

FALL HOME IMPROVEMENT



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How to recognize when it's time to replace your windows

Windows are a major component of a home. Window installation professionals will tell homeowners that the average life span of residential windows is between 15 and 30 years. Most well-maintained products can last 20 years, so homeowners who have windows approaching that age may want to schedule a window assessment and possible replacement.

Replacing windows is a job that requires advanced skill, and this is not a do-it-yourself project. There are many qualified professional window installation companies that will work with homeowners to measure, order and install windows that will fit with the style of a home and local weather, all while providing features the homeowner desires.

For those wondering when to replace windows, Pella and Renewal by Andersen, two of the premiere window manufacturers, offer these guidelines.

- Difficulty opening and closing windows. A window that does not operate as it should can aggravate homeowners. If windows



are sticking shut or cannot be securely closed, it's probably time for something new.

- There's apparent window damage. Accidents happen, and if a rock is kicked up from a lawnmower and cracks a window

or if baseball practice has gone awry with an errant throw, windows may require replacement.

- Drafts in the window are common. If heating and cooling systems are working overtime, drafty, poorly insulated windows

could be to blame. Various agencies can perform energy efficiency tests in a home. Windows that are determined to be the weak spots should be replaced.

- Dated windows are present in the home. Older windows may

pose safety hazards, especially those in older homes. A larger window may be needed to comply with fire safety codes allowing for window egress. Dated windows also may simply look "old" and compromise the aesthetics of a home.

- Outdoor noises are noticed quite readily. Newer windows can help reduce noise transmission. So those leaf blowers, airplanes, barking dogs, and kids playing basketball up the street won't disturb homeowners as they try to enjoy some peace and quiet indoors.

- Fading indoors is noted. Windows that do not feature low-emissivity (Low-E) glass coatings will not block UV rays. Those rays can cause fading to wood floors and furniture or pretty much anything the sunlight touches. Replacing existing windows with Low-E coating alternatives can safeguard belongings and improve window efficiency.

Finally, window replacement may be necessary when existing windows are showing signs of aging or damage.

Build your gift list for DIY enthusiasts

Rising prices have pushed people to look for new ways to save money. The do-it-yourself approach to home repairs has long been seen as a potential avenue to save money, and holiday shoppers can consider DIY when shopping for loved ones this year.

A recent survey by the remodeling company Allstar Home reported that 70 percent of Americans have recently engaged in DIY home improve-

ment projects. Similarly, a new Ipsos poll conducted on behalf of the DIY Network found that 73 percent of Canadian homeowners have done a renovation project themselves in the past. With so many homeowners tackling projects around the home on their own, DIY-related products may be just what's needed to hammer down the perfect gift. The following are some potential home improvement presents for

DIY enthusiasts.

- Magnetic wristband: Keeping items close at hand takes on new meaning when one utilizes a magnetic wristband. The BinyaTools Magnetic Wristband is just one of the versions of this handy tool that's ideal for wrangling screws, nails, washers, and any other ferrous items. It's also a great option for crafters and jewelry makers.

- Painting essentials kit: Painting is an easy and effective way to transform a room. For those DIYers who have yet to compile all of their painting gear, local home improvement retailers often package kits that include a dropcloth, assorted roller sizes, brushes, a paint tray, and even painter's tape to get started on projects.

- Rolling work bench: People serious about projects will need a place to store all the tools they have collected. A rolling work bench, such as the Gladiator nine-drawer work bench, has drawers to store tools and a wooden top on which smaller tasks can be tackled. Roll it where needed.

- Hearing protection: Drills, sanders and other power tools can be noisy. DIYers will want to protect their hearing, and a set of workshop earmuffs can be a thoughtful gift. Some, like the 3M WorkTunes headphones, even come with Bluetooth technology to offer both hearing protection and the

ability to listen to tunes while working.

- Headlamp: DIYers need both hands to tackle jobs effectively, which can make holding a flashlight to illuminate the area challenging. Hands-free lighting is possible with an LED headlamp. The light is easily focused where the user is looking.

- Laser measuring tape: A smart measuring tape utilizes a laser to increase measuring size, calculate distances and ensure that every home improvement project lines up.

- Sawhorse: DIYers working on large projects can benefit from an adjustable saw horse to support materials and ensure safer cuts. The ToughBuilt C700 is an option to consider since it has support pegs that fold out of the legs to allow for greater ease of use.

The list of gifts for DIYers is endless. Tools and additional gear can help people nail holiday shopping this year.



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8 steps to a more functional kitchen

A kitchen is often the most utilized room in a house. Meals may be prepared, cooked and often eaten in kitchens, and the room is often utilized as a homework spot or a makeshift place to pay bills and stay on top of household needs. By enhancing the organization and functionality of the kitchen, homeowners can enjoy these popular spaces even more.

Homeowners have increased their spending on home improvements in recent years. According to the Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, project spending rose to \$472 billion in 2022 from \$328 billion in 2019. It was estimated consumers will have spent \$485 billion by the end of 2023. Kitchen renovations were the most popular upgrade and accounted for the highest budgets in 2021, according to Houzz. When the time comes to renovate a kitchen, homeowners can take steps to make these spaces more organized and therefore functional. Here are eight tips to creating a more functional kitchen.

1. Increase storage, and then invest in more. Make the most of corner cabinets and other potential dead spots in a kitchen. Various products can be used to organize awkwardly angled or shaped areas. Kitchen designers also can work with you to reconfigure cabinets and



kitchen layouts.

2. Organize utensils and dishes around the sink/dishwasher. Rather than traversing the kitchen to put clean dishes away, make loading and unloading the dishwasher that much easier by locating commonly used items next to and above it. Similarly, place frequently used saucepans, baking dishes and other items near the oven or food preparation area.

3. Utilize drawer and cabinet

organizers. Make a place for everything in the kitchen. Take out all items and see what you need and use all the time. Then coordinate storage around those items so everything fits perfectly. Pull-out shelves and Lazy Susans also can facilitate access.

4. Add shelves to cabinets. If you can afford to have a custom-built kitchen, by all means design cabinets according to preference. If you're using standard cabinets, you may have to reconfigure shelves and spacing to fit the items you have. This also will help you maximize

cabinet space.

5. Organize the garbage. Have a pull-out drawer or cabinet to store trash bins. Separate compost, trash and recycling needs.

6. Create continuity in the room. Many open concept homes will have kitchens open up to another room in the home. Mirror the design scheme from elsewhere in the house, and make sure that the flow between spaces is not obstructed.

7. Create a beverage station. A beverage station can minimize the time needed to make a cup of tea or coffee or for the kids to grab juice or chocolate milk.

8. Have a workspace in the kitchen. Whether paying bills, making a grocery list or leaving notes for the family, a dedicated workspace can add more function to the room. Be sure there is task lighting nearby and ample overhead lighting to ensure that all kitchen needs are illuminated properly.

A more functional kitchen can make this already popular space even more so.

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Tips when hiring a contractor

Contractors perform important work for millions of homeowners every day. Home improvement projects are complicated undertakings, and the experience of skilled contractors can ensure jobs are completed on time and within homeowners' budgets.

Homeowners have undoubtedly heard horror stories from neighbors about projects that have gone awry. Projects can go sideways for a number of reasons, but a skilled contractor can help homeowners navigate such situations successfully. That underscores how important it can be to find the right professional for the job. The following are some tips homeowners can consider as they look to hire a contractor.

- Identify which professional you need. Some contractors are of the jack-of-all-trades variety, but many specialize in a particular line of work. It's important that homeowners identify which type of contractor they should work with prior to starting a project.

This requires homeowners to define the goal of the project (i.e., new wood floor installation), which can serve as a springboard into finding the right type of contractor.

- Prioritize building safety. Safety should be the utmost priority for homeowners and contractors alike. Prior to hiring a contractor, homeowners should identify any safety restrictions that might be enforced by local governments and take note of all the permits necessary to get a job done. Homeowners can then discuss those restrictions and permits as they interview contractors. Projects that do not adhere to code are illegal and can compromise homeowners' ability to sell their homes in the future. So it's vital to work with contractors who are familiar with local codes and aware of which permits are necessary to ensure a project can go forward.
- Insist on written estimates. Handshake agreements offer no protection to homeowners

or contractors, so estimates indicating what will be done and how much the project will cost should be provided. Homeowners should insist on

by region, but in general homeowners have a right to a written contract and contractors are obligated to provide a copy of that contract signed

guarantees and warranties also should be cited.

- Do not pay in cash. Some contractors may suggest that the project will cost less if



receiving written estimates and interpret an unwillingness to provide one as a significant red flag.

- Know your rights. Laws vary

by both parties. That contract must be provided prior to the start of the project. The contract should provide a detailed account of the work that will be done, as well as a timeline indicating important dates that components of the project will begin and be completed. The contract also should detail materials and who is providing them. Details regarding payments,

they're paid in cash. However, home improvements should never be cash transactions. Cash does not indicate proof of payment, which can be problematic if a dispute arises.

Contractors help homeowners turn dream projects into reality. Homeowners can employ various strategies to ensure they find the right professional for their home improvement project.

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Did you know?

Homeowners with an eye on home improvement projects should know that kitchens and bathrooms tend to be the most costly rooms to renovate. An affiliate of the National Kitchen and Bath Association told Architectural Digest in 2023 that kitchens and bathrooms require the most labor-intensive renovations, which contributes significantly to the high costs of such projects. Labor is indeed a significant cost when renovating a home, as the Construction Labor Market Analyzer indicates labor cost percentages in construction are between 20 and 40 percent of the total budget of a given project. The final cost of any renovation project will depend on a host of variables unique to each home, including the square footage of the room being remodeled and the materials homeowners choose. However, homeowners looking for less costly renovations may want to consider revamping their dining rooms and closets, each of which are projects that can make a difference and tend to require a less significant financial commitment than projects like kitchen and bath remodels.

How DIY can be bad for homeowners' bottom lines

Homeowners know it can be tempting to go the do-it-yourself (DIY) route when starting a home improvement project. Home repairs and renovations can be costly, and the notion of saving money on such projects compels many homeowners to try their hand at home improvements. However, the DIY approach can be costly as well, and if things go awry, homeowners may end up with empty pockets and unfinished projects.

Online tutorials and advertisements for home improvement retailers can make DIY seem like a snap. However, there are potential pitfalls to consider that could make the ostensibly less expensive DIY route far more detrimental to the bottom line than homeowners may recognize.

- **Permits:** Permits ensure work is done in accordance with local codes, which are designed to ensure the safety of residents and their neighbors. Licensed contractors know which permits are necessary for projects they're hired to

work on, and many even procure permits for their clients (homeowners are urged to read estimates and contracts to determine who will be responsible for acquiring the appropriate permits). DIYers may not know about local permits, and therefore go ahead with projects without procuring any. That can be harmful in the short- and long-term. In the short-term, a failure to procure the appropriate permits can make a home less safe and potentially lead to costly fines and necessitate a complete do-over of the project. In the long-term, homeowners who did not secure the appropriate permits may not be given a certificate of occupancy (CO) when putting their homes on the market, which can make it very difficult to sell the home.

- **Ancillary costs:** The ancillary costs of DIY are not often noted in online tutori-



als. However, such costs can dramatically increase the amount of money DIYers shell out in order to complete projects on their own. Ancillary costs include but are not limited to the price of tools and equipment; disposal fees

for materials that will need to be discarded; and the cost of permits. These costs are

often included in estimates provided by contractors, but they're easily overlooked by novice DIYers.

- **Repairs:** Even experienced contractors make mistakes, so DIYers, particularly novices,

can anticipate making a few errors along the way. Minor mistakes may not prove too costly, but more significant mishaps can quickly negate any cost savings associated with DIY renovations. The cost to fix DIY mistakes varies depending on the project, but a 2019 survey from Porch.com found that the average DIY mistake cost homeowners \$310 and added five and a half hours to the overall time spent to complete a project. It's worth noting the Porch.com survey was conducted prior to the dramatic increase in materials costs related to inflation in recent years. So it's reasonable to assume that fixing DIY mistakes in 2024 could end up costing considerably more than a few hundred dollars.

Before diving into DIY, homeowners may want to consider the real costs associated with forgoing professional experience in the potentially misplaced hopes of saving a few dollars.



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Renovations that help sell homes

The adage “there’s a lid for every pot” suggests that, even in relation to the real estate market, there’s bound to be a buyer for every home on the market. Price is a significant variable in the minds of potential buyers, but there are additional factors that can affect the impression people get of a given home.

Certain home features can tip the scales in favor of sellers. In fact, various renovations can help sell homes more readily. And these renovations need not cost a fortune. Putting a home on the market can be stressful, but these renovations may help

it sell fast.

- A fresh coat of paint: Although painting is relatively inexpensive and a job that some do-it-yourselfers can tackle, it’s not a task relished by many. Painting is messy, it takes time, and requires moving furniture. In fact, prepping a room for painting often is the toughest component of any painting job. But fresh coats of paint can create a strong first impression. Choose a neutral color and get painting. Jennie Norris, chairwoman for the International Association of Home Staging Professionals, says gray

is a “safe” color that has been trending in recent years.

- Minor bathroom remodel: Remove dated wall coverings, replace fixtures, consider reglazing or replacing an old tub, and swap old shower doors for fast fixes in a bathroom. If there’s more room in the budget, replacing a tub, tile surround, floor, toilet, sink, vanity, and fixtures can cost roughly \$10,500, says HGTV. You’ll recoup an average of \$10,700 at resale, making a minor bathroom remodel a potentially worthy investment.

- Redone kitchen: The



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kitchen tends to be the hub of a home. This room gets the most usage and attention of any space, and it’s a great place to focus your remodeling attention. The National Association of the Remodeling Industry estimates that homeowners can recover up to 52 percent of the cost of a kitchen upgrade upon selling a home. Buyers want a functional and updated kitchen. Trending features include drawer-style microwaves and dishwashers, commercial ranges, hidden outlets, and even wine refrigerators.

- Updated heating and cooling system: Better Homes and Gardens reports that homeowners may be able to recoup 85 percent of the cost of new HVAC systems when they sell their homes. Heating, cooling and ventilation components are vital to maintain. You don’t

want buyers to be taken aback by an older system, and many millennial buyers are not willing to overlook old mechanical systems.

- Fresh landscaping: A home’s exterior is the first thing buyers will see. If they pull up to a home with eye-catching landscaping and outdoor areas that are attractive yet functional, they’re more likely to be intrigued. Often buyers will equate a home that features an impressive exterior with upkeep inside as well. The American Nursery Landscape Association says the average homeowner may spend \$3,500 for landscaping.

Improving a home’s chances to sell quickly and at a higher price often comes down to making smart improvements that catch the eyes of buyers.

Make a dining room more elegant for entertaining

The kitchen may be the heart of a home, but when it comes to entertaining, a dining room — if one is present in a house — tends to be the prime gathering spot for meals.

Dining rooms may not be top on the list of spaces to renovate, as they tend to be used infrequently. But a dining room makeover may still be a worthy endeavor. Here are some simple ways to make the dining room more elegant and functional.

- Clear out the clutter. The first step toward improving a dining room eating area is to remove any extraneous items from the space. If the dining room table is not used very often, it likely has become a catch-all for other items, such

as bills, newspapers or kids' homework. Rather than using the dining space as a makeshift office or homework station, invest in a rolling cart to store those papers and other items. Simply roll it into a closet or another room when it's time to host a party.

- Hang a statement light. Few decorative items add as much drama and ambiance to a dining space as a new overhead light. People hear chandelier and think a bejeweled or crystal design. But various chandelier styles can fit the aesthetic of a home. The light will be a focal point and instantly make the dining area more elegant. Install the light on a dimmer to adjust the il-



lumination as needed to set the mood.

- Invest in new linens. Purchase coordinating table linens that will be used for special occasions. A decorative table cloth

or table runner coupled with cloth napkins and placemats helps to set the scene of the dinner party.

- Add a piece of artwork. Many modern homeowners have es-

chewed the China cabinet that once was standard in dining rooms. Rather than a bulky piece of furniture, a large piece of statement-making artwork or framed photos over a more minimalistic buffet table or small service bar is preferable. Choose artwork that complements the colors in the space.

- Include a centerpiece. Centerpieces add sophistication to the table and tie into the event. Floral arrangements, a bowl or basket of fruit, pine cones or greens from outdoors, or collectibles like shells in a tall canister can serve as centerpieces.

There are many simple ways to dress up dining spaces and make them more elegant.

Some hidden costs of DIY

The home renovation industry is booming, and that's reflected in the cost to upgrade a home. Home Guide says remodeling a kitchen costs \$25,000 on average, and a bathroom renovation runs around \$10,000. Though rates fluctuate depending on a host of variables, renovations can cost \$15 to \$60 per square foot depending on the project.

The average homeowner wants to save as much money as possible when renovating their home. Many think doing much of the work themselves is the easiest way to keep costs low. What some homeowners may not realize is that DIY can be costly and prove a big hassle in the long run. The following are some hidden costs of DIY and renovating in general.

Time

DIY projects are a major drain on free time. Homeowners taking the DIY route typically work on weekends or after work. Few people can take off and devote their undivided attention to a remodel like a contractor can. Time is a valuable resource that is not renewable. Therefore, think of a DIY project in terms of what it would equal in lost wages. Because homeowners are not professionals, a DIY project may take double the time it would take a contractor. It may be worth it to simply hire it out.

Mistakes

Many resources are available

to help DIY enthusiasts work on a project, but there are still tricks and techniques learned after years on the job. DIYers may damage their homes by taking shortcuts or not understanding how to do a job properly. A plumbing mistake, for example, may lead to flooding that damages another room in the home. And such mistakes may not be covered by homeowners insurance policies.

Fines

Permits are required for many home improvement projects. Forgetting to obtain permits or not realizing one may be necessary could subject you to hefty fines and/or force the job to be redone so it's up to code. Professionals likely know the rules regarding permits and often include the cost of acquiring permits in an estimate.

Remediation

It's only after opening up walls or removing floors that you may discover issues you did not anticipate, such as termite damage or mold. These unforeseen factors can drive up the overall costs of a project.

Disposal

Removing old building materials or gutting a room is part of many renovations. Chances are this refuse simply cannot be left at the curb for trash pickup. As a DIYer, you may not factor the costs for a dumpster or the

time and money required to haul debris to a recycling or landfill center.


Tools

DIYers may have to purchase

tools as they engage in new projects. These expenses can add up and negate the savings of doing some of the work yourself.

DIY projects may initially seem like a way to save money,



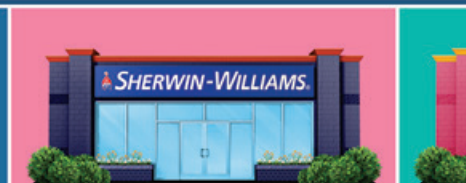



but weekend warriors should calculate the hidden costs associated with DIY renovations before deciding to do some work on their own.



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Shedding some light on home solar

Consumers shopping around for home improvement projects may be leaning toward overhauls that can reduce energy consumption and save them money in the long run. This is a driving factor behind a growing number of homeowners investigating solar energy for their residences.

How does solar power work? Solar power harnesses the sun's energy and converts it into electricity that can be used in homes. Many people are familiar with photovoltaics (PV), which are the panels that absorb sunlight and create an electric field across their layers. Another solar technology, known as concentrating solar power, is primarily used in large power plants and is not appropriate for residential use, according to Energy.gov.

According to the Office of Energy Efficiency & Renewable Energy, hundreds of thousands of solar panels have been put in use across the United States since 2008.

Costs associated with solar: The upfront expense of solar panels is significant, costing anywhere from \$10,000 to \$14,000 for initial installation. However, comparatively speaking, homeowners can spend \$1,500 or more per year on electricity, so

solar panels will pay for themselves over time. Keep in mind that costs may vary depending on energy needs and how many panels will be required to service the system.

How much electricity can I expect? The Federal Trade Commission's Consumer Advice says that the amount of power generated from a solar energy system depends on a few factors:

1. The average number of hours of direct, unshaded sunlight your roof gets each year;
2. The pitch (angle), age and condition of your roof, and the compass direction it faces;
3. The size and strength of your system; and
4. Environmental factors such as snow, dust or shade that may cover the system.

Save even more money: Consumers can contact their utility companies to find out if they provide homeowners who produce solar power with "net metering." This program pays the homeowner money or gives credit for excess power the system produces and returns to the electric grid. Individuals also may be eligible for energy tax credits or other benefits.

Homeowners may find it worthwhile to explore solar energy, particularly if they consume a high amount of electricity.

Improving storage in common areas

Increasing storage capabilities at home is a popular goal among many homeowners and renters. Despite how much space a person may have at home, there's often a desire to have more or maximize the areas that are there. According to the Self-Storage Almanac, there are an estimated 51,206 storage facilities operating in the United States today, and MJ Partners Self-Storage Update says 11.1 percent of households currently rent at self-storage facilities. IBISWorld indicates the Canadian self-storage industry has grown at an average annual rate of 3.1 percent over the last five years.

People often turn to external storage facilities to house their belongings when space is at a premium at home. Others may focus their organization energy on closets, garages and basements to free up room. But common areas around the home also can provide additional sources of storage. Common areas are locations where people come together for activities.

Living room/family room

Living rooms and family rooms are areas of the home where people spend many hours. These tend to be multifunctional spaces where people entertain,

lounge and even enjoy movies or gaming. Possibilities in these living spaces that can create extra storage include furniture that

backpacks for easy access. A shelf with some hooks can store keys or hold a basket to store the daily mail.



serves double-duty. For example, a storage ottoman adds decorative appeal but also can be filled with board games or books. Cabinet-style TV stands may not be as streamlined as mounted versions, but they're ideal places to stash games, remote controls and other accessories.

Entryway

An entryway or mudroom can quickly succumb to clutter. When organizing such a space, think about the needs of the household. A storage bench will be a place where everyone can sit to put on shoes, and then stow footwear underneath when not in use. A wall-mounted rack can hold the current season's jackets or sweaters, as well as purses or

Hallway and closet

Closet organization systems can be the unsung heroes in closets utilized by multiple members of the family. These customizable components can be sized accordingly for the space, and then configured as needed with a balance of shelves and hanging racks. An out-of-the-way nook or long hallway can be enhanced with a bookshelf to hold photo albums or that library that only continues to grow as new reading material is acquired.

Homeowners can make common areas more functional with the addition of storage.



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How to make a home more cozy

The meaning of the term “cozy” varies as it pertains to home decor. For some, cozy may mean intimate spaces with lots of quilts and throws. For others, cozy could indicate bright and airy spaces enhanced by plenty of fresh foliage.

Regardless of how they define cozy, homeowners typically want their homes to be inviting and comfortable. With that in mind, the following are some ways to impart a cozy vibe to any living space.

- Make use of a fireplace. Flames lapping wood (or faux wood in the event of gas-powered fireplaces) can put anyone in a tranquil state of mind. Fireplaces add instant ambiance and make great places for people to congregate and engage in conversation. During warmer months when the fire isn't blazing, decorative candles can be lit to mimic the same feel.
- Add texture in the design. Texture can be anything from a raised pattern on wallpaper

to a knotty area rug to a mosaic piece of artwork. A home with texture tends to create cozier impressions than one with all sleek and smooth surfaces.

- Enjoy a soft rug. Although many design experts say hardwood floors or laminate options are easier for allergies and keeping a home clean, a soft rug underfoot can be welcoming. Rather than wall-to-wall carpeting, place area rugs in spots that can use some cozying up, such as beneath beds and even under the dining table.
- Light candles. The warm, flickering light of candles adds cozy vibes in spades. According to The Spruce and Paula Boston, a visual merchandiser for Festive Lights, candles can be used throughout a home to create instant atmosphere. Exercise caution

with candles and fully extinguish them before retiring for the evening.

- Update bedding for the season. Crisp and light cotton and linen are cozy materials

- Invest in lots of pillows. Pillows can instantly make a spot more cozy, whether it's the living room sofa or an outdoor lounging nook. Look for materials that are durable for the

an environmental standpoint. However, LEDs illuminate with a more stark, blue light that can seem clinical in home spaces. Look for bulbs where the “temperature” can be customized. The more the color spectrum leans toward warm light, the more cozy a space will feel. This can be enhanced by putting some lights on dimmer switches, and toning down the brightness as needed.

- Install a bookshelf. Even for those who are strict devotees of e-readers, a shelf full of actual books interspersed with some well-placed knickknacks can make a room feel more cozy. Books add texture, the feel of hallowed halls and libraries, and visual appeal.

Making a home more cozy doesn't have to be complicated. A few easy modifications can improve interior spaces.



when the weather is warm. But when the temperature starts to dip, flannel or jersey bedding makes a bed that much more inviting, says Real Simple.

space in which they're being used.

- Think about warm lighting. The transition from incandescent light bulbs to halogen and LED is beneficial from

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How to compare contractors' bids

Home renovation projects are significant undertakings. It is common for homeowners who may not have the time nor the expertise to do the work themselves to call in professionals to tackle these jobs.

According to the home improvement resource HomeGuide.com, for a bathroom remodel, which is one of the more popular improvement projects, installation and labor accounts for 10 to 25 percent of the total project cost. In general, many contractors pay themselves \$300 to \$500 for an hourly rate, while helpers may make \$150 per hour.

Materials used account for the other components of an overall project cost. Homeowners negotiate the best rates possible by obtaining a number of bids from contractors, spelling out both labor and material costs and determining their best option. Here's how to compare bids.

Check as many reviews as possible

Go online, ask friends for recommendations, or rely on the Better Business Bureau to find reliable contractors. A contractor who seems too good to be true will not necessarily be so, but it's still best to vet each professional thoroughly prior to signing a

contract.

Cost basis vs bid basis

Certain contractors will produce an estimate based on the best guess of the cost of supplies then add on a flat fee or percentage for their services. This is called a cost basis bid. Others will create a bid that includes all their anticipated supply and labor costs, known as a bid basis bid. Know what you're getting to make the most accurate comparison.

Create a master itemized checklist

It's easy to explain the project differently from one contractor to another when doing so verbally. That may result in a different plan and price. Rather, make a checklist of what you want done and have several copies to give to the contractors with whom you meet. This makes it easier to compare costs line by line.

Have specific materials in mind

Make sure bids are based on the same materials and tasks. For example, if you're comparing window replacement quotes, be sure that each quote is based on the same window material and coating. Vinyl replacement win-

dows may not cost the same as fiberglass or wood.

It is much easier to compare pricing when contractors provide estimates reflecting the same materials.

Small versus big contracting companies

Some bids may differ based on the manpower of the company. One contractor may view a project as an easy one that can be slipped right into the schedule. Another may have to devote more time and effort if it is being undertaken by one or two people. This can affect cost in the quote. Furthermore, a contractor who does a lot of advertising in print, television or online, or has an office or warehouse space, may have extra overhead costs that are passed on to the customer.

Doing your own demo

Figure out if the contractor will allow you to perform a portion of the tear-out, clean-up or other tasks to save on labor costs. Make sure this is included in the bid.

Comparing contractor work bids can be tricky, but it helps homeowners know they're getting the best value for their money.

Garage storage solutions

Who doesn't have a space at home that serves as a catch-all for items that seemingly have no other home? For many, this storage wasteland where items go to be forgotten tends to be the garage. Before long, clutter can overwhelm the space and create an eyesore. Garage clutter also makes the space less functional by making it harder to park a vehicle or store equipment.

Organizing a garage takes work, but the end result can improve the appearance, free up space, make work more efficient, and make it easier to find and use tools more readily. Here are some ways to get started on organizing your garage.

Start with cleaning and culling

One of the first steps when organizing a garage is to thoroughly analyze what is needed and what can be removed from the garage. If items belong elsewhere, such as in a shed or the basement, move these items first. Discard damaged or broken items. Next, move on to tools or gear that hasn't been used in some time. Will you use it again? If the item has been collecting dust for years, you likely already know the answer to that question.

Pile all items in the driveway so you have a clean slate with which to start. Measure the room to figure out the dimensions so you'll know how much wall space is available for storage.

Free up floor space

The ultimate goal of a garage storage renovation is to make floor space available, according to Stacey Schweiger of Sunshine Orga-

nizing. Lifting items off the floor makes access easier, and protects items should there be a flood or leaks.

A combination of wall shelves, overhead shelves, cabinets, and wall hooks can help homeowners create more floor area. Organization becomes easier when everything has a designated space where it can be easily returned to.

Consider weight

When investing in shelving and racks, remember that many of the items stored in garages tend to be heavy. It's important to ensure that shelves and hooks are heavy-duty and able to withstand the weight of pressure put on them. Verify the maximum weight so that racks will not buckle or tip over and cause issues.

Utilize overhead space

Overhead storage can be reserved for items that aren't used frequently, such as seasonal decorations or luggage.

Out of sight

Some items should be stored out of sight and beyond the reach of children and pets. Cabinets and containers can be used and locked to secure materials, such as fertilizers, paints, solvents, and other chemicals.

Additional ideas

Magnets, pegboards, organization bins and systems, and similar products can be used to corral small or errant items like hand tools, fasteners and more.

Garage organization will take some planning and time, but the end result can be well worth the effort.

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Prevent home electrical fires

A person's home should be a safe haven. Too often, however, there may be dangers lurking in a home that can compromise the safety of residents.

Electrical fires are no joke. The Hartford insurance company says electrical failure or malfunctions account for almost 34,000 home fires per year. The National Fire Protection Association says they can contribute to 440 deaths and \$1.3 billion in direct property damage annually.

Older homes may be most vulnerable to electrical fires, as such structures were not designed to handle the demands of modern living. The insurance experts at Nationwide say half of all homes in the United States have electrical systems that were installed before garage door openers, high-tech coffee makers, and many computers became must-have items. And the Electrical Safety Foundation International says homes built before 1973 with overloaded electrical systems pose a number of safety threats.

Overloaded circuits are not the only contributor to electrical

fires. Damaged wiring characterized by worn, frayed or loose wires can cause fires. Malfunctioning appliances or those improperly maintained also can create home fires. Another contributor is poorly installed extension cords and power strips, as well as faulty outlets and switches around homes.

Homeowners can take various steps to reduce the risk of electrical fires at home.

- Install arc fault circuit interrupters. AFCIs are special types of circuit breakers that help prevent fires caused by nicked or frayed wiring. An AFCI gets tripped and cuts off power when an electrical problem is detected before a fire can start. In 2022, the National Electric Code started requiring AFCIs in bedrooms, and by 2017 they have been mandated throughout homes.
- Conduct a home electrical inspection. All homes more than 40 years old should be inspected to ensure their electrical systems can handle modern demands, says



Nationwide. A qualified electrician can make recommendations regarding replacing breakers and suggest other modifications to improve safety.

- Utilize a monitor. Ting from

Whisker Labs monitors a home's electrical network using a smart plug-in sensor that is designed to detect hazards. The company indicates micro-arcs and sparks that develop are precursors to electrical fires.

- Turn to automatic shut-offs. Homeowners can utilize appliances and additional devices that automatically shut off after a set period of time. This can reduce the risk of overheating.
- Rely on timers or smart devices. Timers and smart home devices can give homeowners control of electrical components like appliances or lights from a remote area. This enables users to turn an appliance on or off to reduce overheating or avoid additional risk factors for electrical fires.
- Don't go DIY. Choosing to work with a professional electrician rather than doing electrical work oneself can help reduce electrical fire risk considerably. Electricians know how to work on electrical systems safely to prevent damage to wires and components, and also safeguard themselves against shock. Risk for electrical fires at home can be reduced with technology and other strategies.

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- **Do you want to make a difference in someone's life?**

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For more information about these opportunities and more visit openskycs.org/communitymembership