

Top 5 home projects to help you save money

It's remodeling season, and with so many projects on the to-do list, which should you tackle first? While some projects provide great long-term return on investment, a few simple ones can provide instant savings. Here are the top home spring projects to help you save money:

Caulk around windows and doors - Stop air leaks around your home by sealing existing gaps and cracks. Use caulking or weather stripping around doors and windows. Installing a door sweep is also a good idea.

Insulate your home - Use insulation with a high R-value, such as Roxul Comfortbatt, which can be used to

top up insulation in your attic. Aim for an R-value of 50 or a depth of 16 inches. For whole home efficiency, ensure other areas of your home, such as crawl spaces, basement headers, walls and ceilings, are well insulated. It will keep your house cool in the warm weather and take the stress off your air conditioning unit.

Clean your AC unit - Come spring, it's not uncommon to find an air conditioner's condenser and compressor blocked up with dirt and debris. This can result in greater stress on the unit, causing it to work harder. Giving it a thorough cleaning is easy and can help maximize your AC unit's service life while

minimizing your energy bill.

Plant trees - Direct sunlight can heat up surfaces and building materials, as well as the interior temperature of your home. Consider planting trees in strategic locations to provide shade and reduce cooling costs.

Install a rain barrel - Water is an important, but costly resource. Installing a rain barrel is an easy and affordable measure to reduce your water consumption, while keeping your lawn and garden looking great.

These simple home maintenance tasks can be well worth the effort, potentially providing hundreds of dollars in annual savings.

Embrace greenscaping for a healthy lawn

Lawn and garden enthusiasts are often on the lookout for new trends that can make their lawns and gardens healthier and more robust. One trend that has gained considerable popularity in recent years is the move toward greenscaping, a set of landscaping practices that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says can improve the health and appearance of lawns and gardens while protecting and preserving the planet's natural resources.

Why greenscape?

While the opportunity to protect and preserve natural resources is reason enough for many lawn and garden enthusiasts to embrace greenscaping, there are additional benefits to turning a landscape into a greenscape. Greenscaping promotes the planting of native plants, which are already accustomed to local climates and therefore do not require as much time and effort to care for than non-native plants. Non-native plants may struggle to adapt to foreign climates, requiring homeowners to water them more frequently than native plants. And

homeowners who plant non-native plants can expect to spend money to ensure they survive. So non-native plants can waste water and also cost homeowners time and money.

How can I greenscape?

Planting native plants is just one element of greenscaping. The following are a handful of additional ways men and women with green thumbs can turn their properties into healthy greenescapes.

- Build and maintain healthy soil. The EPA notes that a single teaspoon of healthy soil contains roughly four billion organisms. These organisms help create a loose soil structure that promotes strong, healthy roots. In addition, healthy soil recycles nutrients for plants while protecting them from certain pests and diseases. One way to create healthy soil is to conduct a soil test to determine if it has any nitrogen, phosphorous, potassium or lime deficiencies. Another way to build healthy soil is to add compost when mixing top soil for new garden beds or plants. Among its

many benefits, compost can help soil retain nutrients and water.

- Water effectively. Lawns and gardens need water to thrive, but overwatering can be just as harmful to lawns as drought. Make a list of the types of plants (including the types of grass) in your yard, and then do your homework to determine how much water each plant needs. The EPA notes that vegetables and other annuals should be watered at the first sign of wilting, while perennials typically only need water if they are still sagging when temperatures cool in the evening. Trees and shrubs with fully established roots usually do not require any watering, though they might need some in years that are especially dry. Avoid watering in mid-day, when summertime temperatures are typically at their hottest and water is likely to evaporate. In addition, watering in the evening may encourage the growth of mold or disease, so water in the early morning.

- Practice "grasscycling." When mowing the grass, leave clippings on the lawn (though not in large piles dumped from buckets attached to the mower). It's a misconception that grass clippings contribute to the buildup of thatch that blocks water from getting to the soil. In fact, when clippings are left on the lawn, the soil recycles the clippings into fertilizer.

Learn more about greenscaping by visiting the EPA at www.epa.gov.



Leaving grass clippings in the yard after mowing can contribute to a healthier lawn.

Break ground with the right tools

The right tools for the job can be the difference between an interminable landscaping project and one that goes smoothly and efficiently. Aspiring landscapers probably have a few shovels and rakes hanging in their garages and sheds for basic landscaping work. But while such tools are effective for certain projects, when it comes to churning soil for garden beds or digging holes for outdoor structures, additional tools come in handy. It may be well worth a trip to a nearby home center to purchase or rent one of these tools ideal for breaking ground.



Proper tools can churn up soil in a short amount of time to make landscaping projects that much easier.

around the garden, wear the proper protection. This includes devices to protect hearing when power tools are in use as well as gloves and safety goggles. Tillers, augers and cultivators have the potential to toss soil and rocks into the air, so make sure others keep their distance while work is in progress.

their projects.

Augers dig deep holes, so it is always smart to have the property surveyed prior to use. This way pipes, gas lines, buried electrical lines, and any other obstructions are clearly identified prior to drilling.

Cultivator

Cultivators are similar to tillers in that they loosen soil. Cultivators are effective during the growth period of plants, when they can be used to aerate the soil and remove weeds. Cultivators come in hand-held versions and push models, and some are even motorized. Cultivators get close to plants to remove weeds without disturbing the plant. They also are used to stir in compost or fertilizer.

While many people think cultivators and tillers are the same, that is not the case. The former is less powerful and will mix the soil or stir up the top layer, while the latter can break up moderately hard ground and loosen firm soil.

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