitae can grow to between 10- and 15-foot-tall and spread as wide as four feet at maturity. The tree features a pyramid shape and is considered slow-growing at less than 12 inches of growth per year. The ADF reports that full sun and partial shade are best for this tree.

- **Carolina cherry laurel:** Carolina cherry laurels are popular choices for privacy seekers. The Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center notes the trees can grow very

tall and boast a pyramidal shape. The Carolina cherry laurel require sun and thrive in moist, well-drained soils. Parents with young children should know that the leaves of this family of plant contain hydrocyanic acid and should never be eaten.

- **Boxwood:** The ADF notes that boxwoods are renowned for their use in formal gardens. That can make them an ideal option for homeowners seeking a traditional garden aesthetic in their backyards. Boxwood trees can grow up to 20 feet tall, but they can vary greatly in height. Homeowners purchasing them as privacy trees should speak with their local gardening center to ensure they're getting boxwoods that will provide ample privacy. Though they still have aesthetic appeal, smaller boxwoods may only reach a foot

tall. Boxwoods vary considerably in terms of their growth rate, so homeowners should inquire about this as well before purchasing and planting any trees.

- **Privet:** Privets are dense privacy hedges that grow very quickly, with the ADF reporting they can grow up to three feet per year. Privets may reach 12 feet in height and spread as wide as six feet at maturity. Privets tolerate shearing well, which can make them ideal privacy options for those looking for a formal appearance. Privets require full sun



for uniform growth. Privets are considered invasive in many areas of North America, so homeowners should consult their local garden center

prior to planting.

The right privacy trees can be just what homeowners need to turn their backyards into relaxing respites.



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## Tips for negotiating with contractors

Spring is the season for fixing up a home. Homeowners who aren't interested in doing the work themselves turn to contractors to ensure the job is done not only to code, but on time and efficiently.

After receiving an initial estimate from a contractor, homeowners may wonder if there is any additional wiggle room in contractors' costs.

Certain contractors are willing to negotiate while others are firm in their prices. However, learning the basics of negotiation can put homeowners in position to save money on dream renovations.

### Do your homework

Getting the best price typically require shopping around and not settling on the first bid. Experts recommend getting at least three estimates on the same job — and be sure to let each contractor know

that you are soliciting multiple bids. This alone may entice a specific contractor to give you his or her best offer up front. Avoid simply choosing the lowest bid. Look at quality of work, reputation and reviews. If you like a costly contractor more than another, see if that contractor is willing to match a lower bid to win the job.

### Pick the right season

As with other industries, home renovation work heats up during certain seasons or times of year. General contractors may be more willing to negotiate for a lower price depending on when their busy season may be. Jobs may slow down in winter, for example.

### Talk about supplies

Even after getting a good bid, you may be able to speak with your contractor about lowering costs even more by choosing less costly supplies. Find out if contractors



can source materials from a low-cost supplier. In addition, discuss if you can purchase your own supplies.

### Ask to do a portion

Be honest with the contractor about your budget and figure out if there is any way for you to do some of the work to lower costs. The contractor can give you jobs that are within your abilities, which

can shave dollars off the final price.

### Know your rights and laws

Understand the laws governing contract language in your state or province. Contracts should also spell out the change order process so that expectations of changes and costs will be known in advance.

# 3 factors to consider before converting an attic

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, many homeowners suddenly found themselves in need of more usable square footage in their homes. Required to work from home due to social distancing recommendations, millions of working professionals suddenly found themselves setting up shop at kitchen tables or islands, in alcoves, garages, or even walk-in closets. Those makeshift offices were never supposed to be permanent, but as companies loosen workplace policies and embrace full remote or hybrid working arrangements, professionals are seeking more permanent home office solutions.

Home additions are a possibility for homeowners who need more usable square footage, but add-ons may not be the right option for everyone. If adding on won't work, homeowners may want to look up ... at their attics.

Attics with ample space can

make for ideal home offices, as they're away from the hustle and bustle of a home's main floor. That can make it easier to concentrate when everyone is in the house and reduce the likelihood that video calls with colleagues and clients will be interrupted by kids and pets.

Attic conversions are not always possible, and the following are three important factors homeowners may need to consider before they can go forward with such projects.

1. Dimensions: Both the renovation experts at This Old House and the real estate experts at UpNest indicate that at least half of a finished attic must be a minimum of seven feet high and seven feet wide and 70 square feet. Requirements may differ depending on where homeowners live, but that 7-7-70 guideline is generally the minimum requirement. An attic that fails to meet such requirements won't necessarily be a lost cause, but it might

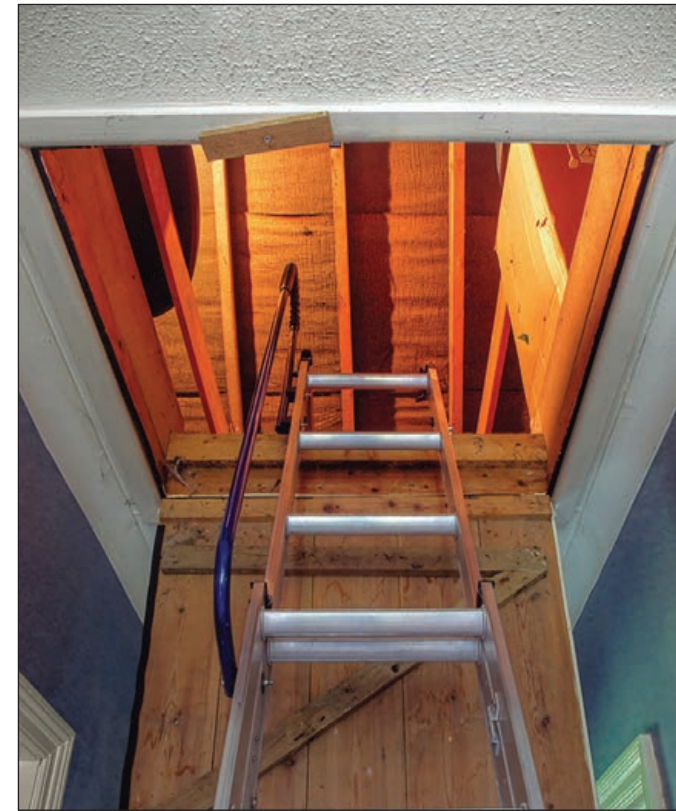
be costly to make adjustments that ultimately align with local codes.

2. Access: Access is another aspect that must adhere to local safety guidelines. Many attics are accessible only through pulldown ladders, but that will have to change if homeowners repurpose their attic spaces. A staircase that complies with local laws will need to be installed, and contractors can work with homeowners to build that and estimate the cost. Homeowners who simply want to put desks in their attics without going with full-fledged conversions are urged to adhere to local access requirements anyway, as they're intended to ensure residents can safely escape attics in the case of a fire or another emergency.

3. Climate control: Attics are converted to provide residents with more livable space. Converted space is only livable if the climate within the

attic can be controlled so it's cool in the summer and warm in the winter. An existing HVAC unit needs to efficiently heat and cool an extra room. If it can't, bills might spike because the rest of the home likely won't be as comfortable, forcing homeowners to adjust thermostats to offset that discomfort. That also could affect the unit's life expectancy. Before going forward with an attic renovation, homeowners should contact HVAC professionals to determine if attic spaces can be serviced with the existing units and ductwork, or if an alternative arrangement must be worked out to make the spaces livable.

Attic conversions can be great ways to make existing spaces more livable. Homeowners considering such projects should pay attention to three important variables as they try to determine if attic conversions will work for them.



## Low-cost ways to revamp living areas

Home improvement projects require substantial financial investment. But just because a homeowner wants to bring a fresh look indoors doesn't mean he or she has to break the bank along the way. Living rooms are some of the most frequently used spaces in a home, and they can use an update from time to time to stay on trend or to make the area more functional for a changing family dynamic. Here are some budget-friendly ideas for breathing new life into living room designs.

- Establish the budget. Homeowners should figure out how many dollars they can designate to a living room makeover before purchasing supplies or hiring out the work. Figure out the scope of the remodel, visit stores or suppliers to price out materials, get estimates

from contractors, and then plan for some unforeseen circumstances along the way to determine if this type of renovation is affordable. If not, scale things back until the project more closely aligns with your budget.

- Change the paint color. Lighter and brighter colors are on trend. A can or two of paint can do wonders for updating a space without a large financial commitment. Pair that new paint color with new window coverings and complementary throw pillows to pull the theme together with minimal expense.
- Update the flooring. Tired, outdated carpeting or other flooring can use an overhaul. While solid hardwood flooring may be preferable, there are many types of laminate flooring that mimic the looks of popular wood colors and

styles for a fraction of the cost. Plus, many are sold at home improvement retailers and even at warehouse clubs or online for reasonable prices. Laminate flooring also may be a potential DIY job for a skilled homeowner, saving even more money.

- Introduce a fireplace. Fireplaces were once hot commodities, but that popularity waned in the 1970s and 1980s. Homeowners with chimneys may discover a fireplace was boarded over and the bare bones still exist that can be renovated to bring back character. There also are ventless freestanding units that are quite affordable that can mimic the look of a built-in fireplace.
- Reupholster instead of replace furniture. There's no need to throw away quality furniture if the fabric is the

only thing impeding design. New upholstery or even a slipcover can update designs.

- Conquer clutter. Rather than adding something to the living room, remove clutter to give the room a more airy feel. This can instantly change the look of the room. Use cord covers to tame plugs for electronics and remove unnecessary furniture from the room.

- Improve lighting. Another easy and often inexpensive fix is to change lighting fixtures, including using brighter, more energy efficient LED bulbs, and to assess lighting needs to eliminate dark corners of rooms that can make the space seem drab. Living room spaces in need of an update often can benefit from improvements that go easy on the wallet.



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# Enter the tech scene to make gardening more fun

Many people take to the great outdoors to escape the increasingly tech-driven daily grind. Though that's an understandable perspective, gardeners who aren't deploying tech in their home gardens could be missing out on a host of benefits that could help their plants, flowers and vegetables thrive.

Devices like smartphones and tablets have made many aspects of life easier and more efficient, and various tech products can do the same when working in the garden.

• **Plant monitor:** Plant monitors are sensors that can keep tabs on the health of plants and deliver that information to gardeners.

Plant monitors often connect to smartphones via Bluetooth and can deliver information on the amount of heat, light and water a plant is getting. Sensors vary in price, and

some will provide more information than others. But these sensors are ideal for gardeners who love their plants but often forget to check up on them each day.

• **Garden camera:** Critters and insects are the bane of many gardeners' existence. Determining just what is nibbling away at flowers and plants isn't always so easy, as many animals are savvy enough to restrict their dining to the middle of the night and insects are so small they can be hard to spot. Garden cameras can serve as the watchmen of a garden and gardeners can review footage to determine just who is compromising all of their hard work. They can then use that knowledge to remedy the situation and give their plants a better chance to thrive.

• **Weather station:** Even the most seasoned gardeners cannot document the conditions

outside as effectively as a good weather sensor. Weather sensors track conditions such as temperature, relative humidity and air quality. This information can then be paired with irrigation devices to ensure plants get all the care they need to thrive throughout the season.

• **Garden hub:** Avid gardeners have traditionally had to arrange for neighbors or loved ones to tend to their plants when they leave home for vacation or weekend getaways. Garden hubs can take care of that by pairing with smart irrigation systems that ensure plants are watered even when no one is home. Certain hubs even gather and analyze local weather conditions to develop a watering schedule to ensure plants thrive. These hubs aren't just handy when on vacation, as they can be great for gardeners who want to know things about their plants that are not apparent to the naked eye.

People may see their gardens as welcome respite from their devices. But garden gadgets can help plants thrive and make time in the garden that much more enjoyable.



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# Turn your bathroom into a spa of luxury when remodeling



Updating a bath has one of the highest returns of any home remodeling project. So tear down that old wallpaper, rip out that tiny medicine cabinet, remove the particleboard cabinet and start anew.

What does the perfect bath look like to you? Think about it. Do you see a skylight or music? Perhaps you envision a tub with soothing jets. These may seem like ridiculous ideas, but keep them in mind. You may be able to work some, if not all, of them into your new bath.

Start by looking through magazines, paying attention to elements you admire most. Maybe it's a color scheme or a set of highly polished fixtures that catches your eye. Perhaps it's the curtains or the way the tub is positioned

in the corner of the room that delights you. Maybe it's just the feeling you get when you look at that photo. Tear out pictures you like and keep them in a notebook. Use it to guide your choices when planning your new bath.

Start by determining how much money you can afford to spend on the project and stick to that budget. There are lots of ways to get a high-end look without spending high-end dollars. Be a savvy and resourceful shopper.

Color is usually the first step. Deciding on a color scheme may be a difficult task for you. Think about the colors that make you happy and relaxed. Try to imagine what a soothing room would look like and pull out those photos you clipped for additional ideas. Once you've made a

decision on color, think about the walls.

Choosing the right wall covering can be difficult. A wide range of paint finishes can be applied and the selection of wallpaper is outstanding. Read the manufacturer's usage recommendations before purchasing wallpaper. Wood paneling is another option. Beaded board gives a bathroom country charm and is readily available at affordable prices. As soon as you have a wall covering in mind, consider the fixtures.

Are you looking for a bathroom with an Old-World feel or do you prefer a more modern look? Antique dressers fitted with sinks are popular, taking the place of standard cabinetry, while a contemporary pedestal sink gives a sleek impression. For large

families or even a husband and wife, double sinks are practical. Browse the Internet or home improvement stores for a wide selection. It's a good idea to familiarize yourself with what's available and the costs. Faucet finishes can range from chrome to brass to baked-on enamel or gold plate. These can be brushed, polished or matte. Shapes, sizes and prices vary as well.

Lighting is another important feature in the bath. It should be both functional and aesthetically pleasing. Try wall sconces or down lighting for a soft glow. Cove lighting and a small chandelier can add a touch of elegance. Candles can really set the mood, but be sure to observe safety precautions and never leave them unattended.

Flooring options are numerous, each with their own advantages and disadvantages. Laminate flooring is very durable, easy to clean and can

be installed over an existing floor, but once damaged, it must be replaced. Ceramic and stone tiles are water and stain resistant as well as elegant, but they can be slippery when wet and are hard on the feet. Hardwood floors have that warm look but are vulnerable to moisture. Carpet is warm and comfortable, but absorbs moisture and can mold and mildew. The choice is not an easy one.

Once you have selected the major components in the room, consider the finishing touches. Mirrors add dimension to a bath and reflect light. If room allows, a full-length mirror is a good idea for that one final look in the morning before work. In a large bath, try to incorporate a place for relaxation. A small, comfortable upholstered chair or a cushioned bench will find many uses. For a country look, add a country cabinet to your bath for towels and

appliances. If the one you have is a bit too rustic, go ahead and paint it to fit into your color scheme. Include framed artwork or a favorite drawing one of your children made in school to personalize your bath.

Plants also add a nice soft touch to a bath. They help to balance a room with many hard surfaces. If you have a window and the extra floor space, add a tall ficus. It will appreciate the high humidity and you'll feel a unity with the outdoors. Any plant will add a splash of color but observe their light requirements. If you don't have a window in your bath, choose a plant with low light requirements.

Creating the bath of your dreams may take some time, but if you use quality materials and pay special attention to details, you can achieve the results you desire.

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From left to right, Jordan Thompson, Keegan Hagerty, Rusty Robertson, Cody Folkema and the baby is our grandson, Frederick Folkema.

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