

Three ways to use your lawn to improve curb appeal

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Returns on home improvement projects vary. In its annual Cost vs. Value Report, Remodeling magazine notes the projects that yield the best returns on investment in a given year. But a host of factors, including the type of market (buyers' or sellers') and the region where the home is being sold, ultimately combine to determine if homeowners' investments in home improvement projects will provide the returns they were hoping for.

Though there's no way of guaranteeing a home improvement project will yield a great return, real estate professionals often cite improving curb appeal as an excellent way to attract prospective buyers and potentially get the asking price or more when selling the home. Improving curb appeal makes even more sense in today's real estate market, when many people do their own searching via real estate websites such as Trulia or Zillow. When using such sites, buyers



will likely be less inclined to click on a listing if exterior photos of the property are not eye-catching.

Various projects, including tending to lawns and gardens, can improve curb appeal. An added benefit to focusing on

landscaping to improve curb appeal is it promotes spending time outdoors in spring and summer. In addition, many lawn- and garden-related home improvement projects need not require professional expertise.

1. Maintain a lush green lawn.

Lawns that fall into disrepair may not give buyers a correct impression about how homeowners maintained their homes. Lawns with multiple dead spots and grass that appears more brown than green may lead many buyers to assume that the home's interior was equally ill-cared for. Maintaining lush green lawns is not as difficult as it may seem. Applying fertilizer and aerating at the appropriate times of year (this varies by region) can promote strong

roots and healthy soil, making it easier for grass to survive harsh conditions like drought. When watering in summer, do so in early morning or evening so as little water is lost to evaporation as possible.

2. Address brown patch.

Even well-maintained lawns can fall victims to brown spots. According to the lawn care professionals at TruGreen, lawns in regions with hot temperatures and high humidity can be infected with brown patch, a common lawn disease that is caused by fungus, which can produce circular areas of brown, dead grass surrounded by narrow, dark rings. Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences notes that removing dew that collects on grass leaves each morning, which can be accomplished by mowing or dragging a water hose across affected areas, can be an effective way to reduce brown patch. Homeowners without much lawn care experience can consult professional landscapers to address the issue. But those looking to sell their properties should note that buyers often walk the grounds of homes they are considering buying. So addressing any issues on the lawn should be a priority for sellers.

3. Confine dogs to certain areas.

Dog owners may want to let their pets roam free in their yards. But homeowners about to put their properties up for sale may want to confine their four-legged friends to certain areas. That's because dog urine can be high in nitrogen. Nitrogen itself is not harmful to lawns, but in high concentrations it can contribute to yellow or brown spots. Also, highly acidic dog urine may even adversely affect pH levels in the soil.

Curb appeal can go a long way toward helping homeowners sell their homes, and a lush lawn can be used to catch the eye of prospective buyers.



Maintain indoor air quality all year long



Ducts may need to be serviced by professionals in homes where indoor air quality is poor.

Millions of people anxiously anticipate the arrival of spring. Months spent cooped up indoors as temperatures outside dip below freezing can take their toll, and those first warm, sunny days of spring can be just what people need to kick the winter blues.

Winter can be dreary for people confined to indoors as temperatures drop, and poor air quality in a home can add to that dreariness while adversely affecting individuals' health. Air quality tends to suffer most in winter, but there are ways to ensure the air inside a home stays healthy all year long.

• Inspect and address any sources of carbon monoxide. Carbon monoxide, or CO, is an invisible, odorless gas that can contribute to poor indoor air quality and a host of health problems if it goes undetected in a home. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, potential sources of CO in a home include improperly vented natural gas appliances, such as stoves and water heaters, gas-powered tools that are used indoors, clogged chimneys, or blocked heating exhaust vents. Men and women can periodically inspect potential sources of CO and address any issues they find while also making sure all CO detectors

are properly installed and functioning optimally.

• Inspect HVAC ducts. Ductwork is used to deliver warm or cool air in homes with heating and air conditioning systems. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency notes that much of the dirt in air ducts adheres to the duct surfaces without ever entering living spaces. However, the EPA notes that homeowners should consider having their ducts cleaned if an inspection uncovers substantial visible mold growth. In addition, the EPA recommends homeowners consider cleaning if ducts are infested with vermin or clogged with excessive amounts of dust or debris.

• Avoid chemical cleaning products. Chemical cleaning products may be great at disinfecting dishes, countertops and other areas in the home, but such items may be toxic and adversely affect indoor air quality. For example, chemicals such as bleach and ammonia, which are used in many commercial cleaning products, can linger in the air, irritating the eyes, nose, throat, and lungs. Homeowners concerned about the quality of air in their homes also can avoid scented products, such as air fresheners and scented detergents, which the

National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health notes may release volatile organic compounds into the air.

• Inspect bathrooms for mold growth. Mold can grow on surfaces that are routinely wet, and that makes poorly ventilated bathrooms common sources for home mold infestations. Mold can adversely affect indoor air quality when mold spores are released, potentially triggering allergic reactions, asthma attacks and respiratory conditions. After bathing in bathrooms without vents, men and women can open windows so the room dries before mold can grow. In bathrooms with vents, make sure vents are running during baths and showers and afterward until ceilings, walls and floors appear dry.

Poor indoor air quality can be easily addressed to ensure individuals stay healthy throughout the year.

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