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How to prepare a garden for spring planting

The final weeks of winter, and even the first few weeks of spring, are still chilly in many parts of the world. Despite those last vestiges of winter chills, late winter is a great time to begin preparing gardens for the coming planting season.

Gardens may have to withstand months of harsh weather each winter, and such conditions can take a toll. Gardeners can consider the following tips as they try to restore their gardens and get them ready for spring planting.

- Disinfect your tools. It's common to clean tools in late fall or whenever they're typically placed in storage for the winter. But cleaning and disinfecting are not necessarily the same thing. If tools were not disinfected at the end of the previous gardening season, disinfect them before doing any work on the garden. Doing so can ensure any lingering bacteria or fungi on tool surfaces are killed prior to the beginning of gardening season. According to the

University of Minnesota Extension, plant pathogens, including bacteria and viruses, can be transferred to and infect plants through bits of soil and plant debris left on shovels and pruner blades. Thoroughly disinfecting such tools prior to using them in the spring is a great way to reduce the risk of disease in your garden.

- Clear debris from garden beds. Leaves, twigs, sticks, and other debris may have gathered in the garden over the winter. Such debris can inhibit the growth of plants and vegetables, so make sure all of it is removed prior to planting. Weeds might even begin to sprout up in late winter and early spring, so remove them before they go to seed.
- Test the soil. Testing the soil prior to planting can help gardeners determine what their gardens will need to thrive in the coming months. Garden centers and home improvement stores sell home testing kits that are effective and easy



to use. Once the results are in, speak with a professional at your local garden center about the best time to amend the soil.

- Loosen compacted soil. Soil can become compacted over winter. If compacted soil is

not loosened prior to planting, plants will have a hard time getting the water and nutrients they need to thrive. Loosening the soil also provides another opportunity to inspect the garden for any underlying issues, such as fungi or weed growth, that you may

have missed when clearing debris or testing the soil.

Late winter is a good time to assess a garden and address any issues that developed over the winter so plants and vegetables can thrive come the spring planting season.



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7 things to know before replacing windows

The decision to replace windows often comes down to aesthetics and necessity. Drafty windows can reduce energy efficiency in a home, requiring HVAC systems to work harder to keep interiors comfortable. The harder the HVAC must work, the more homeowners will pay in energy costs.

Old windows also may be points of entry for water and insects. Despite the importance

of windows, Money magazine advises that new windows make up only a fraction of the home's total exterior "envelope," resulting in only about 5 to 15 percent of total energy savings.

But there are still plenty of reasons to invest in new windows.

1. Vinyl or aluminum may be best. Lumber is farmed rather quickly today and

solid wood products may not stand up to elements as well as wood used a half-century ago. To avoid rot, vinyl windows often are an affordable and durable choice. Homeowners also have the option of wood windows with aluminum cladding, which are long-lasting.

2. Moisture problems indicate windows need to be replaced.



Condensation that shows up as fogging between double-pane windows or on the inside of windows indicates that the windows are starting to fail. If installing a vapor barrier in the basement or crawl space, ventilating properly when showering or cooking, or using a dehumidifier indoors does not remedy the situation, it might be time to replace windows.

3. Windows add curb appeal. Beyond functionality, replacement windows immediately update the look of the home and can improve curb appeal since they are one of the most prominent features on the exterior of a home. If a house needs an update, replacing windows

WINDOWS
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Spring cleaning tips and tricks

Spring is a time of year when change is in the air. Trees are budding, plants are flowering, and homes laden with dark or heavy fabrics and clutter could use some lightening up.

and debris will trickle down
and need to be cleaned next.

- Purchase or rent a carpet cleaner. According to the experts at Clean That Up, carpets help filter indoor air by



Spring cleaning projects are popular this time of year as residents take inventory of their living spaces and aim to declutter, clean and increase efficiency. Some people find the prospect of getting organized overwhelming. Here are some tips that can help anyone master spring cleaning.

- Create a plan. Make a checklist and establish a cleaning plan of attack. Focus on areas that are not regularly cleaned, as they probably need a little attention.
- Assemble your cleaning kit. Spring cleaning can be slowed down considerably if you don't have all of your equipment at the ready. Items to have on hand include an all-purpose cleaner, concentrated cleaner, microfiber cloths, paper towels, mop, vacuum, dusters, and a squeegee. Adjust your equipment based on the task at hand.
- Curate your cleaning playlist. Create a playlist with songs that will get you moving and motivated to clean.
- Work from top to bottom. Work efficiently by cleaning shelves, ceiling fans and other elevated items first, as dust

trapping debris and allergens. By deep cleaning carpets, homeowners can improve the indoor air quality of their homes. Use a carpet cleaner on a warm, dry day so that windows can be opened and cross breezes will help dry the damp rug.

- Clean windows. Wash windows inside and out and utilize their screens to help brighten indoors spaces.
- Deep clean the kitchen. Clean out and disinfect the refrigerator by wiping it down with warm water and baking soda or a vinegar-and-water solution. While in the kitchen, set the oven to the self-clean function so it becomes cleaner as well.

Homeowners also can focus on cleaning curtains (including shower curtains), steam-cleaning upholstery, removing clutter from closets, cleaning out the dryer vent and duct tubing, wiping inside kitchen drawers, and vacuuming under beds and other furniture.

Spring cleaning can bring the revitalizing nature of this beloved time of year into your home.

Did you know?

When planning spring landscapes, homeowners should always group plants with similar water needs together. According to the U.S. Department of Energy, grouping plants with similar water needs together helps to conserve water, which can be an especially useful

strategy if or when drought restrictions go into effect in summer. Homeowners also can embrace additional strategies to landscape with water conservation in mind. For example, aerating soil helps to improve water flow to plants' roots and reduces water runoff, helping

to ensure that plants get all of the water they need while reducing the likelihood that homeowners will have to use excessive amounts of water to keep plants healthy. In addition, using low-water-using types of grass can help homeowners who live in areas prone to drought conserve water while still maintaining lush, green lawns.

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Why it pays to hire contractors for home renovations

A sense of pride comes from a successful do-it-yourself home improvement project. However, quite often inexperience and time constraints lead homeowners to turn to professional contractors to make sure jobs get done correctly and on time.

Allied Market Research reported in 2021 that the home improvement services market is predicted to reach \$585.3 billion by 2030. The following are some reasons why renovation-minded homeowners benefit from the services of professionals.

- Tasks can be overwhelming: A home remodel is a large undertaking with many different steps. Contractors who have been around the block a time or two understand how to organize and manage time to get the job done. Plus, they're devoting all of their attention and time toward the remodel when on the job. This differs from when a do-it-yourselfer tries to work on a remodel in between other responsibilities.
- Expertise: Experienced contractors have done the work they have been hired to do many times, which means their skills are fine-tuned. Knowing the correct way to do a job results in fewer errors (and thus fewer repairs), shorter time periods to get the work done, and potentially lower costs overall.

- Network of suppliers: A good general contractor will have a list of material suppliers he



or she routinely uses. Often contractors become preferred sellers, which means they get a lower wholesale rate, and will often pass those savings on to the customer.

- Licensed and bonded protection: Licensed and bonded contractors not only have the skills for the job, they have insurance protection behind them. Therefore, if an injury occurs or the job goes awry, the homeowner will be protected from liability. A license means the contractor will have to uphold licensing standards, which could mean staying current on trade practices and skills.
- Frees up time: Homeowners who hire out for remodels can utilize their time in other ways, such as on the job or spending time with family.
- Reduces stress: Putting the work in capable hands means homeowners do not have to educate themselves about how to do the task, purchase tools, prevent injuries, and/or deal with potentially negative outcomes. Certainly having extra people in the house can be challenging, but it may not equal the stress caused by tackling a job on one's own.

There are many advantages to hiring contractors to renovate a home instead of taking the DIY route.

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SMART



WINDOWS

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and can be a quick and affordable update.

4. Consider other energy-efficient upgrades. Sometimes older windows can be salvaged, especially if they are not damaged and only moderately drafty. Replacing panes, sash cords, weather stripping, and even glazing may be less expensive than replacing a window. Plus, older homes with attractive windows complement one another. To keep energy bills down, think about adding insulation to the attic and basement — which is a good idea even if you are replacing windows.

5. The wrong windows can adversely affect home value. The National Association of Realtors says homeowners get about 73 percent of their replacement window investment back when they resell a home. But choosing the wrong windows

might lower the value of the home. It's important to match the look of the original windows, including window material and the divided light pattern (the number of panes in each window) with the original windows.

6. Think about soundproofing, too. When upgrading windows, also think about how certain windows can cancel out noises and make homes more soundproof. Some windows can help reduce outdoor distractions like leaf blowers or lawn mowers.

7. Proper installation is key to longevity. Replacement windows are only as good as their installation in many cases. Poor installation and orders of standard rather than custom sized windows could result in poor fitting and seals. Homeowners should carefully vet and review window replacement contractors to find the best professionals for the job.



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House powerwashing tips

Powerwashing, also known as pressure-washing, utilizes a high-velocity water spray to remove dirt and residue from the exterior surfaces of a home. It is frequently used on vinyl siding, concrete and sometimes wood decks to treat mildew and other growth that accumulates over time.

Powerwashing can be a great way to remove grime without having to scrub by hand. But it requires a delicate touch to get it right. Sometimes it is best to leave the job to professionals. But homeowners willing to give it a go can try powerwashing themselves, as various stores rent power washers.

The home improvement website ImproveNet says that, until very recently, pressure washers were almost exclusively commercial machines sold to professionals or rented to do-it-yourselfers. Lately manufacturers have targeted homeowners looking to buy with lightweight options. For those who see powerwashing as a routine venture, purchasing a unit may be worth the investment.

It is important to exercise caution when operating a powerwashing machine. The high-velocity spray can tear through skin. It is key to get a feel for the washer, and try less pressure first to get a handle on the magnitude of the tool.

Don safety gear prior to using a pressure washer. Gloves, eye protection and ear protection can be handy. Most units will connect to a standard garden hose. Choose old clothing and expect to get wet. Never point a powerwasher hose at anyone and do not attempt to rinse feet or hands in the spray.

The renovation resource The Family Handyman suggests starting with a wide-degree nozzle to test out the spray on the surface that needs to be cleaned. A 15- or 25-degree nozzle is usually the wand for general cleaning and paint stripping without damaging the surface of the home. Experiment with an optimal distance of the washer wand to get the desired cleaning effects without causing any damage. Work using a horizontal and slightly

downward angle to avoid driving water up under the siding of a home.

Avoid spraying any electric wires or components on the home. Also, try not to spray upward, and angle the spray away from doors, windows and vents.

Some washers have reservoirs that will hold a detergent solution. Choose the right detergent for the job. Keep in mind that cleansers containing bleach can damage surrounding plants, so they may need to be covered while the washing takes place.

Avoid the use of ladders when operating a powerwasher. The push-back from the wand can cause falls. Instead, opt for an extension wand to address the upper reaches of a home.

Powerwashing a home is an effective way to remove stubborn grime and refresh the look of a home's exterior.



Powerwashing the exterior of the home can be an effective way to clean it in the spring and fall.

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The basics of fertilizing a lawn

Spring marks the return of lawn and garden season. Lawns often bear the brunt of winter's wrath, so spring is a great time to nurse them back to health, and fertilizing can be an essential component of that process.

Fertilizing a lawn can be intimidating. An array of fertilizers, with each seemingly designed to address a different issue, can make homeowners' heads spin when visiting their local lawn and garden center. However, fertilizing is a very simple task that any homeowner can tackle. In fact, fears about fertilizing are often unfounded and can be overcome with some basic knowledge of the process.

- Identify which type of grass is in the yard. The home improvement experts at HGTV note that turfgrass is divided into two categories: cool-season grass and warm-season grass. A local lawn and garden center can help homeowners identify which type of grass is in the yard, and this often depends on location. Fescue,

bluegrass and perennial ryegrass are some examples of cool-season grasses, while Bermuda, bahia, St. Augustine, and zoysia are considered warm-season grasses. Identifying which type of grass is in the lawn is important because that will indicate when to fertilize. Cool-season grasses are typically best fertilized in early spring, while warm-season lawns can benefit from an application just before especially warm temperatures arrive.

- Survey the lawn to identify which spreader to use. A small yard or a thriving lawn with only a few bald or unsightly patches may not need a full application of fertilizer. In such instances, a hand spreader can suffice. For larger lawns and areas, a broadcast spreader is the ideal option. Spreaders have multiple settings, and the fertilizer package will indicate which setting to utilize when using the product.



- Test the soil prior to purchasing fertilizer. The lawn experts at Pennington® note that a simple soil test can reveal soil pH and phosphorous and potassium levels. Soil tests can be purchased at most home improvement stores and lawn and garden centers, and they can help homeowners determine which fertilizer will most benefit their lawns.
- Water the lawn prior to fertilizing. The experts at Scotts®

recommend a good watering a few days prior to fertilizing a lawn. Such an approach ensures the soil is ready to accept the fertilizer once it's applied.

- Follow the instructions carefully. Detailed instructions are typically provided on fertilizer product packaging. Once homeowners have identified and purchased the product they need, they can simply follow the instructions on the packaging, including how and

when to water after application, which can make fertilizing less intimidating.

Fertilizing in spring can help a lawn recover from the previous summer and winter, ensuring it's lush and green when summer entertaining season arrives. Such an approach ensures the soil is ready to accept the fertilizer once it's applied.



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How to care for perennials

Perennials can add color and vibrancy to any garden. One of the more desirable components of perennials is that they come back year after year, meaning homeowners do not have to in-

vest in a gardenful of new flowers every year. That can add up to considerable savings. Perennials often form the foundation of beautiful gardens.



vest in a gardenful of new flowers every year. That can add up to considerable savings. Perennials often form the foundation of beautiful gardens.

Annuals only grow for one season, produce seeds and then die. However, perennials die back to the ground every autumn and their roots survive the winter. So the plants reemerge in the spring, according to The Farmer's Almanac. Some perennials are short-lived, meaning they will come back a few consecutive years; others will last for decades.

Though planted perennials require less maintenance than annuals, they are not completely maintenance-free. Certain care is needed to help perennials thrive, and that starts with the soil. In fact, soil is the single most important factor for growing healthy plants. Penn State Extension says most perennials grow ideally in well drained, fertile soil with a pH of 6.0 to 7.0. In addition, organic matter can improve soil texture and water-holding ability.

When including perennials in the garden, make sure you wait for the right time to plant them. The ideal time is during the spring or fall. Perennials come as container-grown perennials, which already have been established in the soil. Bare-root perennials are just roots that are often packed in peat moss. In order to plant bare-root perennials, soak the roots in water for

several minutes before gently planting in the ground, indicates the how-to resource Tip Bulletin.

Perennials should be watered deeply, especially during the first growing season. However, the

soil should never be overly dry or wet. Most perennials do not need to be fertilized heavily. A single application in the spring typically is all that's needed.

Care along the way can include deadheading spent flowers so that plants can use their energy on seed production and reblooming. Perennials should be divided when they grow large, every three to four years when the plants are not in bloom. Perennials produce fewer flowers or may look sickly when the time has passed to divide them. Early spring often is a good time to divide perennials, advises The Farmer's Almanac.

A thick layer of mulch can help perennials to overwinter successfully. Perennials planted in containers will need to be trans-

planted into the garden before it gets cold because most containers cannot thoroughly insulate perennial roots.

Apart from these strategies, perennials pretty much take care

of themselves. As long as sunlight requirements match plant needs, the perennials should thrive.

Did you know?



Prior to financing home improvement projects, homeowners typically consider a host of variables, including how significant a return they're likely to get on their investment. Though potential ROI is not the determining factor for most homeowners, the cost of home renovation projects is so significant that ROI certainly merits consideration. According to Remodeling magazine's "2022 Cost vs. Value Report," a garage door replacement recouped the highest percentage of homeowners' initial investment in 2022. The average cost of such a project was \$4,041 in 2022, and homeowners recouped roughly 93 percent of that investment at resale.

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