

# FALL HOME IMPROVEMENT

OCTOBER 2025



**The Yankee Xpress**  
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**FREE PRESS**

# Enjoying 'sweater weather' in the backyard



Though temperatures have started to fall (excuse the pun), backyards in New England are still bustling with activity. And with the weather a little cooler, it could be easier to convince family and friends to help with a quick project so you can all enjoy your outdoor space into the next season and beyond (you know

what they say about New England weather).

Consider any (or all) of these simple projects:

### Fire Pit Gathering Spot

Create a stone fire ring, purchase a metal fire bowl

Add Adirondack chairs, cozy

If you're having a gathering in the fall (or winter) and need to extend your entertainment space, consider adding a propane heater or a chiminea to your deck or patio to accommodate your guest list.

blankets, and a log holder

Great for an evening of hot cider and/or s'mores

### Covered Porch Nook

Weatherproof cushions, throw blankets, small side table.

String lights or lanterns

Great for morning coffee, a good book, or watching others play in the leaves

### Backyard Harvest Table

Gather a picnic table, folding table, or create a table out of sawhorses and an old door

Add a weatherproof plaid tablecloth or runner

Add fall décor: mums, kale, gourds, lanterns, bittersweet, corn stalks, etc.

Great for a meal or special event (Halloween party, pumpkin carving, etc.)

### Backyard Movie Spot

If possible, set up near fire pit

Hang a sheet or use a portable projector screen (sometimes available from your public library)

Add camp chairs, blankets, cocoa, and seasonal movies

Great for all ages

### Front Door Pumpkin & Mum Entryway

Don't forget the front door too (this is similar to the Harvest Table)

### EASY DIY LOG HOLDER

#### Materials:

- 2 (or 4) cinder blocks, standard size
- 4 sturdy 2x4 boards, about 4 feet long each



#### Instructions:

1. Choose a level surface
2. Lay two cinder blocks flat on the ground, back to back, with the hollow holes pointing up
3. Insert one 2x4 into each hole, with boards leaning outward
4. Stack firewood

*\*Optional: For more stability, add a second layer of cinder blocks*

Line your front steps or walkway with pumpkins, gourds, mums, lanterns, and other fall décor

Great because it doesn't get more 'New England' than this



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# Family-Friendly Fall Fixups

## Ways to get kids involved in home improvement

A homeowner's work is never done, or so it seems. Here are some projects that (a) need to be done, and (b) can be family friendly.

### Easy, even kids can help

Decorate the entryway with pumpkins, mums, and lanterns

Paint front door or mailbox

Update house numbers

Rake leaves into piles and compost or bag them

Create a DIY leaf-press art project (see text box)

Check and replace outdoor lightbulbs

Clean and organize coat closet or mudroom

### Moderate, family teamwork

Install or replace weatherstripping on doors and windows



Get a handle on the messy garage before winter is here.

Install a ceiling fan for better air/heat circulation

Plant spring bulbs (tulips, daffodils, crocus)

Organize garage for winter gear

Clean and seal wooden deck or porch

Build or decorate a birdhouse/birdfeeder

### Challenging, adult-led

Install a storm door

Install attic insulation or seal attic hatch

Replace or repair broken fence posts/gates before snow

Build raised garden beds and fill with fall perennials

Refinish or stain outdoor furniture before winter storage

Build a mudroom bench with storage

### FAMILY-FRIENDLY LEAF-PRESS PROJECT

What's a more family-friendly fall project than collecting leaves and pressing them into projects that can be enjoyed year-round? Here is a way to do just that.



#### 1. Collect Leaves

Go on a nature walk with the kids. Choose leaves that are flat, not too thick, and freshly fallen (dry, crumbly ones break easily). Gather different shapes, sizes, and colors for variety.

#### 2. Press the Leaves

There are two main ways to press your leaves, the old-fashioned book method or building a leaf-press (see orange box) – either way can be fun. The Book Method:

Place each leaf between two sheets of newspaper or plain paper

Put the paper inside a heavy book

Stack more heavy books on top

Leave(s) for 1–2 weeks

#### 3. Create Your Masterpiece

Once the leaves are flat and dry:

**Leaf Collages:** Glue leaves onto construction paper to make animals, patterns, or abstract art.

**Leaf Rubbings:** Place a leaf under paper and rub over it with crayons to see the veins and shapes.

**Leaf Prints:** Paint one side of the leaf, press it on paper, and lift for a stamp effect.

**Nature Journal:** Glue leaves into a notebook and label them (fun science + art combo).

**Seasonal Decorations:** Frame pressed leaves, make bookmarks (lamine them), these can also be holiday gifts.

### DIY LEAF PRESS

Cut two pieces of cardboard (about 8 1/2 x 11)

Punch holes in the corners

Place leaves between sheets of paper and stack between the cardboard

Thread string or use bolts with wingnuts to tighten the press

Leave for 1–2 weeks, tightening occasionally

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# Put your garden to bed until spring

According to www.gardenpals.com, 55% of American households engage in garden activities; 33% of U.S. households grow vegetables, fruits, and other food; and children involved in growing vegetables are more willing to eat them.

In New England, we love our gardens. Here are some ways to prepare for colder temperatures, protect the soil, and get ready for the spring growing season.

**Clean up the garden.** Pull out annuals, vegetable plants, and any diseased or pest-infested plants; and clear out any leaves, stems, or old mulch.

**Soil care.** Test the soil pH and nutrient levels; add compost, manure, or organic matter to enrich the soil over winter.

**Mulch.** Apply a two-to-four-inch layer of mulch around perennials, shrubs, and garden beds to insulate roots, reduce soil erosion, and discourage winter weeds.

**Protect plants.** Cut back dead foliage on perennials but leave some seed heads for birds; cover perennials that need protection from cold temperatures; and bring potted plants indoors.

**Plant for fall and winter.** Plant spring-blooming bulbs like tulips, daffodils, and crocuses before the ground freezes; and spinach, kale, radishes, garlic, and other cold-hardy vegetables can still be planted in early October.

**Lawn care.** Rake leaves to prevent plant suffocation and disease; fertilize to help strengthen roots for winter and spring growth; and overseed bare patches to get a thicker lawn next spring.

**Garden tools and structures.** Sharpen pruners, clean shovels, and store hoses to prevent rust; drain irrigation to outside structures (and pools) to prevent freezing damage; and repair or protect trellises, fences, raised bed structures, etc. as needed.



# 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 sea-

son. Crisp and light cotton and linen are cozy materials 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.

- 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 space in which they're being used.
- Think about warm lighting. The transition from incandescent light bulbs to halogen and LED is beneficial from 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 knick-knacks 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. .



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# 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 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 foot-

**STORAGE**  
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# How to prepare your home for fall

Where does the time go? We're not sure but it's fall already. Experts agree that the number one item on your checklist should be clean and inspect gutters, followed closely by seal gaps and cracks, clean the dryer vent, and have your chimney cleaned.

With the help of Better Homes and Gardens, Family Handyman, and House Beautiful, here are ways to prepare your home for the fall, ranked in order of difficulty.

## Easy Tasks

- Test smoke and carbon monoxide detectors
- Check for drafts, seal exterior gaps and cracks
- Clean/replace furnace filter
- Shut off and drain outdoor faucets and hoses
- Reverse ceiling fans
- Stock up on winter supplies
- Swap out seasonal decor/textiles
- Change humidifier settings or clean units
- Test outdoor lighting, replace bulbs as needed
- Store summer clothes and rotate closets
- Clean and store outdoor furniture/grill
- Schedule chimney/fireplace cleaning

- Schedule furnace/heating system service
- Bleed/drain hot water radiators

## Moderate Tasks

- Inspect and clean gutters and downspouts
- Clean dryer vent
- Check windows and doors for drafts, add weatherstripping or film
- Keep window wells clean
- Check/test sump pump
- Service lawn equipment before storage
- Rake leaves, mulch gardens with leaves
- Aerate, fertilize, overseed lawn; cut short one last time
- Deep clean appliances, including oven
- Check handrails and steps for sturdiness
- Plant spring bulbs
- Check insulation in attic/basement, add more as needed
- Fix cracks in driveway
- Test winter equipment

## Difficult Tasks

- Check roof for loose/damaged shingles
- Inspect and trim large trees near your house

## Building a basic toolbox

Many homeowners have a box or drawer of tools, but here is a way to build the perfect 'basic' toolbox with tools that will help you accomplish most basic home tasks.

Safety gear (gloves, goggles, ear protection)

Claw hammer

Locking tape measure (25 ft.)

Screwdriver set (flathead & Phillips)

Utility knife (with extra blades)

Adjustable wrench

Slip-joint pliers

Needle-nose pliers

Allen (hex) wrench set

Cordless drill + drill bit set

Level (2- or 4-ft.)

Stud finder

Flashlight or headlamp

Extension cord (heavy-duty, outdoor rated)

Adjustable pliers (Channel-lock style)

Crescent wrench set (metric + SAE)

Putty knife (flexible + stiff)

Socket set (ratchet with sockets)

Small parts organizer

Duct tape

String or twine

Set of cheap paintbrushes

And some "nice to have"s include:

Handsaw

Ladder (6-8 ft. step ladder)

Pry bar (crowbar)

Stud and circuit tester

Caulk gun

Measuring square (combination square)

With these basic tools, you'll be ready to tackle these fall home improvement projects:

Clean and re-caulk around windows and doors

Install or replace weatherstripping on doors

Hang storm doors or reinforce screen doors

Patch and paint exterior trim or siding

Check and tighten stair rails or deck handrails

Install hooks or racks for winter coats and boots

Replace or upgrade outdoor lighting

Check and patch gaps in siding or foundation

Install or reinforce shelving in garage/basement

Repair or replace damaged fence posts/pickets

Swap out old showerhead for a water-saving model

Build a simple firewood rack

Install draft stoppers on attic access or crawlspaces

Tighten hinges and latches on gates, garage doors, and sheds

Check gutters for leaks and patch with sealant

Sources: [www.networkx.com](http://www.networkx.com), [www.lowes.com](http://www.lowes.com), [www.goodhousekeeping.com](http://www.goodhousekeeping.com)

## Signs it's time to replace gutters

Home improvement projects run the gamut from complex undertakings like room additions to simpler renovations like a new front door. Some home renovations excite homeowners more than others, but all improvements are a way to make a home safer, more comfortable and/or more functional.

A gutter replacement might not inspire the same level of excitement as a room addition or an overhaul of an outdoor living space, but new gutters can help to prevent roof damage and make properties safer by ensuring rain water is directed away from walkways. Homeowners who suspect it might be time for a gutter replacement can look for these signs of fading gutters.

- **Cracks or splits:** Cracks or splits at the seams of the gutters where two pieces connect is a telltale sign they need to be replaced. Cracks or splits are can slowly lead to separation of gutter pieces, which will lead to leaks. But not all cracks or splits are found at the seams. In fact,

some homes feature seamless gutters, which also can crack or split. Regardless of where they're found, cracks or splits are a warning signs of fading gutters.

- **Rust:** Rust is rarely a good sign whether you're looking at a vehicle or even garden tools. Rust also is a bad sign in relation to gutters. Gutters are painted, and not only for aesthetic purposes. Paint on gutter also serves to protect them from water. When paint begins to flake, gutters will begin to rust and may even produce noticeable rust flakes on the ground below. Rust on gutters and rust flakes beneath them are indicative of gutters that need to be replaced.

- **Gutters pulling away from the home:** Gutters that appear to be pulling away from the home is a sign that they need to be replaced. Gutters are fastened to a home during installation, which ensures they can withstand rain and water. Over time, those fas-

### GUTTERS

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# Surprising hidden costs of home ownership

A home is the most expensive purchase many people ever make. Buyers understand that certain costs come with home ownership. However, some of the costs associated with home ownership can catch even the most savvy savers off-guard. And in recent years, those extra costs have been surging.



The following are some of the unexpected expenses that come with living the homeowner dream.

- **Property taxes:** Depending on where you live, property taxes can comprise a large portion of monthly expenses. Some people pay their property taxes separate from their mortgage payments. Others wrap the tax burden into their mortgage bill. Either way, Business Insider reports that New Jersey currently has the highest effective property tax rate in the United States, with a median Garden State property tax bill at \$9,000 annually. The lowest property tax rate is found in Hawaii, and the average homeowner there pays only \$2,000 in property taxes annually. Zoocasa reports that annual property taxes in Canada can cost anywhere from \$2,500 to \$10,000 depending on the province's property tax rate and average cost of homes.
- **Home insurance:** CNN Business reports that home insurance premiums have surged in recent years, in large part due to extreme weather. In the U.S., insurance rates jumped 11.3 percent nationally last year, according to S&P Global. Severe storms, including hurricanes and wildfires, cost homeowners insurance agencies nearly \$101.3 billion last year, and those losses have been passed

on to policy holders through higher prices.

- **Mortgage insurance:** Many people do not have the standard 20 percent down payment necessary to buy a home. To circumvent this, lenders will require borrowers to take out mortgage insurance, also called PMI, to offset their risk. Credit Karma says PMI depends on factors such as down payment and borrowers' credit scores, but typically it's around 0.2 to 2 percent of the loan amount per year. You can remove PMI from your monthly payment once you have 20 percent equity in your home.
- **Maintenance:** Even a brand new home will require some measure of maintenance and routine upkeep. Bankrate indicates one of the biggest costs of owning a home is maintenance, coming in at roughly \$3,018 a year and an additional \$3,300 for improvements. Lawn care, home cleaning, pest prevention, replacing smoke alarms and batteries, roof repair, and clearing rain gutters are some of those costs.
- **HOA and CDD fees:** Some communities impose homeowners association fees on those who live within the neighborhood. Such fees cover items like maintenance in and around the community and snow removal. A Community Development District Fee is imposed by the developer of a neighborhood or subdivision to finance the cost of amenities in a neighborhood. Homeowners should be aware of these fees before buying in an HOA community.

Apart from these expenses, annual utility payments can be quite expensive. Utilizing utility plans that offer a fixed cost per month can help homeowners budget for utility expenses more readily.

Home ownership can be costly. Buyers would be wise to familiarize themselves with some of the hidden costs of owning a home prior to purchasing one of their own.

## STORAGE

*continued from page 5*

wear underneath when not in use. A wall-mounted rack can hold the current season's jackets or sweaters, as well as purses or backpacks for easy access. A shelf with some hooks can store keys or hold a basket to store the daily mail.

## 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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# Fireplace safety during the holiday season

Gatherings with family and friends are an integral component of the holiday season. Certain rooms in the house are on display more than others, with kitchens, dining rooms and living areas serving as popular places to congregate. Of course, fireplaces also serve as popular gathering spots in homes that feature them.

Lighting a fire in the hearth can make any space more cozy, but doing so comes with some hazards. Consider these fireplace safety tips in advance of the holiday entertaining season.



- Have the fireplace inspected and swept professionally. Prior to lighting the first fire of the season, ensure that a professional inspects the fireplace, chimney and venting to ensure everything is in good condition. The chimney also should be swept to remove excess debris and buildup that could pose a fire hazard.
- Keep items away from the fireplace. Wrapping paper, rugs, clothing, magazines, and the like should be kept at least three feet away from the

flames, suggests the American Red Cross. Also, make sure decorations are hung securely and a safe distance away from the fire.

- Check your smoke alarms. Be sure the home has working smoke alarms on every level of the house. And keep a fire extinguisher close to the fireplace.

• Never burn wrapping paper. Wrapping paper contains additives, like dyes, that make it burn extremely hot. Do not think of discarding wrapping paper by burning it in the fireplace.

- Keep the tree a safe distance away. Although it makes for the perfect Christmas photo backdrop, Christmas trees

and fireplaces should not be near each other. Also, the Christmas tree is not safe to burn in the fireplace after the season, as the wood has not been properly dried or seasoned.

- Use a screen on the fireplace. Make sure the fireplace is properly covered by a screen to stop embers from escaping when the wood pops and sparks. The screen also can help keep decorations and other objects from falling into the fire.
- Keep the fireplace clean. Promptly remove any ash and debris from the fireplace after it has cooled to improve indoor air quality and provide greater control over the next fire when it is burned, advises the American Society of Home Inspectors.

Fireplaces bring warmth and add ambiance to a home, particularly during the holidays. But safety must prevail when lighting fireplaces.

## GUTTERS

*continued from page 6*

teners can wear down, ultimately leading to gutters that appear to be pulling away from the home. Though gutters can be refastened, eventually they will need to be replaced.

- Pooling water: Pooling water in a gutter may just be a sign that gutters need to be cleaned. However, pooling water on the ground directly beneath gutters indicates they're not effectively directing water away from the home.

- Water damage inside: A home's interior might not be the first place homeowners look when inspecting for damaged gutters, but a flooded basement or crawl space could indicate a gutter problem. Gutters and downspouts are designed to direct water away from a home when functioning properly. When that isn't happening, water can pool beneath the foundation, leading to pooling water and other water damage in basements and crawl spaces.

Gutter replacement projects may not be exciting, but new gutters can make a home safer and prolong the life of a roof and other features on a property.

## Did you know?

Homeowners with an eye on home improvement projects should know that kitchens and bathrooms tend to be the most

between 20 and 40 percent of the total budget of a given project. The final cost of any renovation project will depend on a



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

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.

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# Tips to renovate on a budget

Renovations around the house require an investment of time and often considerable amounts of money. Findings from the 2024 U.S. Houzz & Home Study show that home renovations are becoming more expensive. The median renovation spending for homeowners has gone up 60 percent since 2020. Angi, a home services website, reports the average renovation cost for homes between 1,250 and 1,600 square feet is \$51,772, but the final cost of home renovations depends on the scope of the project.

Homeowners who are conserving funds can rest assured that it is possible to make meaningful changes both inside and outside a home without breaking the bank. Here are some ways to renovate a home on a budget.

- Create a budget and don't waver. Figure out exactly what you can afford for a renovation and then make that your maximum dollars spent. Research comparable projects in your area and be honest about whether you can afford the renovation as-is or

if you must adapt ideas to fit your price. Make sure to build in a cushion of around 15 to 20 percent for any unforeseen expenses that may arise once a renovation is underway.

- Maximize an existing floor plan. This Old House suggests looking for ways to maximize your current layout before you invest in major renovations like an expansion. Bring in a designer with an eye for utilizing space. For example, see how you might be able to replace shelves with pull-out drawers in the kitchen. Moving furniture around or rethinking floor plans also can help to lower costs.
- Balance DIY with hiring contractors. You can save money by tackling some projects yourself, but only if you are confident in your renovation skills. Rather than risk making costly mistakes and having to redo things, hire well-vetted professionals but ask if there's any DIY work you can do to cut costs.



- Check clearance and resale stores. Shop discount stores for building materials to save money. For example, if a builder ordered too many cabinets they may offer them to Habitat for Humanity ReStores, which are non-profit home improvement stores and donation centers.

Checking the clearance and markdown sections of other stores may yield considerable savings on items needed for a renovation. Warehouse retailers like Costco or Sam's Club also can be great places to find certain home improvement materials and furnishings.

- Take advantage of free services. Certain stores may offer things like free consultations with designers who can show you what a renovation can look like. This is advantageous to the stores because once you see the potential you're more likely to buy the products, even if it's not mandatory.

- Resurface instead of redo. Certain items can be made to look new with minimal effort. Paint is a relatively inexpensive tool that can transform walls and more. A good hardwood flooring company can buff out a floor and put a new coating instead of an entirely new floor. Kitchen cabinets can be resurfaced instead of replaced as well.

Finding ways to perform home renovations on a budget may require some creative thinking, but it's possible to get results at the right price point.

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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



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

- Know your rights. Laws vary 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 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, guarantees and warranties also should be cited.
- Do not pay in cash. Some contractors may suggest that the project will cost less if 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.

# Remedies for creaky floors

Hardwood floors are coveted features in many homes. The National Wood Flooring Association says wood floors are the most environmentally friendly

are a common nuisance that homeowners may experience. Squeaking is often caused by movement and friction between floorboards. Treating the prob-



flooring options available. In the United States, the hardwood forests that provide flooring products are growing twice as fast as they are being harvested. Furthermore, wood floors can last for many generations and require fewer raw materials to produce than other flooring options. That means less waste may end up in landfills.

Hardwood floors can endure for decades in a home, but over time those same floors may need some tender loving care to keep them looking good and working as they should. Squeaky floors

lem involves identifying the underlying issue.

### Loose hardware

Squeaky floors may be due to the loosening of the hardware holding the floor in place, says The Home Depot. When nails or screws no longer are secured tightly, the boards can rub together. The noise heard is the sound produced by rubbing. Tightening or replacing the hardware can help reduce the squeaking.

### Counter-snap kit method

This Old House says this kit method is a great way to fix squeaks without damaging the floor. Once the source of the squeak is located, drill a 3/32-inch pilot hole through the hardwood flooring. Then insert a screw through the kit's depth-control fixture and into the pilot hole, and drive it until it automatically snaps off below the wood surface. Follow this up by filling the hole with wood putty that matches the floor color. Once the putty is dry, lightly sand the area to blend.

### Use a shim or shims

Sometimes the floor may squeak because of a gap between the joists and the subfloor. Filling the gap with a small piece of wood called a shim can help alleviate the gap or gaps.

### Drive up screws

If a squeak is just in one spot, The Home Depot says that you may be able to drive short screws from below into the subfloor.

### Small gaps

For small gaps between boards, sprinkle talcum powder

or powdered graphite between squeaky boards to reduce friction. Wood filler applied with a putty knife also may work. For larger gaps, use a liquid filler designed for wood floors.

Homeowners also can visit their local home improvement center for other hardware solutions designed for underfloor repairs to remedy squeaks. Many work from underneath the floor and involve mounting plates or brackets to sure up the floor.

Squeaky floors can be problematic, but noises can be banished with some repair work.

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