



Spring Home & Garden

The Yankee Xpress
BLACKSTONE VALLEY **Xpress**

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Spring has sprung, now it's time for cleaning and home maintenance

By THERESA KNAPP

The days are getting longer, rain has replaced snow, and soon we'll be spending more time outside, so now is the time to assess possible winter damage and make a plan for repairs.

Homeowners should pay particular attention to their roofs, says Dermott Larkin of

Westwood Insurance.

"Roof claims are the number one insurance problem for insurance companies these days," said Larkin. "Generally speaking, for any new policy written now, the company is going to inspect your house and one of the first things they're going to look at is the roof."

In addition to missing shingles and moss growth on the

roof, Larkin says when insurance companies are inspecting homes, also issues that could affect your insurability are peeling and chipping paint, rot around windowsills, excessive debris in the yard and against the house as problematic.

Larkin says another consideration for homeowners is a home security system, specifically a central station alarm, which is monitored 24/7/365, and the company alerts you (or the police) when the alarm is triggered. "A central station alarm can save you 15% to 20% on a policy."

Here is a list of items to consider:

Outdoor Maintenance

- Inspect roof & gutters – Check for winter damage, missing shingles, clean out gutters and downspouts
- Check for winter damage – Look for cracks in driveway, sidewalks, foundation
- Lawn & garden prep – Rake leaves; aerate, fertilize, seed lawn; trim trees, shrubs near house

- Drainage – Improve drainage around house
- Service yard equipment – Tune-up lawnmower and other gardening tools; winterize snowblower
- Inspect & clean outdoor furniture – Pressure wash and freshen up patio furniture
- Grill – Deep clean grill, inspect for damage, clear area of debris, fuel up
- Pool – Schedule pool opening, maintenance contract
- Air condenser – Remove debris around AC condenser

Home Exterior

- Pressure wash the exterior – Clean siding, walkways, decks, pool areas
- Paint – Touch up house, outbuildings as necessary
- Accessways – Ensure railings, stairs, ramps are sturdy
- Check windows & screens – Clean windows, inspect for drafts, replace/repair screens; replace storm doors/windows with screens
- Inspect & seal wood decks – Stain or reseal wood to prevent rot
- Fencing – Repair damage, stabilize, seal as needed
- Sprinkler system & hoses – Look for leaks and adjust

Home improvement advice from an insurance agent

- Maintain roof
- Install central station alarm
- Install/stabilize railings on decks, porches, etc. (anything with 3 or more steps)
- Never waive a home inspection when buying a new home

–Dermott Larkin,
Westwood Insurance

sprinkler heads, reattach hoses, turn on outdoor water

- Septic system – Schedule maintenance if you're due

Indoor Maintenance

- HVAC system check-up – Change air filters, schedule AC tune-up
- Check for leaks & water damage – Inspect under sinks, around appliances, and in the basement; address water damage and mold, install sump pump if needed
- Check weatherstripping & seals – Make sure doors and windows are energy-efficient

MAINTENANCE

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How to prepare outdoor spaces for Memorial Day entertaining

Memorial Day weekend is a popular time to entertain. For many, the weekend marks the first outdoor entertaining opportunity of the year, which is certainly something to look forward to.

As outdoor entertaining season begins, homeowners can take these steps to prepare their outdoor living spaces for the first big backyard get-together of the year.

- Break out the power washer. Pressure washing is an important component of spring home cleanup. The warmer temperatures of spring allow water from power washing to dry more quickly, which can decrease the chances that mold and mildew will grow on surfaces like siding. A freshly power washed home also makes for a welcoming entertaining space. A power washer also can be used on outdoor entertaining spaces to remove dirt and debris that

built up over the winter. Just make sure to read manufacturer instructions before using a power washer to clean paving stones, decks and outdoor furniture.

- Inspect outdoor furniture. Now is a good time to inspect outdoor furniture if the task was not performed in late fall or early winter before items were moved into the garage or placed in storage. Check to make sure furnishings are still safe to use, addressing any issues before guests come over for a Memorial Day weekend gathering. Wash cushions for outdoor furniture and replace any that might be showing their age.
- Clean the grill. A thorough cleaning of the grill also is in order prior to summer entertaining season. Many homeowners do little or no grilling during winter, so now is the time to give grilling sur-

faces and the interior of the grill a deep cleaning. Check for leaks if using a gas grill, and scrub the interior of any grease that accumulated last season. Many grilling experts advise lighting a grill and letting it burn for roughly 20 minutes prior to putting any foods on the grates for the first time. Such a strategy allows residual fluids like soap, vinegar and de-greasing products used when cleaning the grill to burn off before food is placed on the grates.

- Inspect the landscaping, too. It's not just seating areas like patios and decks that need some investigation prior to outdoor entertaining season. Take a walk around the landscape and make sure there's no potentially dangerous spots where people could be injured when playing backyard games. Fill in any holes with soil and fresh grass seed, and inspect trees to see if any



branches need to be pruned. Summer entertaining season begins each Memorial Day weekend. Homeowners can take vari-

ous steps to ensure their outdoor entertaining spaces are comfortable and safe.

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Attract winged friends with these bird feeders

Birds are beautiful creatures that can make a lawn and garden feel even more serene. Providing

snacks to supplement what birds naturally find in the wild guarantees up close and personal interactions with the scores of species that call neighborhoods home.

to those high-speed flyers.

Nyjer bird feeder

Small birds like goldfinches



Bird feeders are particularly important in colder climates and during wintertime when food may be scarce. Keeping birds well fed helps them survive over winter and continue to repopulate in the spring. Bird feeding isn't all for the birds, either. Ashley Dayer, an associate professor in the Department of Fish and Wildlife Conservation at Virginia Tech, argues that feeding birds also is a benefit to humans because it stimulates compassion for the animals.

The type of bird feeder a person places in the yard determines which species may be drawn to the property. The following are various types of feeders to consider.

Suet feeders

Suet cakes are high-energy food sources that attract birds like woodpeckers and nuthatches. They are particularly beneficial in colder months or regions where birds need extra fat for energy. These cage-like feeders snap around the rectangular suet cake and hang from a pole or tree.

Ground feeder

Ground feeders are simple screen-bottomed trays that sit several inches off of the ground or on a deck to help keep seeds and grain from coming in contact with droppings. Ground feeders are a favorite of juncos, sparrows, goldfinches, and cardinals, among others.

Sugar water feeder

These feeders come in different shapes, from tubes to round dishes, and are magnets to hummingbirds. They typically have red coloring to be more attractive

love to dine on nyjer seeds, which are tiny, black thistle seeds. These feeders are tube-shaped mesh socks designed to hold this specific seed. The small feeding ports prevent seed waste and cater to the small beaks of finches.

Hopper bird feeder

These are the feeders many people think of when they envision bird feeders. Hopper bird feeders hold a large amount of seed and often have a roof or a design that mimics a house or barn. The covered design helps to keep seeds dry and might be the best hanging feeder for people who live in areas with a lot of rain. Hoppers will attract blue jays, grackles, cardinals, and blackbirds.

Tube feeders

Tube feeders will attract an array of birds. They are cylindrical in shape with various ports to enable birds to perch and feed.

Window and smart bird feeders

These types of bird feeders attach to windows to allow homeowners to view the birds up close. Smart varieties have cameras on the feeders that will send a feed via an app to a smart phone or computer. Some even may identify the bird species on the feeder at any given point in time.

Bird feeders provide enjoyment for bird watchers and nutritious food various species.

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MAINTENANCE

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- Deep clean & declutter – Clean out closets, cabinets, and garage; donate unused items
- Smoke & carbon monoxide detectors – Replace batteries or units as needed
- Clean dryer vents – Remove lint build-up inside the dryer; exhaust hose, and outdoor vent

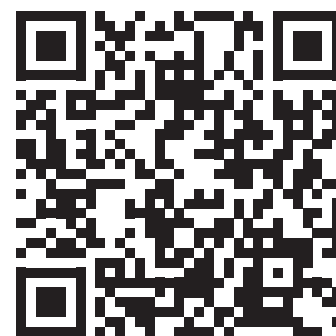


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Sustainable gardens are good for your health, environment

BY THERESA KNAPP

A sustainable garden is one that is environmentally responsible and focuses on conserving resources.

According to the UMass Extension Landscape, Nursery and Urban Forestry Program, a sustainable garden is one in which “each plant does not have a known significant insect or dis-



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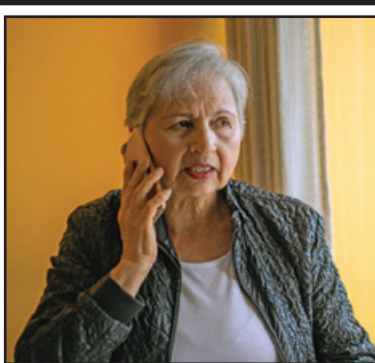



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ease problem, is drought tolerant (once established), is not invasive, and is long-lived.”

The UMass Extension website says the first guideline to a successful sustainable garden is “right plant, right place.”

In a blog post entitled, “5 reasons why sustainable gardening

tips; environmental wellness; stress reduction and improved mental health; physical activity; and food security and self-sufficiency.”

Tips for getting started with sustainable gardening, according to gardenforwildlife.com, include:

- Use native plants (www.massaudubon.org/nature-wildlife/plants/native-beneficial-plants)
- Choose sustainable plants (https://ag.umass.edu/landscape/fact-sheets/choosing-sustainable-plants)
- Think organically

- Reduce your lawn
- Use less water
- Reduce, reuse, recycle
- Start gardening sustainably

Tips for planting your garden, according to www.keepmass-beautiful.org, include:

- Evaluate sunlight
- Test soil quality
- Choose seasonal plants
- Flowers that beginners: Zinnias, sunflowers, cosmos
- Use organic fertilizers

“The first guideline is ‘right plant, right place.’ In other words, conduct a site evaluation and determine what plants would do well in that location.”

-UMass Extension Landscape, Nursery and Urban Forestry Program

can be a key to health,” www.usanafoundation.org lists the advantages of sustainable gardens as nutrient-rich food at your fin-

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Additional gardening resources can be found at:

- Plant Hardiness Zone Map https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/system/files/MA150_HS.png
- Tips for growing a sustainable garden in Massachusetts: Native plants, permaculture, and pollinator habitats bit.ly/SustainableGardenTips
- Ways to make your lawn more sustainable:
 - “Lawn to lettuce: transform your lawn into a mixed-use vegetable garden” ediblesema.com/feature/lawn-to-lettuce/
 - “More than just a yard” at www.mass.gov/doc/more-than-just-a-yard-ecological-landscaping-tools-1/download
 - “Right plant, right place,” a plant selection guide for managed landscapes bit.ly/UMassManagedLandscapes
 - “Transforming Massachusetts lawns: your guide to sustainable, water-wise landscaping for a thriving ecosystem” bit.ly/SustainableLawns

A spring lawn revitalization strategy

New growth is a hallmark of spring, whether it plays out in the birth of birds and bunnies or with the returned buds on trees and plant stalks. While most greenery rebounds naturally, lawns may

green grass adds to a beautiful landscape and functional yard. Here is how to get started when the weather warms, courtesy of The Farmer's Almanac and The Home Depot.



need a little extra TLC in order to return to their once lush, green glory.

Revitalizing a lawn in spring is a multifaceted process but can be well worth the reward when

- Clean up debris. Spend a few hours raking up leaves from the lawn and removing any other winter debris like twigs so that air can reach the grass below. Also remove any thatch that has developed.

- Test the soil. Take a sample of the soil to determine its pH level and nutrient needs. Then you can make adjust-

LAWNS

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Tips for the gardening beginner

Gardening is a popular hobby all over the world. Ruby Home Luxury Real Estate estimates there are 71.5 million gardening households in the United States alone. That translates to around 185.9 million people engaged in some form of gardening, which places the U.S. among other countries where gardening is wildly popular, including Australia and China.

A greater number of people are showing interest in gardening, which is a rewarding hobby that's good for the mind and the body. Those who are new to gardening may need a crash course to get started. These pointers can help any-

one foster a newfound passion for gardening.

Choose the best location

Spend time in the yard and decide where to house a garden. A far-off corner may get the most sun, but will you forget about the garden if it is too far away?

with a garden center. A garden typically requires a mix of compost to add nutrients to the dirt; peat moss or coconut coir to help with water retention and to make the soil lighter; and vermiculite that helps to retain water. A compost bin set up at the same time as the garden allows gardeners to



Ideally, the garden should be located where it will get at least six to eight hours of sun each day. There also should be a water source nearby. The spot also should be convenient so that it is easy to go and pick vegetables or prune flowers.

continually produce nutrient-rich food to add to the garden.

Plant starter guide

It's best to keep a few things in mind when planning the garden. Think about what will grow well in your climate. Consider how big the garden will be and the size of mature plants. A small garden will not be able to accommodate corn, for example. Also, how would you like the space to look and what will be its function? Is this a purely aesthetic garden or one that will be food-bearing?

Start small

If you're new to gardening, begin with a small garden footprint so that you can get your feet wet. A raised garden bed can be a good starting point because it is contained and easy to maintain. As your experience (and garden) grows, you can add to the garden size the next time around.

Start seeds inside

If you'll be starting a garden from seeds, it's best to start indoors before your region's frost-free date. This way the delicate plants will get the needed care and can establish before they go outdoors in the ground. Keep

Amend the soil

It's possible but unlikely that the soil in the backyard is the perfect mix to grow healthy plants. It's more likely that the garden will need some soil modification. You can test the soil makeup with do-it-yourself kits or work

GARDENING

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COMPOST

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- Apply mulch

How to get the most from a small garden, according to www.

LAWNS

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- ments to set a strong foundation for the lawn to grow.
- Do some weeding. Pull out any weeds that have poked through early on and apply a pre-emergent herbicide to prevent additional weeds from taking over.
- Start the aeration process. A core aerator punches holes into the soil. This enables air and water to penetrate through to the roots.
- Overseed the lawn. Apply grass seeds over the lawn, paying special attention to any bare or thin areas so that the seed will fill in the lawn.
- Water consistently. It is important to water the lawn deeply and consistently, especially

treehugger.com:

- Think vertically
- Layer plants in space
- Layer plants in time
- Make sure every element has multiple functions

when the weather is dry, to help promote strong root development.

- Time fertilizer correctly. Apply a spring fertilizer around three weeks after the lawn starts to turn green or after the first two or three mowings. If fertilizer is applied too early it can feed weeds instead of the grass and result in fertilizer runoff.
 - Mow to an appropriate height. Begin to mow when the ground is dry enough and the grass is long enough to need cutting. Leave some length to the lawn; otherwise, sunlight will reach the soil and encourage weed seeds to germinate.
- With a little elbow grease at the start of spring, homeowners can establish strong and healthy lawns.

GARDENING

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them humid by covering the seedlings in plastic wrap. You can start the seeds in different containers, even empty egg cartons. Transplant to larger containers after the seedlings grow a second set of leaves. Once you're

free from overnight frost, you can place the established, strong seedlings in the ground.

An automatic watering system, such as a timer hooked up to the sprinkler, can keep the garden well watered, which increases the chances of success. Then it will only be a matter of weeks before the garden can be enjoyed throughout the season.

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- Choose the right gardening method for the particular space
- The best plants for a sustainable garden, according to zero-wastekitchen.com, include:

- Leafy greens - Lettuce, spinach, kale, and Swiss chard are quick-growing, nutrient-dense plants that thrive in most climates
- Herbs - Basil, rosemary, thyme, mint (which can be invasive)
- Tomatoes - Any variety
- Root vegetables - Carrots, radishes, beets

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How to establish a peaceful backyard retreat

Backyards have undergone quite a transformation over the last decade-plus. The days when patios and decks were all a backyard living space had to offer are largely a thing of the past, as homeowners have realized just

how valuable it can be to commit to a stunning backyard.

The real estate experts at Zillow estimate that homes with backyard features such as outdoor televisions, outdoor showers and outdoor kitchens command

3.1 percent more than expected upon reaching the market. If 3.1 percent doesn't sound like a lot, it actually equates to nearly \$11,000 on a typical home. But there's more to gain than money when converting a backyard



space into a relaxing respite. Such spaces can provide a welcoming escape from the hustle and bustle of daily life, all the while giving homeowners and residents a comfortable space to soak in the great outdoors. With that in mind, homeowners can take the following steps to establish a peaceful backyard retreat.

it an unkempt look. Aim for a landscape that affords a balance of sun and shade so the space is as comfortable as possible throughout the day.

- Refresh the landscape. Even if your vision is centered on outdoor furniture and a space that accommodates movie nights under the stars, it's still best to refresh the existing landscape if it needs a little upkeep. Overgrown trees, hedges and bushes can create the same cluttered vibe that dominates interior spaces overrun with items. If necessary, work with a local tree service or landscape architect to trim, or even remove, trees and hedges that are crowding the backyard and making it feel claustrophobic or giving

- Set up multiple gathering spaces, if possible. Once a backyard retreat is established, everyone who calls the property home might find the space hard to resist. Keep this in mind when planning the space and aim to set up multiple gathering spaces. An outdoor kitchen with a nearby dinner table can be a great space to enjoy al fresco dining, but a separate area to read a book or watch a movie or ballgame can make the space more versatile. Some may want to relax away from the noise of the grill area, and multiple gathering spaces ensures there's always a peaceful

BACKYARD
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Did you know?

Inflation has garnered countless headlines in recent years, and much of that news has focused on the notably higher cost of food. Though the cost of some items at the grocery store has gone down



in 2024, many items remain significantly more expensive than they were as recently as three or four years ago. In an effort to overcome rising food costs, some consumers have thought about gardening. According to Washington State University, the average household with a food garden spends around \$70 per year on seeds and garden supplies. The reward for that small investment is roughly \$600 worth of food. Though the financial investment associated with a food garden might be minimal, it's important for

prospective gardeners to recognize that the commitment of time required to establish and sustain a food garden can be significant.

BACKYARD

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spot to unwind out back.

- Add a water feature. Running water has a way of calming the nerves, and that's good to keep in mind when planning a backyard retreat. Water features run the gamut from garden ponds to koi ponds to fountains to hot tubs. Homeowners can identify which feature best aligns with their idea of relaxation and then

work with a landscape architect to ensure it's installed in their backyard oasis.

- Don't forget shade. Temperatures are rising in many areas of the globe, and that's worth noting when planning a backyard retreat. Even the most ardent sun worshippers likely won't want to be exposed to the sun at all times when relaxing in their backyards. Strategically chosen means of providing shade can make spaces enjoyable all day long. Consider umbrellas, gazebos,

pergolas, and even retractable awnings to cover patios and decks when the sun is at its highest each afternoon. If you plan to spend ample time in the grass, make that more enjoyable by planting shade trees, which also can protect the grass from drought and make it more comfortable underfoot.

A relaxing backyard retreat can make for an ideal space to escape the hustle and bustle of daily life.

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