



TRI-STATE HOME TRENDS

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KITCHEN COUNTERTOP
SURFACES

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HOW TO BUILD YOUR
OWN BACKYARD FIREPIT:
TIPS FOR SAFETY AND STYLE

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COMPARING 4

POPULAR KITCHEN COUNTERTOP SURFACES



When designing or renovating a kitchen, choosing the right countertop is one of the most crucial decisions. With many options on the market, it can be challenging to decide which material best suits your style, durability requirements, and budget. This article breaks down four of the most popular kitchen countertop surfaces: granite, quartz, marble, and butcher block. Each material has its unique advantages and disadvantages, which we'll explore to help you make an informed choice for your kitchen.



GRANITE

THE CLASSIC NATURAL STONE

Durability

Granite is a naturally hard stone that resists heat, scratches, and stains when properly sealed.

Unique Appearance

Since each slab of granite is unique, it provides a one-of-a-kind look with natural variations in pattern and color.

Value-Adding

Granite countertops often increase home resale value due to their durability and appeal.

Maintenance

Granite requires occasional sealing to keep it stain-resistant and maintain its shine. Unsealed granite can absorb spills and develop stains.

Price

High-quality granite can be expensive, especially for larger countertops or rare colors.

Weight and Installation

Granite is heavy, requiring sturdy cabinetry and professional installation, which can add to the cost.

Best For

Homeowners seeking a high-end, natural look with excellent durability.





QUARTZ

The Engineered Powerhouse

Low Maintenance

Unlike granite, quartz countertops don't require sealing and are resistant to stains, scratches, and bacteria.

Consistent Appearance

Quartz is engineered, allowing for a more consistent pattern and color that can complement a variety of kitchen styles.

Wide Range of Colors

Quartz offers a broader color range than natural stones, including brighter colors and more uniform patterns.

Susceptible to Heat Damage

Unlike granite, quartz can be damaged by high heat, so hot pans should not be placed directly on its surface.

Higher Cost

Quartz is often priced similarly or even higher than granite, making it a premium option.

Less Natural

Because it is engineered, quartz lacks the unique, natural veining and depth found in natural stones.

Best For

Those who want a durable, low-maintenance countertop with a variety of design options.



MARBLE

The Elegant Showstopper

Timeless Beauty

Marble is known for its classic, luxurious look, with beautiful veining and a wide range of colors.

Cool Surface

Marble stays cool, making it a favorite for baking and pastry preparation.

High-End Appeal

Marble countertops can increase home value and appeal, especially in luxury homes.



Porous and Stain-Prone

Marble is more porous than granite and can easily stain, especially if exposed to acidic substances like vinegar, wine, or citrus.

Scratches Easily

Marble is softer than granite and quartz, making it more susceptible to scratches and dents.

High Maintenance

Regular sealing is necessary to maintain its look and prevent staining.

Best For

Those willing to invest in maintenance for a luxurious, timeless look.



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BUTCHER BLOCK

The Warm, Natural Alternative

Warm Aesthetic

Butcher block countertops offer a natural, rustic charm that pairs well with a variety of kitchen styles, from farmhouse to modern.

Affordable

Compared to natural stones, butcher block is generally more affordable.

Easy to Refinish

Butcher block can be sanded and re-sealed to remove scratches and renew its appearance.

High Maintenance

Butcher block requires regular oiling and sealing to prevent water absorption, staining, and bacteria buildup.

Not Heat-Resistant

Hot pans can scorch the wood, so extra care is needed.



Prone to Scratches and Dents

While scratches can be sanded out, butcher block is more susceptible to nicks and scratches than stone.

Best For

Those seeking a warm, organic look who are willing to maintain it regularly.

Comparing the Costs and Lifespan

Material	Cost per Square Foot	Maintenance Level	Durability
Granite	\$40 - \$200	Moderate	High
Quartz	\$50 - \$150	Low	Very High
Marble	\$60 - \$250	High	Moderate
Butcher Block	\$30 - \$100	High	Moderate

Which is Best for You?

Your ideal countertop material depends on your budget, lifestyle, and the aesthetic you want. Quartz and granite are excellent options for busy kitchens needing durability and minimal maintenance, while marble offers elegance for those

willing to maintain it carefully. Butcher block is perfect for a warmer, natural look but requires more upkeep.

Each option can transform your kitchen, so choose the one that best meets your needs and style preferences.

Tips for Installing Kitchen Tile Like a Pro

Get the best results with these smart steps and pro-approved tricks.

1. Plan Your Layout First

Before mixing any mortar, dry-lay your tiles to visualize spacing and placement. Start from the center of the room or a focal point (like the sink or range) and work outward for a balanced look.

2. Choose the Right Tile and Grout

Porcelain is a great choice for kitchen durability. For grout, opt for stain-resistant or epoxy-based formulas that can stand up to spills and moisture.

3. Prep the Surface

Ensure your subfloor is clean, level, and sturdy. Use a cement backer board for added stability and moisture resistance, especially if you're tiling over wood.

4. Use Spacers for Uniform Joints

Tile spacers ensure even gaps between tiles. Don't eyeball it—precision matters for both looks and long-term performance.

5. Don't Rush the Adhesive

Follow the manufacturer's instructions on drying times. Walking on tiles too early or grouting too soon can lead to shifting and uneven results.

6. Invest in a Quality Tile Cutter

For clean, accurate cuts, use a wet saw or tile cutter suitable for your tile type. Sloppy edges can ruin the entire look.

7. Seal Your Grout

After it cures, seal the grout to protect against stains and water damage. This is especially important in high-traffic, spill-prone kitchens.

Final Tip:

Take your time. A careful, patient installation will reward you with a beautiful, long-lasting floor that stands up to daily kitchen life.



7 Reasons Why **TILE FLOORING** Is a Smart Choice for Your Kitchen

When it comes to choosing flooring for your kitchen, the options can be overwhelming. From hardwood to vinyl, laminate to concrete, each material brings its own set of pros and cons. However, tile flooring continues to be one of the most popular and practical choices for kitchens—and for good reason. Below, we explore the many benefits of opting for tile floors in one of the most high-traffic and functional areas of your home.

1. Durability That Lasts

Kitchens endure a lot of wear and tear—spills, foot traffic, heavy appliances, and dropped utensils. Tile flooring, particularly ceramic or porcelain tiles, is renowned for its durability. These materials are tough, scratch-resistant, and can withstand years of use without losing their appearance. This makes tile a perfect choice for homeowners looking for a long-lasting investment.

2. Easy to Clean and Maintain

One of the biggest draws of tile flooring is how easy it is to clean. Spilled spaghetti sauce? No problem. Dropped a carton of eggs? Wipe it up with ease. Tile doesn't stain easily and can be cleaned with simple household cleaners. It also doesn't harbor allergens or absorb odors, making it a hygienic option for a space where cleanliness is key.

3. Water and Heat Resistance

Kitchens are prone to moisture and heat, both of which can damage some

flooring materials over time, but tile stands up well to both. Porcelain tiles have a very low absorption rate, making them nearly waterproof. And unlike some synthetic materials, tile won't warp or melt under high heat.

4. Variety of Styles and Designs

Tile flooring offers an impressive range of colors, patterns, textures, and sizes. Whether you're going for a sleek modern look, rustic farmhouse charm, or classic Mediterranean vibes, there's a tile out there to match your aesthetic. You can even find tiles that mimic the appearance of wood or natural stone—giving you the look you want with the durability you need.

5. Adds Value to Your Home

Because tile is seen as a high-quality, desirable flooring material, it can increase the resale value of your home. Potential buyers often appreciate the blend of style and function that tile provides, especially in high-use areas like the kitchen. A well-installed tile floor can be a selling point and give your home a competitive edge in the market.

6. Eco-Friendly Options Available

For environmentally conscious homeowners, there are tile options made from recycled materials. Tile also has a long lifespan, which means less waste over time. Plus, it has a cool surface that can help with regulating indoor temperatures in warmer cli-

mates, potentially reducing energy costs.

7. Great for Radiant Heating Systems

If you live in a colder climate, tile flooring pairs beautifully with radiant heating systems. It conducts heat well and can keep your kitchen warm under foot during chilly months—adding both comfort and efficiency to your home.

Final Thoughts

Tile flooring is more than just a pretty surface, it's a practical, long-lasting solution that fits the unique demands of a kitchen environment. With its strength, versatility, and timeless appeal, tile continues to be a go-to flooring choice for homeowners looking to blend beauty with function.

Whether you're remodeling or building from scratch, tile deserves a place at the top of your kitchen flooring list.

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How to Build Your Own Backyard

FIREPIT

Tips for Safety and Style

A backyard firepit can transform your outdoor space into a cozy retreat for family gatherings, storytelling, or simply enjoying the warmth of a crackling fire. While building a DIY firepit is a rewarding project, it's essential to prioritize safety and adhere to local regulations. This guide walks you through creating a stylish and secure firepit for your backyard.

Step 1: Choose the Right Location

Start by selecting a suitable spot for your firepit. Consider the following:

Distance from Structures: Place the firepit at least 20-30 feet away from your home, trees, fences, or any other flammable structures.

Ground Surface: Avoid building on wooden decks or grassy areas. Instead, choose a flat, non-flammable surface like dirt, gravel, or sand.

Overhead Clearance: Ensure there are no overhanging branches or power lines above the firepit.

Wind Direction: Pick a spot sheltered from strong winds to prevent embers from traveling.

Step 2: Gather Your Materials

You don't need to break the bank to build a durable firepit. Common materials include:

Fire-Resistant Bricks or Pavers: These will form the walls of your firepit.

Gravel: For the base layer, aiding in drainage and reducing fire hazards.



Metal Fire Ring: Optional but recommended for added safety and durability

Sand: To create a protective layer inside the pit.

Basic Tools: Shovel, level, tape measure, and a rubber mallet.

Step 3: Build the Firepit

Mark the Area: Use spray paint or a rope to outline the shape of your firepit. Circular designs are popular, but square or rectangular ones work well too.

Dig the Base: Excavate the marked area to a depth of 6-8 inches.

Add Gravel: Spread a 2-3-inch layer of gravel at the base to improve drainage.

Lay the First Layer: Arrange fire-resistant bricks or pavers in your chosen shape. Use a level to ensure the base is even.

Build the Walls: Stack additional layers of bricks, staggering the seams for stability. For extra strength, you can use heat-resistant adhesive.

Insert a Fire Ring: Place a metal ring inside the pit to protect the bricks from prolonged exposure to high heat.

Add Sand: Spread a layer of sand inside the pit to absorb heat and protect the base.

Step 4: Ensure Fire Safety

Building a firepit is just the beginning. Safe usage and maintenance are crucial:

Have a Fire Extinguisher: Keep a fire extinguisher, garden hose, or bucket of sand nearby for emergencies.

Use the Right Fuel: Burn only dry, seasoned wood. Avoid materials like treated wood, plastic, or trash, which release harmful chemicals.

Control the Fire: Never leave a fire unattended and keep flames manageable (under 3 feet high).

Extinguish Properly: Douse the fire with water or sand and stir until no embers remain before leaving the pit.

Bonus Tips for Style

Seating: Arrange weather-resistant chairs or benches around the firepit for comfortable lounging.

Lighting: Add string lights or solar-powered lanterns for ambiance.

Decor: Use natural stones or decorative bricks to match your outdoor aesthetic.

Accessories: Invest in firepit grates or skewers for roasting marshmallows or grilling.

A well-constructed and properly maintained firepit can provide years of enjoyment while enhancing the beauty of your backyard. Follow these steps to create a functional and safe gathering spot that you'll love to use throughout the year.

Understanding the Differences Between **3-SEASON** & **4-SEASON** Rooms



Adding a sunroom or enclosed space to your home is an excellent way to increase living space and create a bright, inviting area that connects you to the outdoors. When considering such an addition, you'll encounter two primary options: 3-season rooms and 4-season rooms.

Understanding the differences between these two types of room additions is key to making the right decision for your needs, climate, and budget. This article explores the distinctions between 3-season and 4-season rooms and the best uses for each.

What is a 3-Season Room?

A 3-season room is designed for use during the spring, summer, and fall

months. This type of sunroom typically lacks full insulation and may not be equipped with heating and cooling systems like the rest of your home. Instead, it is a semi-outdoor space that offers protection from the elements, such as rain, wind, and insects, while letting in an abundance of natural light and fresh air.

Key Features of a 3-Season Room

Insulation: Limited or minimal insulation compared to a fully climate-controlled room.

Windows and Screens: Often equipped with large windows and screens that can be opened to let in breezes during warmer months.

Temperature Control: Typically lacks central heating and cooling, though

space heaters, ceiling fans, or portable AC units may be used to manage the temperature.

Structure and Materials: Constructed from less insulated materials, including glass, aluminum, or other lightweight framing, making it a more affordable option.

Best Uses for a 3-Season Room

Warm Climate Areas: If you live in a region with mild winters, a 3-season room can often be used year-round with minimal additional heating or cooling.

Seasonal Living Spaces: Ideal for enjoying outdoor views during spring, summer, and fall without being exposed to insects or unpredictable weather.

Budget-Conscious Additions: Since a 3-season room doesn't require the same level of insulation and HVAC integration, it is generally less expensive to build and maintain than a 4-season room.

Limitations

Temperature Control: Not suited for winter use in colder climates without additional heating sources.

Not Year-Round: Comfort during the coldest months can be difficult to maintain.

What is a 4-Season Room?

A 4-season room is a fully insulated and climate-controlled space that is integrated into the home's existing HVAC system. This room is designed for year-round use and feels like an extension of the main living area, offering the comfort of the indoors with panoramic views of the outdoors. With proper insulation, high-

quality windows, and continuous heating and cooling, a 4-season room can be used in any season, no matter the weather outside.

Key Features of a 4-Season Room

Insulation: Fully insulated walls, floors, and ceiling to provide thermal protection against temperature extremes.

Windows: High-performance windows, often double- or triple-paned, to help maintain indoor temperatures and provide energy efficiency.

Heating and Cooling: Integrated into the home's central HVAC system or equipped with dedicated heating and cooling units to ensure comfort throughout the year.

Structure and Materials: Built with materials that match or complement the main home's construction, such as wood or insulated vinyl, allowing for greater energy efficiency and durability.

Best Uses for a 4-Season Room

Year-Round Living: Perfect for regions with harsh winters or hot summers where climate control is essential.

Extended Living Space: Since a 4-season room is insulated and climate-controlled, it can function like any other room in the house, whether used as a family room, office, or dining area.

Property Value: A well-designed 4-season room can significantly increase the value of your home, as it adds livable square footage and functionality throughout the year.

Limitations

Higher Cost: The cost of construction for a 4-season room is generally higher than for a 3-season room due to the need for insulation, more durable materials, and integration with the home's HVAC system.



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Extended Construction Time: More complex design and construction can lead to longer project timelines.

Key Differences Between 3-Season and 4-Season Roomst

Choosing the Right Option for Your Home

When deciding between a 3-season or 4-season room addition, consider the following factors:

1. Climate

If you live in a region with cold winters or hot summers, a 4-season room may be the better option, as it will allow you to enjoy the space comfortably year-round. In mild climates, a 3-season room may provide sufficient comfort for most of the year.

2. Budget

3-season rooms are typically more affordable and quicker to build. If budget constraints are a primary concern, a 3-season room can be a great way to add enjoyable living space without the high costs associated with a 4-season room.

3. Purpose of the Room

Consider how you plan to use the space. If you envision using the room as a year-round extension of your living area (for example, as a home office or family room), a 4-season room will provide the necessary comfort and usability. However, if you want a light-filled retreat primarily for seasonal enjoyment, a 3-season room might meet your needs.

4. Resale Value:

A well-built 4-season room can add more value to your home, as it increases the overall living space. However, if you are looking for a quick and cost-effective way to improve your home, a 3-season room can still provide excellent appeal to potential buyers.

Feature	3-Season Room	4-Season Room
Usage	Spring, Summer, Fall	Year-Round
Insulation	Minimal or None	Fully Insulated
Heating/Cooling	None	Fully integrated with central HVAC or has its own system
Windows	Single pane windows, normally with screens	Double or triple-pane energy efficient windows
Cost	Lower cost	Higher cost due to insulation and HVAC
Structure	Lightweight framing	Sturdier materials that match the home's construction
Climate Suitability	Mild or warm climates	Suitable for all climates

Conclusion

Both 3-season and 4-season rooms offer unique advantages, depending on your needs, climate, and budget. A 3-season room is ideal for those seeking a budget-friendly, seasonal space to enjoy the outdoors with minimal construction. A 4-season room, on the other hand, is a full extension of

your home's living space, offering year-round comfort and adding substantial value to your property. By carefully weighing these factors, you can choose the option that best fits your lifestyle and enhances your home.

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5 ESSENTIAL SAFETY SUPPLIES EVERY NEW HOMEOWNER SHOULD HAVE

Becoming a homeowner is an exciting milestone, bringing a sense of independence and accomplishment. However, it also comes with responsibilities—one of the most important being to ensure your new space is safe for you and your family. As a new homeowner, equipping your home with essential safety items can prevent potential hazards and keep your household secure. Here's a guide to five essential safety supplies every new homeowner should invest in.

1. Smoke and Carbon Monoxide Detectors

Smoke detectors are your first line of defense against potential fires, and carbon monoxide (CO) detectors protect you from a colorless, odorless gas that can be fatal. Many homes already have smoke detectors installed, but it's essential to ensure they're functioning properly, ideally in every room and hallway. Carbon monoxide detectors are particularly important if your home has gas appliances, a fireplace, or an attached garage.



Pro Tip

For convenience, consider dual-functioning alarms that detect both smoke and carbon monoxide. Remember to test your alarms monthly and replace the batteries at least once a year.

2. Fire Extinguisher

In the event of a small fire, a fire extinguisher can prevent a dangerous situation from turning catastrophic. Place at least one fire extinguisher in the kitchen, as cooking is a common cause of household fires. Other ideal

locations include near fireplaces, in the garage, and on each floor of your home.

Pro Tip

Learn how to use your fire extinguisher properly by following the PASS method—Pull, Aim, Squeeze, and Sweep—and be sure everyone in the household knows where it's located and how to use it.

3. First Aid Kit

Accidents happen, and having a well-stocked first aid kit ensures you can address minor injuries quickly. Your first aid kit should include basics like bandages, antiseptic wipes, adhesive tape, gauze pads, pain relievers, scissors, tweezers, and an instant cold pack. It's also a good idea to include a first aid manual.

Pro Tip

Keep a first aid kit in both your home and your car. Regularly check your kit for expired or used items and replace them as needed.

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4. Emergency Lighting

Power outages can leave you fumbling in the dark, which can be hazardous in an unfamiliar home layout. Emergency lighting, such as flashlights and lanterns, can prevent accidents during a blackout. Consider investing in both battery-powered and rechargeable lights. Some flashlights can be mounted on walls or kept in strategic locations, like near the stairs, in the bedrooms, and in the basement.

Pro Tip

For hands-free convenience, headlamps are an excellent option and can be especially useful if you need to move around in the dark. Keep extra batteries in your emergency kit as well.

5. Surge Protectors

Power surges, which can happen during storms or due to electrical malfunctions, can damage electronics and potentially lead to fires. High-



quality surge protectors are an inexpensive way to safeguard your devices and home. Look for protectors with a high joule rating, as these provide greater protection.

Pro Tip

Surge protectors should not be confused with power strips; not all power strips offer surge protection. Replace surge protectors every few years, as they wear out over time, even if they appear functional.



Conclusion

As a new homeowner, investing in these essential safety supplies can give you peace of mind, knowing that you've taken steps to protect your home and family. Along with regular maintenance and awareness of emergency procedures, these items can help you manage unforeseen situations effectively and safely.

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10 TIPS TO MAKE YOUR AIR CONDITIONER MORE ENERGY EFFICIENT

Updating your HVAC (heating, ventilation and air conditioning) system to cool your home in a smart and sustainable way involves several steps that not only improve energy efficiency but also reduce environmental impact.

Consider these tips from the heating and cooling experts at Carrier to help make your cooling system more eco-friendly:

Upgrade to an Energy-Efficient HVAC System

If your HVAC system is outdated, consider replacing it with a more energy-efficient model. Look for systems with an Energy Star or high SEER2 (seasonal energy efficiency ratio) rating, which indicates better energy efficiency. The higher the SEER2 rating, the more efficient the unit. Financial incentives for installing a higher-efficiency system are available through the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022. You can also shop for rebates from manufacturers and utility companies.

Look for a Carbon-Free HVAC System

Heat pumps, ductless and VRF (variable refrigerant flow) systems that run on electricity and use low refrigerant can help reduce your home's negative impact on the environment.

Install a Smart Thermostat

A smart thermostat can be programmed based on your preferences and adjust temperatures automatically. These devices can be controlled re-



motely through smartphones and help reduce energy consumption by cooling your home only when necessary.

Conduct Regular Maintenance

Keep your HVAC system running efficiently with regular maintenance. This includes cleaning or replacing air filters every 1-3 months, checking refrigerant levels, cleaning outside condenser coils and ensuring the system's components are in good working condition and the airflow is not blocked.

Seal and Insulate

Improve your home's insulation to maintain a consistent temperature. Seal windows, doors and any gaps or cracks to prevent cool air from escaping. This can significantly reduce the workload on your HVAC system.

Use Ceiling Fans

Ceiling fans can help circulate cool air throughout your home, allowing you to set the thermostat at a higher temperature without sacrificing comfort, thus saving energy.

Add Window Treatments

Use blinds, shades or curtains to block out sunlight and reduce heat gain during the hottest parts of the day. This simple step can make a big difference in how much your air conditioner needs to work.

Upgrade to a Variable-Speed Compressor

Traditional compressors operate at full power or not at all. However, a variable-speed compressor can adjust its output to match your cooling needs precisely, resulting in better efficiency, energy savings and improved indoor comfort.

Ventilate Properly

Ensure proper ventilation in your home, especially in areas like the kitchen and bathroom, to remove excess heat and humidity, which can reduce the need for air conditioning.

Update Roofing

If you're replacing your roof, consider cool roofing materials that reflect more sunlight and absorb less heat than standard roofing materials, reducing the heat that enters your home.

By implementing these strategies, you can improve or update your HVAC system to cool your home more sustainably. Not only do these steps help the environment, but they can also lead to lower energy bills and improved indoor comfort. Always consult with an HVAC professional to determine the best and most efficient options for your home and needs.

Find more information visit [Carrier.com](https://www.carrier.com).

How to Choose a **WATER** Heater

American homeowners may not realize that their water heater accounts for roughly 13% of annual residential energy use. Recently, the Department of Energy (DOE) passed new water heater efficiency standards that will help save approximately \$7.6 billion and reduce more than 332 million metric tons of carbon emissions.

Whether you are looking for a heat pump water heater or a more conventional option, here are steps to help identify the ideal water heater for any home.

Assess Your Hot Water Needs

Keep in mind the number of people in the home and estimate hot water usage (in gallons) for activities like showering, dishwashing, laundry and cooking. Identify peak usage periods such as mornings and evenings when the demand for hot water likely increases and consider available energy sources.

Choose the Right Type of Water Heater

Each category of water heater has its own set of unique advantages. Selecting the right one depends on each household's specific needs, budget and space availability.

With three primary types of water heaters, here's what each style has to offer.

Heat Pump Water Heaters (HPWH)

These units use electricity to move heat from the air to heat the water,



making them significantly more energy-efficient than conventional electric water heaters. Benefits include lower environmental impact due to their high efficiency. These units also provide savings on energy bills. In fact, by upgrading to a more efficient heat pump water heater, the average homeowner savings could reach \$1,800 over the appliance's lifetime, with more advantages for renters and low-income households. All of these features make HPWH's a cost-effective option for the long term.

Conventional Storage Tanks

Available in electric, propane and natural gas options, these units can store a large volume of hot water in a tank that is ready for use at any time and maintain it at a set temperature

until needed. Features include a lower initial installation cost and the ability to provide hot water during power outages (for gas models). Keep in mind that tank-type options require more floor space than a tankless water heater and use energy to replace heat losses from the tank.

Tankless Water Heaters

Also known as "instantaneous" or "on-demand" water heaters, tankless models are available in natural gas, propane and electric - and heat water only when it is needed. Tankless technology does not store hot water, rather it heats the water as it passes through the unit, providing a continuous supply of hot water. These units are much smaller than conventional tanks, which helps to save

space. Homeowners will see long-term benefits while saving on energy bills, as energy isn't wasted on maintaining hot water. Heating water instantaneously requires high energy consumption for a short period of time, so a review of the home's existing electrical or gas systems to ensure they are compatible with the chosen model is recommended.

Energy Efficiency and Technology Features

Energy Efficiency and Decarbonization

Energy-efficient models employ advanced technologies to minimize energy waste. This provides homeowners with substantial savings on monthly energy bills while also lowering greenhouse gas emissions. Additionally, a few environmentally- and budget-friendly options exist, with many water heaters being ENERGY STAR® certified.

Regulatory Changes

The DOE's new energy efficiency standards for water heaters, effective in 2029, aim to save consumers money in energy costs. Electric water heaters will shift to heat-pump technology, using less than half the electricity of older models, while gas-burning heaters must also meet higher standards. To maximize savings and ensure compliance with the latest standards, it's essential to select models that comply with the new regulations. Be sure to check the updated standards and guidelines to make an informed decision.

Technology and Innovation

Innovations such as smart home integration and Wi-Fi connectivity provide greater control over the water heating system and contribute to increased energy efficiency and cost savings. For instance, many Rheem water heaters include features such as a hot water availability indicator, vacation mode for energy savings,



easy energy usage tracking, and proactive leak detection and prevention.

Homeowners focused on these regulatory and manufacturing changes,

as well as the ongoing rebates and incentives being offered, can leverage these trends to increase their comfort with new energy-efficient water heaters. When selecting the ideal water heater, remember to start by fully assessing the home's hot water needs, then prioritize factors such as comfort and maximizing energy savings. And, finally, research the model's warranty details to ensure the unit will serve the home for many years to come.



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4 TIPS FOR MAINTAINING YOUR GRILL

Regular maintenance is important for ensuring the performance and longevity of your grill. By properly maintaining your outdoor cooking appliance, you can prevent rust, extend its lifespan and ensure it cooks food safely.

Neglecting grill maintenance can lead to the buildup of grease and food particles as well as decreased cooking efficiency, safety hazards and necessary repair or replacement. A clean grill typically produces better-tasting food by preventing the transfer of unwanted flavors from previous meals.

By taking the time to properly care for your grill with these tips, you can help ensure its performance and longevity.



Clean and Season the Grates

Regularly cleaning and seasoning grill grates can help keep them in top condition. Start by heating the grill to a high temperature to burn off left-over food and grease. Once hot, use a grill brush to scrub away residue. After cleaning, rinse grates thoroughly with water and dry thoroughly. Once dry, apply a thin layer of cooking oil to prevent rust, keep food from sticking, maintain the flavor of your food and ensure even cooking.



Inspect and Clean the Burners

To ensure efficient heat distribution and prevent flare-ups, it's important to inspect and clean your gas grill's burners. Before cleaning, turn off the gas supply and disconnect the propane tank. Remove the burners and check for any signs of damage or corrosion. Use a wire brush to clean debris or buildup and a thin wire or paperclip to clear any clogs. After cleaning, reassemble the burners and check for proper alignment. Make sure there are no gas leaks, and the burners ignite properly.



Check and Replace Parts as Needed

To extend the lifespan of your grill, regularly check and replace any worn or damaged parts. Inspect components, such as the ignition system, cooking grates, control knobs and propane connections for signs of

wear and tear, rust or loose connections. If you notice any issues, replace the parts as soon as possible.



Protect Your Grill from the Elements

If you have a grill cover, use it whenever your grill is not in use to shield it from rain, snow and the sun's rays. If you don't have a cover, consider investing in one or storing your grill in a sheltered area away from strong winds and extreme weather conditions. Regularly clean your grill's exterior using mild soap and water. Avoid using abrasive cleaners that can damage the finish to help prevent rust, corrosion and other damage caused by exposure to the elements.

Find more tips to make the most of grilling season at eLivingtoday.com.

3 INEXPENSIVE WAYS

TO UPDATE YOUR HOME BEFORE SELLING IT

When preparing to sell your home, it's essential to make it as appealing as possible to potential buyers. However, you don't need to spend a fortune on major renovations to boost its appeal and value. There are several cost-effective updates you can make that will enhance your home's appearance and attract buyers. Here are three inexpensive ways to update your home before putting it on the market.

1. Fresh Coat of Paint

One of the easiest and most affordable ways to give your home a fresh look is by applying a new coat of paint. Repainting walls can instantly brighten up a room, make it feel larger, and hide any scuffs or imperfections. Neutral colors such as light gray, beige, or white appeal to a broad range of buyers, as they create a clean and modern backdrop that allows potential homeowners to envision their own décor.

Tips for Maximizing Impact

Focus on high-traffic areas like the living room, kitchen, and hallways.

Don't forget to paint over outdated or bold-colored accent walls, as neutral tones help create a more universal appeal.

If your budget allows, consider painting the front door and trim for added curb appeal.

A fresh coat of paint can make a home feel new without requiring a major investment, typically costing under \$100 per room if you do the work yourself.



2. Upgrade Lighting Fixtures

Lighting plays a crucial role in how a home looks and feels. Outdated or dim lighting can make spaces appear smaller and less inviting. By upgrading your lighting fixtures, you can create a more modern, welcoming environment for buyers. New light fixtures don't have to be expensive—there are plenty of stylish, affordable options available at home improvement stores.

Key Areas to Upgrade

Entryway: A statement light fixture in the entryway sets the tone for the rest of the home.

Kitchen: Swap out old, basic lights for sleek pendant or track lighting to create a more contemporary feel.

Bathroom: Update vanity lighting with something bright and modern to give the bathroom a fresh look.

Additionally, ensure all your light bulbs are energy-efficient and provide ample brightness. LED bulbs are a cost-effective option that improves the ambiance of the space while reducing energy costs.

3. Enhance Curb Appeal with Simple Landscaping

First impressions are critical, and your home's exterior is the first thing

potential buyers will notice. Luckily, improving curb appeal can be done inexpensively by focusing on a few key areas of your yard and exterior.

Inexpensive Landscaping Ideas

Trim bushes and trees to make the yard look well-maintained.

Add fresh mulch to flower beds and around shrubs. This gives a polished look to landscaping at a low cost.

Plant seasonal flowers or inexpensive greenery near the entrance to create a welcoming vibe.

Pressure wash the driveway, walkways, and siding to make them look clean and refreshed.

Simple updates to your home's exterior can increase its attractiveness and entice more potential buyers to take a closer look. Landscaping improvements are generally low-cost but provide significant visual impact.

Incorporating these three affordable updates—fresh paint, upgraded lighting, and enhanced curb appeal—can make your home more inviting and modern, increasing its attractiveness to buyers without breaking the bank. These changes not only make your home look better but also help it stand out in a competitive market, leading to a quicker and potentially more profitable sales price.

Hardwood vs. Laminate

FLOORING

Key Differences, Benefits, and Drawbacks

When deciding on the right flooring for your home, hardwood and laminate flooring are two popular options. Each has its unique characteristics, benefits, and drawbacks. Understanding these differences can help you make an informed decision that suits your style, budget, and lifestyle needs.



Hardwood Flooring

Overview

Hardwood flooring is made from natural wood, typically sourced from trees like oak, maple, cherry, or walnut. Each plank is milled from a single piece of timber, giving it an authentic and timeless appeal.

Benefits

Aesthetic Appeal: Hardwood flooring offers a warm, natural look with unique grains and textures that can add value and elegance to any space.

Longevity: With proper maintenance, hardwood can last for decades, and it can be sanded and refinished multiple times to restore its original beauty.

Eco-Friendly: Sourced from renewable resources, hardwood is an environmentally friendly option if harvested sustainably.

Increased Property Value: Homes with hardwood floors often have higher resale values due to their classic appeal.

Drawbacks

Cost: Hardwood flooring is significantly more expensive to purchase and install compared to laminate.

Maintenance: It requires regular maintenance to prevent damage from moisture, scratches, and wear.

Sensitivity to Environment: Hardwood can expand and contract with changes in humidity, making it less suitable for areas with extreme climate variations.



Laminate Flooring

Overview

Laminate flooring is a synthetic product made of multiple layers, including a high-resolution photographic layer that mimics the look of wood or stone. It is topped with a clear protective layer for durability.

Benefits

Affordability: Laminate is more budget-friendly, offering the look of hardwood at a fraction of the cost.

Durability: The protective layer makes it resistant to scratches, dents,

and stains, making it a good option for high-traffic areas.

Ease of Installation: Most laminate flooring systems use a click-and-lock design, allowing for straightforward DIY installation.

Low Maintenance: It requires minimal upkeep and is easy to clean with regular sweeping and occasional damp mopping.

Drawbacks

Limited Longevity: Laminate flooring cannot be refinished, and once damaged, it typically needs replacement.

Appearance: While modern laminate closely mimics the look of hardwood, it lacks the natural texture and depth of real wood.

Moisture Sensitivity: Despite being more moisture-resistant than hardwood, excessive water exposure can still cause laminate to warp or swell.

Lower Resale Value: Laminate does not add as much value to a home compared to hardwood flooring.

Choosing the Right Flooring

When choosing between hardwood and laminate flooring, consider your budget, lifestyle, and the specific needs of your space:

If you prioritize authenticity, longevity, and property value, and you are willing to invest more upfront and commit to maintenance, hardwood may be the better choice.

If you are looking for an affordable, durable, and low-maintenance option that still provides the appearance of wood, laminate flooring might be the right fit.

Both hardwood and laminate flooring have their place in the market, catering to different needs and preferences. By weighing the benefits and drawbacks of each, you can make a choice that enhances the beauty and functionality of your space.

HOW TO PROTECT HYDRANGEAS FROM HUNGRY DEER

by Melinda Myers

Low maintenance, beautiful flowers, and plenty of varieties have made hydrangeas a favorite landscape plant. It seems you can't visit a garden center or nursery without being tempted by one of the traditional favorites or newer hydrangea varieties.

Despite their easy-care nature, hungry deer can make it difficult to fully enjoy these plants. Rutgers University rates landscape plants based on their susceptibility to deer damage. According to Rutgers, hydrangeas are occasionally severely damaged by deer, meaning they are a plant preferred by deer and protection is advised. Your experience may be different and can vary from year to year, but it is always wise to be pre-

pared to protect key plants in your landscape.

Deer like to browse leaves, tender shoots, flower buds, and blossoms. Damage is worse when populations are high, food is scarce, and when environmental stresses like cold and deep snow are present. Once deer find a place to dine, they tend to return. Their damage has a rough or torn appearance as opposed to a clean cut like that made by a pruner. Preventing damage is always the best way to maximize your enjoyment. Even if your plants have escaped damage in the past, continue to watch for deer tracks, droppings, and plant damage.

Fencing is one option but not always the most attractive or practical. An

eight-foot fence is the recommended height for protecting large areas. The University of Minnesota found deer can be kept out of small gardens that are 8 x 16 feet or smaller with much shorter fences. Sturdy decorative posts and somewhat invisible deer fencing tend to make a less obtrusive fence. Always check with your local municipality for any fencing restrictions.

Many gardeners report success using high-test fishing line. Create a barrier using strong five-foot posts with the fishing line spaced at two-foot intervals.

Scare tactics may provide some short-term help. Motion-sensitive sprinklers, noise makers, and smells are often used. Several gardeners



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Hydrangeas are a favorite of hungry deer making them susceptible to severe damage so strategies to protect these plants are recommended. Photo courtesy of MelindaMyers.com

have reported success placing colorful wine bottles inverted over rebar posts. The rattling helped discourage deer browsing and added an ornamental element to the garden. Occasionally change scare tactics to increase success.

Place key plants closer to your home, in the back of large beds, or surrounded by less susceptible plants. Making it hard to reach the plants can help discourage damage to hydrangeas.

Repellents are another option. Treat susceptible plants before the deer start browsing for the best results. Look for a rain and snow-resistant product, which does not need to be reapplied as often. That means you'll save time applying and spend less money.

Maximize results by treating new growth according to the label directions. Most liquid repellents need time to dry and can only be applied when temperatures are above freezing. Always check the label for the product being applied and follow the directions for the best results.

Continue to monitor the landscape for signs of deer presence and damage and adjust your management strategies as needed. Be persistent so you can increase your success.

Melinda Myers has written more than 20 gardening books, including *Small Space Gardening*. She hosts the "How to Grow Anything" DVD series and the Melinda's Garden Moment TV & radio segments. Her website is MelindaMyers.com.





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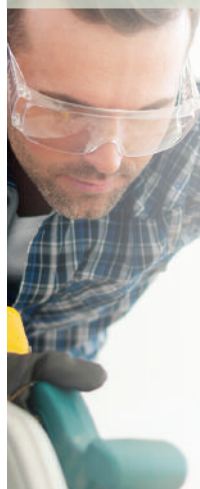
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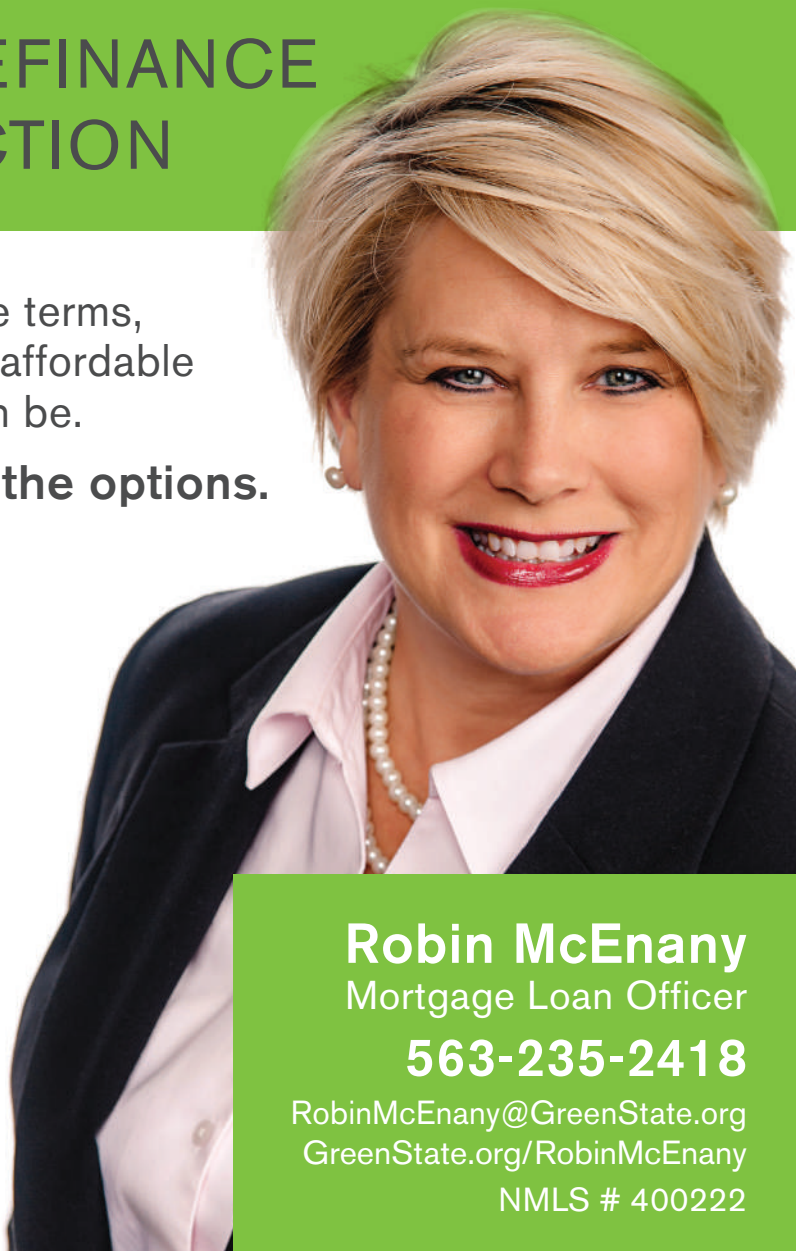
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