

Use renovations to create healthier homes

Home renovation projects are done for several different reasons, whether to update styles, repair damaged or broken items or to achieve more living space. More than ever before, homeowners are choosing improvement projects geared toward making their homes healthier.

Establishing a healthy home means different things to different people. For example, to an environmentalist, a healthy home may incorporate eco-friendly or green products. To those with young children or mobility-impaired seniors, a healthy home may be one free from

potential hazards. Others may view a healthy home as one that alleviates allergies.

The World Health Organization says inadequate housing conditions, such as poor ventilation, radon, urban pollution, and moisture issues, can contribute to many preventable diseases and

injuries - especially respiratory problems, nervous system disorders, cardiovascular diseases, and cancer. Furthermore, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency ranks indoor air quality as a top five environmental risk to public health. EPA studies have found that indoor air pollution levels were roughly two to five times greater than outdoor pollution levels.

People interested in making their homes healthier can embrace these renovations and lifestyle changes.

- Be aware of furniture materials. Toxic PBDEs, which are chemicals used as flame retardants on furniture fabrics produced prior to 2006, can send toxins into the air. Some manufacturers may still use these flame retardants in new forms, but with similar risks. Before purchasing furniture, ask if a product is treated, and select naturally fire-resistant materials like wool and

cotton.

- Lighten up. Lighting is often underappreciated but can have a dramatic impact on whether a home feels inviting, warm and/or uplifting. Experiment with different types of bulbs and lighting fixtures to turn drab and dreary environments into brighter places. Lighting may improve mood and productivity.

- Let the sun shine in. Modify window treatments to let more sunlight into the house. There is evidence that the sun, particularly UV light, is a potent bactericide. The Sunlight Institute advises that there's no harm in letting natural sunlight do its work, as bacteria within eight feet of low-intensity UV light can be killed in 10 minutes.

- Inspect and service wood-burning appliances. A study published in the American Journal of Respiratory Cell and Molecular Biology has

found regular inhalation of wood smoke limits immune activity and function, and anyone who burns wood indoors should be aware of these potential health risks. Ensuring proper ventilation of smoke and routinely cleaning the chimney can help cut down on particulate matter.

- Turn to nontoxic cleaning products, pesticides and insecticides. Always opt for nontoxic, natural products when cleaning in and around the house.

- Declutter the home. A cluttered, hectic space can affect emotions and mental state, never mind attracting dust and making a home harder to clean. Spending time in spaces that do not elicit stressful feelings is healthier and can help residents to rest and recharge.

Making a home healthier can be on the list of this year's renovation plans.

Easy ways to conserve water

There are a number of reasons to conserve water, but perhaps none is more urgent or compelling than the role water plays in human survival. Water.org notes that human beings can survive for weeks without food but only make it a few days without water. What's more, the foods humans eat, namely plants and animals, require water to survive.

The world's supply of fresh water is dwindling, a troubling notion on its own, and even more so when considering the human population is only growing. In fact, the World Water Council estimates that the world's population will grow by as much as 50 percent in the next half-century.

Such a reality only highlights the need to conserve water. Though the growing global water shortage is a complex problem, the many ways people can conserve water are quite simple.

- Change your diet. Reducing consumption of livestock and poultry in favor of vegetables can help people dramatically reduce their water consumption.

According to the Grace Communications Foundation (GRACE), a nonprofit organization dedicated to creating a more sustainable food

system, livestock and poultry produced in the United States consume substantial amounts of water-intensive feed. By reducing consumption of such products, consumers can greatly reduce their water footprints. When eating meat, dairy and eggs, GRACE recommends opting for pasture-raised products that feed on grass, which is less likely to be irrigated than water-needy food sources like corn and soybeans that are fed to many commercially produced livestock and poultry.

- Reduce water consumption when cooking. When cooking, some cooks might find it convenient to keep faucets running so they can more easily rinse foods and their hands. However, such practices are incredibly wasteful, as substantial amounts of water literally goes down the drain when faucets are running unattended. In addition, homeowners can install low-flow faucets in their sinks, which GRACE notes typically flow at 1.5 gallons per minute instead of the five gallons per minute of more traditional faucets.

- Take showers instead of baths. Baths might feel like just what the doctor ordered after a long day, but baths

are considerably more wasteful than showers. GRACE estimates that the average bath can require as many as 50 gallons of water, while a 10-minute shower under a low-flow showerhead requires roughly half that amount of water.

- Take your conservation efforts outside. Water conservation efforts need not be confined to indoors. Homeowners who pride themselves on having lush green lawns can still produce enviable landscapes while conserving water. When watering a lawn, do so in the early morning hours or early evening. Temperatures tend to be more mild during these hours than in the middle of the day, meaning less water will be lost to evaporation. Consider the weather when watering the lawn as well. If wind is in the forecast, turn off automatic sprinklers and hand water if absolutely necessary. Gusty winds increase water loss due to evaporation and prevent water from getting to the lawn. In addition, if the forecast is predicting rain, turn off automatic sprinklers and let nature water the lawn instead.

- Take steps to conserve energy. Water plays a vital role in the production of energy, so taking steps to conserve energy can go a long way toward reducing your water footprint. When buying new appliances, opt for energy-efficient products. Homeowners can investigate renewable energy sources such as solar energy, which can dramatically reduce their carbon footprints while conserving substantial amounts of water over the long haul.

The need to conserve water is urgent. But as complex a problem as the dwindling world water supply is, the efforts to solve that problem through conservation can be simple.



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