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Home & GARDEN



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DID YOU KNOW?

Homeowners looking for a rustic or weathered look for their flooring often rely on terracotta tile, a durable and versatile material that many feel gives a home a warm and earthy feel. Terracotta tile comes in various finishes and has proven resistant to the growth of mold and bacteria. However, because it is very porous, terracotta tile absorbs moisture quickly, which means it must be sealed somewhat regularly to prevent cracking, discoloration and staining. It also must be sealed especially well when installed in a kitchen, as terracotta floor tiles are susceptible to damage from acids, alcohol, oils, and vinegar. Installation of terracotta flooring is labor intensive and is therefore best left to professionals.

THESE ANIMALS MAY HELP YOUR GARDEN



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

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

Bats

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

Frogs

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

Birds

While it is true that some birds can damage crops, many birds are content to feed on insects attracted to the garden, which helps to keep insect numbers in check. Chickadees, for example, will dine on aphid eggs, while

larger birds may prey on mice or other rodents or simply scare them out of the garden. Jays and mockingbirds are known to be feisty and can even deter dogs and cats from a yard. Hummingbirds will sip on the nectar of flowers and help pollinate plants.

Snakes

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

Butterflies and bees

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

Many animals and insects can be detrimental to the health of a garden. However, several animals are handy to have around and should be welcomed to the landscape.



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THE POTENTIALLY HARMFUL EFFECTS OF **MOLD IN YOUR HOME**

The presence of mold in a home is a sight few homeowners want to see. In addition to being unsightly, mold found in a home can be unhealthy. While certain cleaners may prove effective at removing mold, homeowners who want to remove existing mold growths and prevent future growths may benefit from gaining a greater understanding of mold and why it grows inside homes.

What is mold?

Mold is a blanket term used to describe fungi that can be found both indoors and outdoors. Many species of mold exist, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention notes that some estimates suggest there may be more than three hundred thousand different species of mold. Common indoor molds include cladosporium, penicillium, alternaria, and aspergillus.

Which conditions promote mold growth?

Homeowners may notice that mold tends

to grow in specific areas of their homes but not in others, and that's because molds grow best in certain conditions. Warm, damp and humid conditions, such as those found in poorly ventilated bathrooms and basements, make ideal breeding grounds for mold.

What are the effects of mold exposure?

Molds are a natural and resilient part of the environment, but mold growth indoors should be addressed and avoided. Mold spores are tiny and invisible to the naked eye, and when these spores attach to wet surfaces, they begin to grow. Once these spores begin to grow, they can then affect people in various ways. Roughly a decade ago, the Institute of Medicine found sufficient evidence to support a link between exposure to indoor mold and respiratory tract issues, such as coughing and wheezing in people who were otherwise healthy. The same report found that mold may trigger asthma symptoms among people with asthma and



homeowners' best friend with regard to reducing mold exposure at home. Control humidity levels in areas of the home that tend to be warm and humid, such as the kitchen and bathroom. Install an exhaust fan in the kitchen and bathroom and a window in the bathroom if yours does not already have one.

The CDC recommends that humidity levels be no higher than 50 percent throughout the day, and an air conditioner and dehumidifier can help you keep indoor humidity levels in check, especially during the summer when humidity levels tend to be their highest of any time during the year.

When renovating your home, remove any existing carpeting from bathrooms and basements and toss out soaked carpets or upholstery as well. If painting will be part of your home renovation projects, add mold inhibitors to paints prior to application. Mold that grows inside a home is unsightly and potentially unhealthy. But concerned homeowners can take several reactive and proactive steps to reduce existing mold growths and prevent them from returning in the future.

hypersensitivity pneumonitis, a disease in which the lungs are inflamed when a person breathes in certain dusts he or she is allergic to, in people susceptible to that condition.

Some people who do not have a preexisting condition can still be sensitive to molds. When exposed to mold, such people may experience symptoms like nasal stuffiness, eye irritation, wheezing, or skin irritation.

How can exposure to mold be decreased at home?

Adequate ventilation is arguably

POWER TOOL SAFETY TIPS



Power tools can dramatically reduce the time it takes to complete home improvement projects. Professional contractors regularly rely on power tools for cutting and sanding, and many do-it-yourself renovators follow suit and invest in power tools to help get the job done. But power tools, in spite of their usefulness, are not without risk. According to the Work Safe Center, power tool injuries account for as many as 400,000 emergency room visits in the United States each year. Power nailers, chain saws and table saws account for the greatest number of injuries. Keeping safe is of the utmost priority when using power tools. Here's how:

- Read all manufacturers' instructions and guidelines before use.
- Keep your tools clean and in proper operating condition.
- Use the right tool for the job.
- Always wear eye protection, such as safety glasses or goggles.
- Wear standard cotton or leather work

gloves to protect hands.

- Consider the use of earplugs or earmuffs with loud power tools.
- Don't use power tools in proximity to flammable vapors, dust or construction materials.
- Always check that wires are kept away from blades.
- Maintain a tight grip on a tool.
- Do not overreach when using tools, and maintain balance.
- Pay attention when working with any power tool.
- Only use attachments specifically recommended for the power tools and ensure proper installation.
- Unplug all power tools during breaks and anytime when tools are not in use.
- Routinely inspect tools for damage.
- Keep tools stored in secure locations when not in use.

THE RIGHT WATERING CAN MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE IN A LUSH LAWN

Proper watering is essential when trying to restore or maintain a lush green lawn. If watered incorrectly, a lawn can be susceptible to a host of problems, including insect infestation, weak roots and disease.

When watering a lawn, especially when temperatures start to soar in the summer, it's easy to think a lawn needs more water and needs it during those hours of the day when the sun is at its most intense. However, those are two common misconceptions about watering. The following are a handful of tips for homeowners who want to help their lawns endure the summer heat and maintain their lush appeal into the fall.

- **Water when temperatures are mild.** In the summertime, humans typically need water when temperatures are at their most extreme, but that does not mean lawns should be watered when temperatures soar. Water attracts the sun, so watering when temperatures are at their hottest, which is typically around midday and into early afternoon, will likely lead to brown spots indicative of a burned lawn. That's because the sun will be drawn to the water, bearing down on the lawn and burning the grass as a result. When summer arrives, a lawn is best watered when temperatures are at their most mild. That often translates to early morning or early evening. An added benefit of watering when temperatures are on the mild side is less water will be lost to evaporation during this time, meaning you won't be wasting water.

- **Situate sprinklers to conserve water.** Homeowners who won't be hand watering their lawns should make sure their sprinklers are placed properly throughout their property. Situate sprinklers so they aren't watering driveways, walkways or patios. All of the water should be going to the grass, especially when drought restrictions are in place and the amount of watering the law allows is limited. It's also important to

make sure water from sprinklers isn't being blocked from reaching the grass by trees. Homeowners with especially large trees on their property should consider hand watering the grass beneath such trees to ensure these areas receive adequate water.

- **Lean on mulch.** Homeowners tend to fear drought for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that drought can cause a green lawn to turn brown, potentially affecting property value and robbing a landscape of its beauty. But there are ways to help the soil retain moisture when temperatures are especially hot and dry. Mulch around trees, flower beds, gardens and shrubs can help homeowners get the most bang for their watering buck. That's because mulch retains moisture, even when temperatures are especially hot. This helps foster stronger root growth and healthier landscapes that are less susceptible to disease and insect infestation.

- **Get to know your lawn.** Several variables combine to determine how much water a lawn needs. Understanding these variables helps homeowners understand how much to water their own lawns. Local climate is a variable to consider, as is whether or not a lawn was fertilized (experts typically recommend a lawn be fertilized several times, beginning in the spring and ending in October). Soil type and grass type also help to determine how much water a lawn needs, and homeowners who need to determine the type of soil and grass on their property can consult a local lawn care center or landscaping professional.

Proper watering can help a lawn survive the dog days of summer, and it's up to homeowners to learn the right techniques.



Poorly situated sprinkler heads can deny lawns the water they desperately need when the temperatures rise.



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TIPS FOR HOMEOWNERS ON THEIR FIRST RENOVATION PROJECTS

Home renovations are typically exciting, as homeowners get to see the visions of their dream homes come to light right before their very eyes. Turning an outdated bathroom into a modern oasis or an empty basement into the ultimate man cave strengthens the sense of attachment homeowners have with their homes.

But few home renovation projects go from start to finish without experiencing a few bumps in the road along the way. Such bumps can be difficult to handle for homeowners working on their first renovation projects, but there are many ways for novices to navigate the sometimes murky waters of home improvement projects and come out relatively unscathed on the other end, where a newly renovated home awaits.

Plan well and know what to expect. When working with contractors, get all agreements in writing and spell out exactly what you desire in a home renovation. Photo references can help guide contractors and architects. Ask for the full picture of what can be expected with the work, from demolition to the punch list. Knowing what lies ahead can keep you grounded throughout the project.

Discuss work each day and set payment schedules. Make payments contingent on work completed. This can help keep contractors on schedule. Paying for all work upfront leaves homeowners at a disadvantage, as it does not provide incentive for workers to be timely and efficient. Check in with workers to get daily progress reports.

Have reasonable expectations. A renovation project may exceed its budget and take longer than initially expected. Understanding that these potential setbacks might be part of the

process will make it easier to handle them when the foreman speaks to you about any issues that arise.

Accept the mess. Construction work is messy. There's no way to maintain a pristine house when contractors are entering and exiting all day. Dust is bound to be generated, and tools can fill up rooms. A home in disarray can be stressful, but continue to visualize the end result and the mess won't bother you so much.

Establish a contingency plan. Bathrooms and kitchen renovations are typically the most disruptive home improvement projects. Going without a kitchen can make it difficult to enjoy meals at home, while a bathroom remodel may require you to navigate water shutoffs. If your project is scheduled to take several months, establish a contingency plan to deal with the consequences of your renovation project. Speak with family members about using some of their home amenities, and prepare and freeze meals in advance so you can reheat them later on when you don't have access to your stove.

Plan your escape. Sometimes the constant work and mess of construction is too much to bear. Afford yourself time away by visiting relatives or staying at a hotel. Even a single night away can provide the relief you need.

A home that is undergoing a remodel can be a less than comfortable environment. But homeowners who have never before lived through a renovation project can take several steps to make the process go as smoothly as possible.



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ADD VALUE TO YOUR HOME WITH THESE RENOVATIONS

Homeowners choose renovation projects for a variety of reasons. Although many improvements are made to increase functionality and comfort of a home, several others are seen as worthwhile investments. These investments can add up to a higher resale value when the time comes to sell a home.

Certain projects have a history of providing a greater return on homeowners' investments than others. The following renovation tips can add beauty to your home and generate great returns when you put the home up for sale.

Invest in your kitchen. Kitchen remodels are a safe bet when it comes to putting money into improving a home. Residents tend to spend a great deal of time in the kitchen, but a dated, poorly functioning kitchen can detract from the value of a home, even if the rest of the home is in good shape. It's possible to recoup between 60 and 120 percent of your kitchen remodel investment, especially if the kitchen matches up well with the rest of your home. Homeowners should know that a deluxe renovation may not be necessary, as relatively moderate improvements can create a whole new look for a kitchen.

Look to paint. One of the least expensive improvement materials, but one that has a significant impact, is paint. Neutral, modern colors can easily liven up any space. If you paint with low-VOC paint, you also can advertise an eco-friendly home, which is very desirable these days.



Put in another bathroom. Multiple bathrooms are an attractive selling point, particularly in older homes that may not have been equipped with more than one bathroom. Finding extra space for a bathroom can be tricky, but consider closets, areas under stairs or even taking some space away from another room. Popular home-improvement television channel HGTV advises that half-bathrooms require at least 18 square feet of space, while full baths need 30 to 35 square feet for a stand-up shower or bathtub.

Renovate the HVAC system. Aesthetic



improvements aren't the only ones that add value to a home. Many home buyers are eager to purchase a home that has a new heating and cooling system, as buyers understand that furnaces and air conditioning units are substantial investments that can last for years. Other improvements, such as adding attic insulation or replacing older windows and doors with more energy efficient options, also are smart bets.

Add illumination to rooms. A dark home is a dreary home. Adding light can mean including more overhead and accent lighting. Under-cabinet task lighting is a nice touch. Inclusion of skylights and sun tubes can bring natural light into rooms that may not have south- or west-facing windows.

Put a deck addition outdoors. Outdoor living spaces have become more



desireable, especially as the "staycation" has grown in popularity. Decks and patios can make backyards more appealing. The scope of your investment will depend on the size of the deck and design. Doing the work yourself can cut the cost of decks in half, but only if you have the specific tools or experience to tackle such a project.

Improve curb appeal. Adding attractive landscaping and freshening up the entryway to a home can add considerable value to your home, as buyers judge homes by their exteriors. Completely renovated interiors may never be seen if buyers pass up your home because of a less attractive exterior. Classy, subtle changes, like well-placed shrubbery and a green lawn, can work wonders. An inviting front door and well-lit entryway also add curb appeal to a home.

Before making improvements, homeowners should determine if a given project will provide a solid return on their investment.

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EXPLORE THE ALTERNATIVES TO GRANITE COUNTERTOPS

Granite has long been a popular countertop material for homeowners looking to combine functionality with aesthetic appeal in their kitchens. But granite is no small investment, and homeowners looking to refurbish their kitchens should know there are a multitude of countertop materials available to those working on a budget or those who simply want to give their kitchens a different look.

Solid wood: Wood countertops create a warm, homey interior. Butcher block counters are less expensive than granite and do not necessarily need to be ordered from a speciality retailer. But wood can stain and dent and can even burn when hot kitchenware is placed atop it. Regular application of oil can help homeowners maintain the appearance of their wood counters for years to come.

Marble: Marble tends to be less

expensive than granite without sacrificing aesthetic appeal. However, marble is softer and more porous than granite, so it can stain and be etched. Diligence in wiping away spills, routine sealing and a gentle touch is necessary for those who choose marble countertops.

Soapstone: This is a natural stone composed mainly of mineral talc that gives the stone its smooth feel. Soapstone ranges from black to gray but can sometimes have a green shade to it. Other materials in the stone can produce veining. Although softer than granite, soapstone is still high-density and will hold up well. It's impervious to stains and bacteria, and exposure to chemicals will not damage it.

Quartz: Quartz is a manufactured product made of stone aggregate and polymers compressed under high pressure. It has the look of natural

stone but requires less work to maintain. Quartz has consistent colors and patterns and is a nonporous material, so it will not need routine sealing and resealing.

Glass: Glass countertops are back-painted, so homeowners can order just about any color they want. Glass will be tempered, so it is safe and heat-resistant. Glass can scratch, though, so it is not as impervious as other materials.

Concrete: Concrete is another material that can be colored to match homeowners' whims. Concrete is relatively inexpensive compared to other countertop materials, but it can crack or chip.

While granite is a popular countertop material, homeowners who want something new have many additional options at their disposal.

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THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN RENOVATING A VACATION HOME

Vacation homes may seem like a luxury only the very wealthy can afford, but many people purchase vacation homes as investments. Vacation homes give families a place to escape to where they can spend time together each summer or winter, but such homes also help homeowners generate income, and some homeowners even find the height of vacation season generates enough rental income to pay for the second home year-round.

Personal style goes a long way toward determining how to renovate a primary residence. But men and women who own vacation homes they hope to rent out should not allow their own personal styles to dictate a vacation home renovation project. The following are some additional things homeowners should consider before renovating their vacation homes.

Curb appeal: When renovating a vacation property, relatively minor updates can

dramatically improve curb appeal, which may bear more weight with prospective renters than it would prospective buyers. Potential buyers are making a substantial financial commitment when they buy a home, so they will go over a home with a fine tooth comb. But vacation renters are making a much smaller financial commitment, so curb appeal can go a long way toward encouraging vacationers to rent your property. Repaint a home in a more vibrant color or replace old siding with newer material. Hire a local landscaping service to tend to the property throughout vacation season, and be sure to include updated photos of your property with online listings.

Connectivity: While vacation was once a respite from all aspects of our everyday lives, nowadays vacationers want to maintain at least some connection to the outside world. If your vacation home is not up-to-date with its wireless technology,

upgrade to a faster network that offers high speed Internet. Such connectivity can and likely will prove attractive to prospective renters who have grown accustomed to relying on the Internet, even when they are on vacation.

Appliances: A vacation rental may not need the latest and greatest appliances, but homeowners may find it easier to attract renters (and charge more in rent) if the home is not filled with outdated appliances reminiscent of a long forgotten era. Upgrade especially outdated appliances, but make sure any upgrades fit with the theme of your rental. For example, stainless steel appliances may look great in your primary residence, but such appliances are costly and may not be what renters hoping to find a beachside bungalow are looking for.

Accessibility: Some people want a vacation home far off the beaten path, but that does not mean the home has to be

inaccessible. If your vacation home is in a wooded area far off the road, consider paving the access road prospective renters will use to get to and from the property.

This relatively small touch may appeal to potential renters who want some seclusion but don't want to put their vehicles through the ringer every time they leave the property.

Renovating a vacation home is a great way to generate extra rental income from the property, and there are several ways homeowners can make their vacation homes more attractive to renters without breaking the bank.



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HOW TO GUARANTEE YOUR GARDEN STARTS OFF ON THE RIGHT FOOT



As winter slowly winds down, many gardeners cannot wait to soak up the springtime sun and get their hands dirty in the garden. Such excitement is not just good for gardeners, but can benefit the garden in the months to come as well.

Late winter or early spring is a great time to get a head start on the gardening season. Even if gardening season is still around the corner, completing the following projects can ensure your garden gets off on the right foot.

Clear debris

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

Examine the soil

Soil plays a significant role in whether a garden thrives or struggles. Examining the soil before the season starts can help gardeners address any issues before they plant. Ignoring the soil until a problem arises can turn the upcoming gardening season into a lost opportunity, so test the soil to determine if it has any nutrient or mineral deficiencies. This may require the help of a professional, but if a problem arises, you might be able to adjust the acidity or alkalinity of the soil and still enjoy a successful gardening season.

Another way to examine the soil is less complex but can shed light on when would

be a good time to get back to work. Reach into the soil and dig out a handful. If the soil quickly crumbles, you can start preparing for gardening seasoning. But if the soil is still clumped together, it needs more time to dry out before you can begin your prep work.

Initiate edging

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

Fight weeds

Though weeds likely have not survived the winter, that does not mean they won't return once the weather starts to heat up. But as inevitable as weeds may seem, homeowners can take steps to prevent them from turning beautiful gardens into battlegrounds where plants, flowers and vegetables are pitted against unsightly and potentially harmful weeds. Spring is a good time to apply a pre-emergent weed preventer, which can stop weeds before they grow. Though such solutions are not always foolproof, they can drastically reduce the likelihood of weed growth.

Though gardeners might not be able to start planting their gardens in late winter or early spring, they can still get outside and take steps to ensure their gardens thrive once planting season begins.

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DOS AND DON'TS OF KITCHEN REMODELS



According to *Remodeling* magazine's "2014 Cost vs. Value Report," a major kitchen remodeling project should enable homeowners to recoup 74.2 percent of their initial investments. Kitchen renovations have long been a safe way to improve the functionality and value of a home. But not every kitchen project is a guaranteed winner. Homeowners may inadvertently make changes that end up sticking out like a sore thumb rather than improving the space. Take a look at these kitchen remodeling dos and don'ts to guide your next undertaking.

DO consider the way your kitchen will look with the rest of the home. Keep architectural integrity in mind when designing the space. A farmhouse sink and country cabinets can look out of place in an ultra-modern home.

DON'T overlook the importance of a seasoned designer or architect. These pros will know the tricks to maximizing space and achieving the ideal layout of appliances and may be able to

recommend local contractors and vendors.

DO look beyond surface details to the structural integrity of the design. The kitchen should be functional, long-lasting and beautiful.

DON'T design just for today, but look to the future as well. Unless you are willing to spend \$50,000 every five years, look for styles and materials that will last for the long haul. Older homeowners may want to make adjustments now that address potential mobility issues down the road.

DO work with what you have. A complete demolition and renovation is not always necessary to achieve the desired results. Only invest in major changes if something is not working (such as having to walk across the entire kitchen to access the stove) or is unsafe. Otherwise, minor upgrades may do the trick.

DON'T over-improve the space. A fully equipped commercial kitchen

may be handy for a professional chef, but the average person may not need an industrial hood and indoor pizza oven. When you make excessive improvements, you may not be able to recoup as much of the money spent because your home will not be on par with the values of homes in the neighborhood.

DO make sure you can afford the project. Plan for some unexpected purchases and plan out the renovation according to your budget. Skimping on materials

or design because of lack of money may leave you feeling dissatisfied afterward.



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HELP YOUR HOME'S EXTERIOR REBOUND FROM HARSH WINTER WEATHER

The seasons can be harsh on homes, and perhaps no season is more taxing on a home's exterior than winter.

Harsh winter weather can take a toll on roofs, gutters, landscaping, and just about any other part of the home that must face the cold head-on. The following are a few areas of your home that might need some help rebounding from winter now that spring has finally arrived.

Gutters: Gutters are vulnerable to winter weather, as strong winds may blow debris into the gutters or even blow the gutters off of the house. Gutters should be cleaned prior to and immediately after winter to ensure they're working properly and not backing up to the point that water can build up and damage the roof. Reattach any loose gutters and clear them of any debris left behind by winter winds.

Roof: The roof is another area of your home's exterior that may have been beaten down over the winter. Examine the roof for cracked, missing or deformed shingles that can allow water to enter a home and

damage its interior. Some roof damage is visible from the ground, but homeowners who just endured especially harsh winters may want to climb up on their roofs or hire a professional to get a closer look. Another way to determine if the roof was damaged is to go into your attic and check for water damage near roof trusses. Water damage indicates something went awry over the winter.

Walkways and driveways: Heavy snowfall or significant accumulation of ice over the winter can result in cracked or damaged walkways, driveways and porches. Some of this damage may have resulted from aggressive shoveling or breaking up of ice. Look for any cracks in areas that needed shoveling over the winter, as such cracks can be safety hazards and may even prove to be entry points into your home for water or critters.

Landscaping: Landscaping also tends to take a hit in areas that experience harsh winters. Winter storms may damage trees, which can put a home right in the line of falling limbs or worse. Walk around your



property to inspect for tree damage, removing any fallen limbs or cutting down any limbs that appear dead or that might eventually prove a safety hazard. In addition, check the grass for any dead spots that might have fallen victim to winter freeze, and address those spots when the time comes to revitalize your lawn.

Appliances: When surveying your property

after a long winter, inspect appliances like a central air conditioning unit or even dryer vents to make sure they made it through the winter unscathed. Such appliances may have proven an attractive nesting spot for animals over the winter, but damage can be significant if vermin or other animals seek shelter from winter weather inside appliances.

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HOW TO COOL YOUR HOME WITHOUT BREAKING THE BANK



Ceiling fans can help cool a home more efficiently when fan blades spin in the right direction for the season.

Mother Nature is consistently inconsistent these days, when 30-degree Mondays might be followed by 60-degree Tuesdays. Fickle weather is often accompanied by large fluctuations in temperature, strong storms and unseasonable conditions, making it difficult for homeowners to maintain comfort levels in their homes.

As a result of fluctuating temperatures, home heating and cooling systems have been heavily taxed. Growing reliance on HVAC systems has also driven up energy bills, as moderate weather synonymous with spring has given way to more days of extreme heat or extreme cold. As summer approaches once again, reducing cooling costs is a priority for many homeowners. The following are a few ways to cool your home's interior without causing a spike in your energy bill.

Reduce sun exposure. Much of the hot air inside of a home can be attributed to sunlight exposure throughout the day. Walls and windows on the south and west sides of a home will bear the brunt of the sun's rays, so close shades and drapes on this side of the house to maximize coolness. Shades and curtains can save you up to 7 percent on your bills and lower indoor temperatures by up to 20 degrees. Homeowners also may want to think about installing a retractable awning on areas of the house that get a lot of sun. Planting shade trees is another way to naturally cool down hot sides of the house.

Draw more air into the attic. Hot air rises, and in the summertime hot air can get trapped beneath the roof in the attic and eaves of a home. While an attic should have vents, homeowners can speed up the exchange of hot air with a simple trick. Open up a window on a shady side of the home, and then open the attic door or take out the access panel and place a box fan inside to blow air up into the attic. This will disperse the hot air and help force it out through the vents.

Use fans productively. Using box fans to suck cool night air in from east- and north-facing windows and to push out hot air from west- and south-facing windows is another way to

increase circulation through a home. Running fans may be less costly than turning on air conditioners. Also, set ceiling fans to rotate counter-clockwise. This will pull cooler air up from the floor and create a wind-chill effect.

Switch to LED or CFL bulbs. Ninety percent of the energy used for incandescent bulbs is emitted as heat. This not only wastes electricity but also can make conditions hotter inside a home. Switch to cooler, more efficient light bulbs.

Reduce humidity levels. Humidity makes hot temperatures feel even hotter. Clean laundry, take showers and run the dishwasher at night or early in the morning before the day heats up. Don't forget to vent bathrooms and kitchens by turning on exhaust fans when water is in use.

Rely on a programmable thermostat. Setting a thermostat to adjust the air conditioning system automatically means homeowners can keep the temperature raised when they're not home and then have it lowered shortly before they arrive home. The thermostat also can adjust temperatures for day and night use.

Keep doors closed. Do not cool rooms that are unused. Maximize the cool air in lived-in spaces by blocking off rooms that do not need to be cooler.

Invest in more insulation. Insulation does not just keep homes warmer in the cold weather. Insulation also prevents hot air from infiltrating living spaces while keeping cooler air where it's needed. Sealant around windows and doors also will prevent unnecessary air exchange.

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EXPLAINING CARPET FIBERS AND TYPES



right decision.

Homeowners looking for carpeting for their homes are bound to hear about particular fibers and types of carpets. But such talk is lost when buyers don't understand carpet fibers and what makes each type of carpet unique. The following rundown of the various carpet fibers and types of carpet should help homeowners make more informed decisions.

Carpet fibers

When a carpet salesman or store employee references "carpet fiber," he or she is referring to the type of material used to make a particular carpet. No two fibers are the same, as each feels different to the touch and reacts to routine wear and tear differently. Here are the five most popular carpet fibers:

Nylon: Nylon is the most durable carpet fiber, and that has contributed to its popularity. Nylon is available in a wide range of styles and is a flexible material. Many nylon carpets come with a stain-resistant treatment to protect the material from common stains and spills.

Polyester: Highly resistant to stains and fading, polyester is soft, and today's polyester carpets are more resilient and durable than those of yesteryear.

Triexta: Triexta is a type of polyester fiber that is especially soft. A relatively recent addition to the market, triexta carpet fibers are especially susceptible to stains and spills.

Olefin: Olefin carpet fibers are among the least expensive, thanks in part to its lack of durability compared to other fibers. Olefin carpet fibers repel UV rays and therefore don't fade when exposed to sunlight.

Wool: Wool tends to be the most expensive carpet fiber, but that cost is offset by its considerable durability and soft feel. Wool carpets can last several decades, but they also are high maintenance and not especially resistant to stains.

Carpet types

The type, or style, of carpet refers to how the carpet is designed. The type of carpet homeowners choose may depend on where in their homes the carpet will be installed.

Frieze: Frieze carpet, sometimes referred to as twist carpet, is made of twisted strands of carpet, and many homeowners prefer

frieze carpet because of its modern and stylish look. Frieze carpet can be somewhat expensive, which is why some homeowners install it in bedrooms and sitting rooms where it won't be susceptible to high traffic.

Saxony/Cut pile: Saxony or cut pile carpet is ideal for high traffic areas, such as the living room or hallways. That's because it tends to be resistant to matting and crushing and still feels soft underfoot.

Berber: Berber carpets, often referred to as loop carpets, are especially durable, making them strong options for high-traffic areas of a home. Though there are variations in loop carpets, a traditional loop carpet is created when yarn is sewn or tufted into the backing and left uncut.

Choosing a carpet for a home is no small task, but homeowners who educate themselves about the various carpet fibers and styles can find the right fit for their homes.

When buying carpet for the first time, homeowners can be overwhelmed with unfamiliar terminology.

Navigating such terminology, not to mention the vast array of options inside typical carpeting stores, can be difficult and make carpet buyers nervous about making the

HOW TO ADDRESS CEILING STAINS

even indicative of a larger problem, so it pays for homeowners to address stains on their ceilings as soon as possible.

Start with the source. Low kitchen ceilings tend to fall victim to oil stains, which are an unfortunate side effect of cooking. But not all stains can be so easily traced to their origins. Some ceiling stains, such as those in bathrooms, may be a byproduct of mold, while others may be indicative of plumbing problems. Identifying the source of a stain is often the first step toward eradicating it.

Fix the problem. Once you have identified what's causing the stain, fix the problem as soon as possible. Ceiling stains are often indicative of much larger problems, and the longer those problems are allowed to fester, the bigger they become. Some water stains on ceilings result from cracks or joints that have not been adequately sealed or caulked. Reseal or recaulk any cracks you suspect are leading to ceiling stains. If you have determined a leaky roof is behind your

stained ceilings, then have the roof inspected for damage, and prepare yourself to finance a new roof if the inspector determines that's the best solution.

Cover nearby furniture. If you find ceiling stains above living areas, then be sure to cover the furniture below such ceilings with a tarp. Even if your stain solution will be made primarily of water, you don't want to risk compounding your ceiling stain problem by staining your furniture as well.

Remove the stains. Different stains require different treatments. A solution made of water and bleach may be effective at removing ceiling stains, but only apply such solutions on days when you can open the windows and air out your home. Larger stains may require the application of a stain blocker, which may need to be applied with a roller and brush. No matter the stain, you need to leave time for the ceiling to dry before you can move on. Opening the windows can prevent your home from being

overcome by the smell of bleach and also speed up the time it takes the ceiling to dry.

Cover the ceiling with primer. Once the ceiling has completely dried, you can apply a stain-blocking primer to prevent future stains. Allow the primer ample time to dry.

Apply a fresh coat of paint. After the primer has dried completely, you can then repaint the ceiling. Some paints may blend in even if you only paint the affected areas of the ceiling, but others will require a complete repainting of the ceiling. The eye test will help you determine how much work you have to do in that regard.



Many stains are instantly noticeable. But while a wine stain on a light-colored carpet or a gravy stain on a white shirt tend to jump out right away, other stains sneak past our radars every day. Ceiling stains are one type of stain that tend to go unnoticed for long periods of time. But ceiling stains can be unsightly, and some are

WEED OUT GARDENING MYTHS FROM FACTS

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

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

MYTH: Compost tea is more effective than traditional compost.

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

MYTH: Plants under stress should be fertilized.

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

MYTH: Young trees need stakes. It may be tempting to stake that little sapling to protect it against the weather and strong winds, but doing so may actually work against the founding tree. Staking trees to inhibit swaying may not stimulate the tree to grow thicker, lower trunks that will help the tree in the long run. The Royal Horticultural Society recommends that saplings be staked for around one year and then have the stakes removed to encourage the tree to be strong and stable on its own.

MYTH: Water droplets and sunshine lead to burnt leaves. Gardeners have been told to resist watering their plants during the hottest times of the day. Many assume it's because water droplets lying on leaves will magnify the sun's rays and burn the leaves. According to Dr. Gabor Horvath at the Eötvös University in Budapest, water droplets will rarely damage plants because the drops are too close to the leaves to cause burning

before they evaporate. Watering during the hottest points of the day is not advised because water evaporates and gets wasted.

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

MYTH: Adding compost or potting soil to the planting hole for a tree or shrub is beneficial. Gardeners frequently add compost or potting soil to the hole where the root ball of a tree or shrub will be placed. But this encourages the roots to grow only in this nutrient-rich area, rather than spreading throughout the landscape to form a stronger and more durable root system. If you are going to amend the soil, do so evenly across the landscape.



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

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

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GET STARTED NOW ON **SPRING CLEANING**

Following a few guidelines can make the process of spring cleaning go quickly and smoothly.



Warmer temperatures and longer hours of sunlight can recharge energy levels. Upon the arrival of spring, homeowners dust off their to-do lists and charge ahead with renewed vigor. But before homeowners can get started on renovation projects, many must tame the existing mess that may have built up over the winter. Spring is a great time to dive into spring cleaning projects and ready a home for a season of renovation and remodeling. Getting started on spring cleaning can be a tad overwhelming. In 2012, OnePoll asked 1,000 adults living in the United Kingdom how they felt about spring cleaning, and 41 percent of those surveyed found spring cleaning a daunting process while 68 percent had negative feelings about spring cleaning. But in spite of that initial lack of enthusiasm, respondents said they felt happy and more organized once they finished their spring cleaning. Establishing a plan and setting reachable goals can make spring cleaning a lot less daunting.

Set aside several days for spring cleaning. A long weekend is a great time to do some spring cleaning, as having consecutive days to clean will reduce the chances you grow distracted.

Make a list and purchase all of the supplies you will need. Again, this will help you stay on course, rather than going out to the store to pick up cleaners or organizational systems.

Try to set reasonable goals. Even if you hope to clean the entire house, stick to the

one or two rooms that are most desperate for your attention. Divide each task into a series of steps so when you complete each step you will feel proud that you're making progress.

Create your musical playlist. A playlist full of your favorite songs can provide some inspiration and energy to push you through the spring cleaning when your enthusiasm starts to wane. The music also may take your mind off of the work ahead and help to pass the time.

Start from the top and work downward. Follow a logical cleaning order. Begin by dusting away cobwebs and lighting fixtures. Clean light switches and walls. Empty closets and then restock them in a more organized fashion. Leave the furniture and flooring for last, as dirt and dust may accumulate on furniture and flooring as you clean other areas of the home.

Be prepared to bid adieu to some of your stuff. Have a few trash bags at the ready. Reorganize items you won't be keeping into separate piles, with one pile for items you plan to donate and another for those items you will discard. Donate what you can and promptly put the remainder of the items at the curb for pickup.

Stay fed and hydrated. Cleaning can be physically and emotionally exhausting. Take breaks to fuel up on food and always have a refreshing beverage close by.

SIMPLE WAYS TO LIMIT WEED GROWTH



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

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

- **Work the soil regularly.** When weed roots are removed from the soil, weeds die. But just because you hoed or tilled the soil last month does not mean new weeds won't grow in and start robbing your plants of essential nutrients and minerals this month. The garden should be cultivated regularly, and you should pay particular attention to the soil after the garden has been watered. If weeds are allowed to go to seed, the garden can quickly be overwhelmed by them, as young weeds tend to grow in quickly and a little water might be all they need to sprout. So make a point to routinely cultivate the soil with a hoe or tiller, being careful when working on soil around growing plants.

- **Lay down black plastic.** Some gardeners may want to avoid laying black plastic down in their gardens for fear that such a weed deterrent robs the garden of its natural beauty. While that might be true, the black plastic also robs many weeds of their ability to grow in. Some weeds may be especially stubborn and grow in under the plastic, forcing their way through the holes cut into the plastic for the

plants to grow through. But laying black plastic covering over the garden before it's planted is often an effective way to limit weed growth.

- **Lay mulch in vegetable gardens.** Mulch can serve multiple benefits in a garden. Many people find mulch aesthetically appealing, but mulch serves more practical purposes as well. Mulch made of organic materials, such as bark chips or grass clippings, is often too heavy for weeds to push through, making it difficult, if not impossible, for weeds to sprout in the garden. But mulch also conserves moisture in the soil, strengthening plant roots as a result. Stronger roots can lead to a healthier garden.

- **Cut down on plants' elbow room.** The more space between plants, the more room weeds have to grow. So decreasing the space between plants can limit weed growth. But spacing plants too closely together can make it difficult for vegetables to grow in as well. Spacing recommendations will likely be included on packaging when buying seeds, but reducing those recommendations by an inch or two may allow the plants to grow in strong while limiting weed growth at the same time.

Garden weeds can put plants in jeopardy and rob gardens of their beauty. But there are a handful of ways gardeners can limit weed growth without harming their plants.



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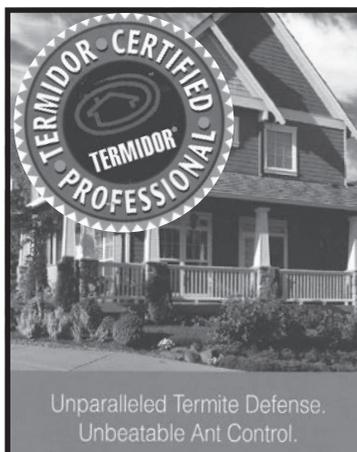
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HOW TO RID YOUR YARD OF PESKY PESTS

Groundhogs feed on plants, frustrating homeowners who want to keep the critters off of their properties.

Spring is the season when lawn and garden equipment is dusted off, windows are washed and homes are aired out. Spring also is a great time to get started on lawn and garden projects.

Early spring might not be warm enough to start planting, but it is a great time to inspect a yard for any property damage or problems, including pests. Small animals like groundhogs can compromise lawn and garden projects. For example, vegetable gardens are prime targets for such pests, while trees and shrubbery offer cozy abodes and camouflage from other predators. Homeowners can grow frustrated by the damage such critters can do to their properties. But identifying the offenders early on can minimize that damage.

Groundhogs

Groundhogs are one of 14 species of marmots and are the largest members of the squirrel family. They frequent the areas where woodlands meet open spaces, like streams, roads or fields. Groundhogs feed on grass, plants, fruit and tree bark. They also will feast on home gardens during the summer and fall seasons. Groundhogs are most active during the warm months, when they forage and feast to build up large reserves for winter hibernation.

Humane methods of keeping groundhogs at bay include making the area inhospitable. Groundhogs can climb trees and fencing, but they're less likely to get into plants if there is a fence around them. Dogs can be preventive as well, as some dogs will chase groundhogs off of the property. The scent of urine can also scare groundhogs off. Using traps to capture and then relocate groundhogs is another option.

Moles

Moles are cylindrical mammals that are most comfortable living a subterranean lifestyle. The fur of moles feels similar to velvet, and they have small ears and eyes. Moles also have strong forelimbs with forepaws that have an extra thumb and multiple joints. These help them to burrow underground effectively and hollow out subterranean chambers. The diet of moles is primarily earthworms and small invertebrates found in the soil. The runs they create beneath the surface of the soil are used to trap prey and store it in "larders" for later.

Moles are not harmful to lawns and gardens, but they can compromise the aesthetic appeal of lawns and gardens. That is why homeowners often want to prevent moles from making homes on their property. While there are traps and poisons available, one of the easiest ways to prevent mole infestation is to remove

their sources of food. Homeowners also can cut back on watering property and get rid of grubs and other insects. Also, consider installing a mole barrier of aluminum sheeting or hardware cloth by burying these materials between two and three feet deep along the perimeter of a lawn or garden.

Cats are natural enemies of moles, so sprinkling cat litter around mole runs may dissuade moles from visiting the area.

Voles

Often mistaken for mice, voles are small rodents with shorter, hairier tails and more stout bodies than mice. Voles are commonly referred to as meadow or field mice, and they feed on small plants and will eat nuts, fruits and even dead animals. Voles will frequently eat succulent root systems and burrow under lawns and gardens.

The runways of voles will be shallow, so they aren't prevalent in frequently cultivated soils. They are also less likely to burrow beneath frequently mowed lawns.

Voles do not like open areas. Remove protection like



weeds, tall grass, dense vegetation, and heavy mulch to make a yard a less popular habitat. Keep grass adjacent to flower beds or gardens mowed short.

If groundhogs, moles and voles become particularly troublesome or infest a yard in great numbers, an exterminator may be needed.

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THE DOS AND DON'TS OF BACKYARD FIRE PITS

Once a rarity, fire pits have grown increasingly popular in recent years, as more and more homeowners turn their homes into private oases. Fire pits run the gamut from the very simple to the more elaborate, and the fire pits homeowners choose often depend on the space they have available as well as their budgets.

But even homeowners without any space or budget constraints should give careful consideration to which fire pit they ultimately install, especially if they plan to make that installation themselves. The following are some dos and don'ts of fire pits for those homeowners about to add this relaxing and popular accessory to their backyards.

DO confirm you can legally build a fire pit in your yard. Fire pits have become so commonplace that homeowners may think there are no regulations governing their construction. However, it's still best to confirm with your local government planning or zoning offices if you can build a fire pit and if any restrictions apply.

DON'T proceed with the project until you have been granted official approval. Assuming you have the go-ahead to build a fire pit is not the same thing as knowing you have been approved. Starting early could result in fines if it turns out you aren't allowed to have a fire pit. But you may also begin building a bigger fire pit than the local government allows, and that could be money down the drain later. Wait until you get official word before you proceed with the project.

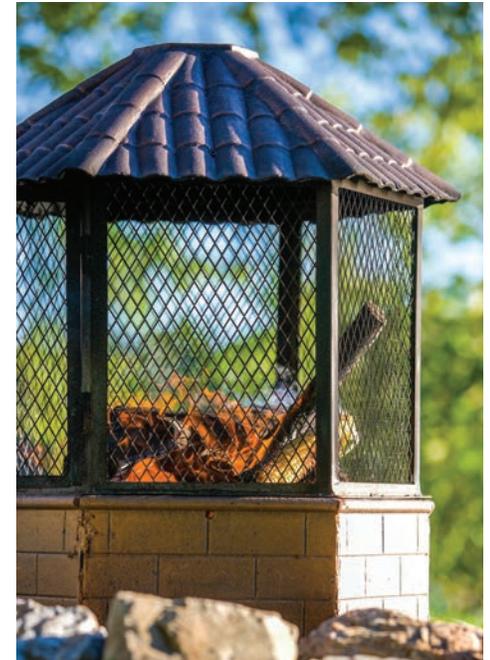
DO build on flat ground. The fire pit should be built on flat ground to reduce risk of accident and/or injury. A fire pit built on flat ground also means everyone can enjoy it comfortably and equally once the project is finished. If the ground around the pit is not flat, some people may be forced to sit crooked or lean forward just to enjoy the pit.

DON'T build near flammable structures. Build the fire pit far enough away from existing structures, such as your home, garage or shed, so flickering flames do not catch some wind and lead to disaster. Before building in a

given spot, monitor the wind patterns for a few days by sitting in a lawn chair at the spot you ultimately want the fire pit to be. If you notice the wind is blowing toward your house, you will want to choose another area for the pit so smoke from the fire will not be blowing into your home every night.

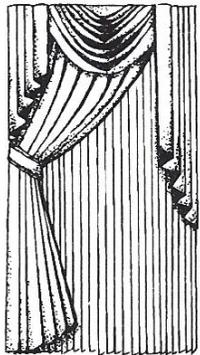
DO choose the right size. The size of your fire pit will depend on the space you have available, but even if you have a vast swath of space, keep in mind that professional contractors typically recommend building a fire pit no bigger than 44 inches wide. Anything larger can be unsightly and may not appeal to prospective buyers down the road. In addition, an especially large fire pit may result in potentially unruly flames that can present a fire hazard.

DON'T go it alone if your DIY skills are suspect. Installing a fire pit is a relatively inexpensive DIY job, but that does not mean anyone can do it. Ground needs to be excavated and the slope of the yard must be measured so the fire pit is safe and functional for years to come. If your DIY skills are not up to snuff, hire a professional



contractor so your backyard oasis does not become a costly headache.

A fire pit can turn a boring backyard into a relaxing retreat. But homeowners must adhere to the dos and don'ts of fire pits to ensure their retreat is something they can enjoy for years to come.



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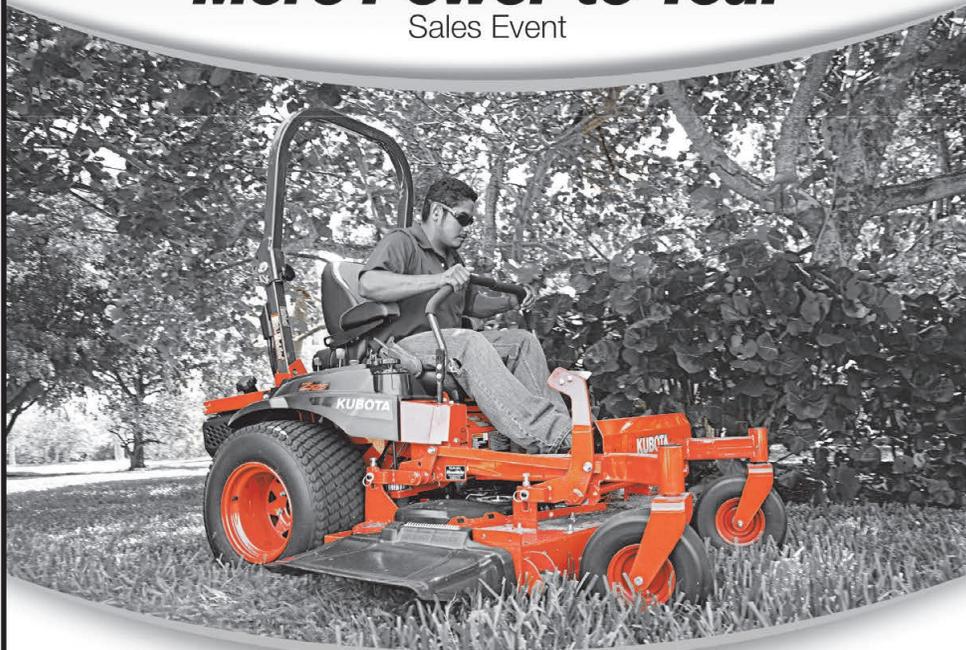
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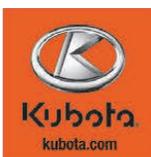
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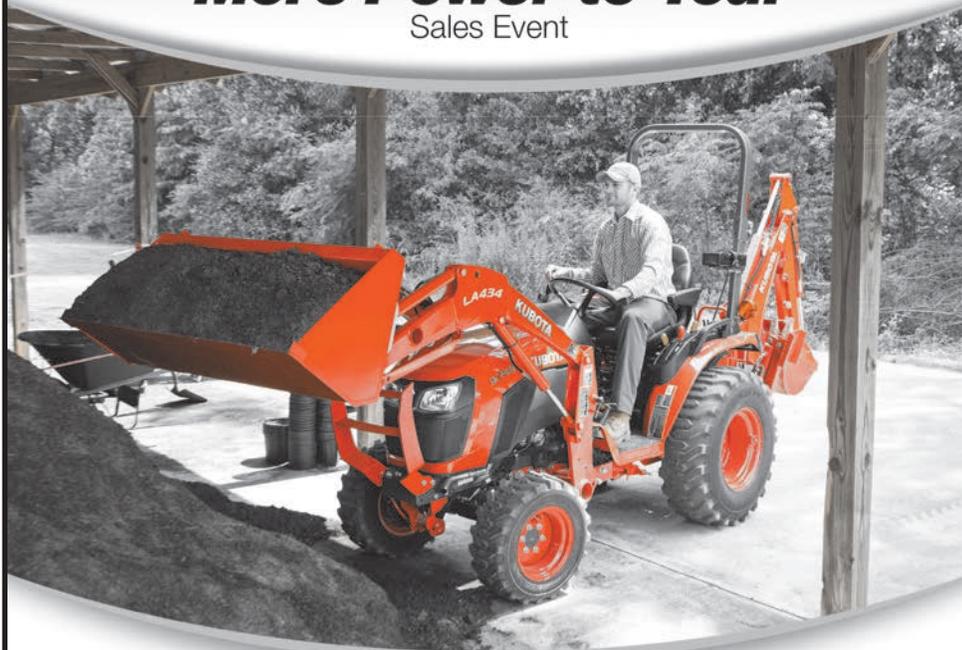


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