TRI-STATE HOME TRENDS



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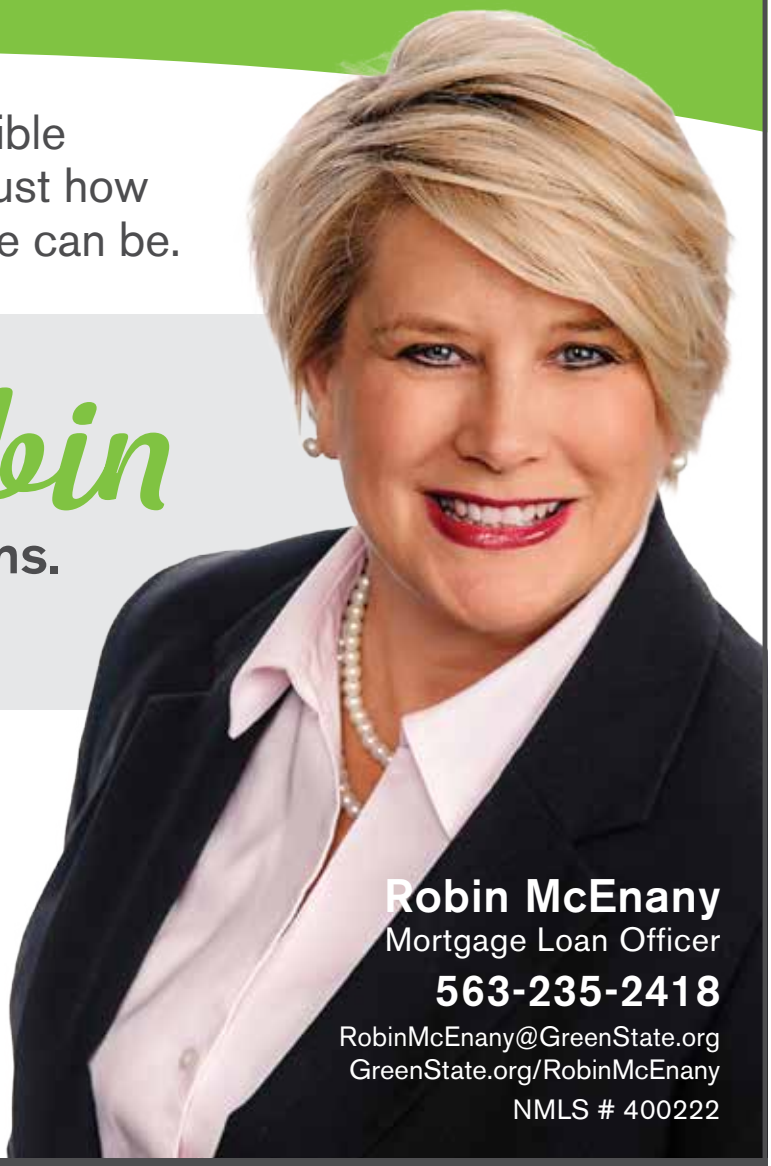
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Your local guide to homes, products, services, & contractors.



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WHY AN EPOXY GARAGE FLOOR IS THE ULTIMATE HOME UPGRADE

by Jon Lewerke

For many Dubuque area homeowners, the garage is the literal entryway to the home. It's where we kick off our muddy boots after a weekend at Mines of Spain, store our tools, and park our vehicles to shield them from the unpredictable Iowa elements. Yet, despite being one of the most heavily used spaces in the house, the garage floor is frequently the most neglected.

Standard, unfinished concrete floors are prone to cracking, staining, and releasing a persistent fine gray dust that tracks straight onto your kitchen rugs. If you are looking to elevate your home's value, utility, and aesthetic appeal, upgrading to a professional epoxy floor coating is one of the smartest investments you can make this season.

Here is a breakdown of why Tri-State homeowners are trading bare concrete for the resilience and beauty of epoxy.

1. Defeating the Midwest Elements

Living in the Driftless Region means our homes endure a dramatic four-season cycle. Between sub-zero winter blizzards and humid Mississippi River summers, standard concrete expands and contracts constantly. This thermal movement leads to hairline fractures and eventual pitting. Worse yet is the winter slush. When your car parks inside after a snowy commute down Northwest Arterial, it brings along road salt, deicing chemicals, and brine. On bare concrete, this moisture seeps into the porous surface. When it freezes, it chips away at the stone—a process known as spalling.

An epoxy coating acts as a completely non-porous shield. It bonds chemically with the underlying con-

crete, creating an impenetrable barrier. Water, salt, and automotive fluids sit harmlessly on top of the surface, completely unable to penetrate or degrade your garage's foundation.

2. Unmatched Durability and Strength

Epoxy is not just a thick coat of paint; it is a thermosetting polymer. When the resin and hardener mix, they trigger a chemical reaction that cures into a structure significantly harder than concrete alone.

This surface is built to withstand extreme impact and heavy weight. Whether you are setting up a heavy-duty woodworking bench, using floor jacks for weekend car maintenance, or storing heavy lawn tractors, high-grade epoxy resists scratches, dents, and gouges. Additionally, it has immense chemical resistance. Standard household spills like oil, gasoline, antifreeze, or even harsh cleaning agents wipe away with a paper towel without leaving a permanent discoloration.

3. Say Goodbye to Concrete Dust

Have you ever noticed how a swept garage floor feels dusty again just twenty-four hours later? Unsealed concrete naturally breaks down over time, shedding a fine powdery substance through a process called "dusting." This dust settles on your vehicles and inevitably gets tracked into your home by kids and pets.

Epoxy completely seals the concrete slab, eliminating dust production at the source. This makes maintaining a clean home significantly easier, as the entry point from the garage stays pristine.

4. Effortless Upkeep and Safety

Cleaning an epoxy floor requires a fraction of the effort needed for raw concrete. Because the surface is completely seamless, there are no crevices for dirt, grime, or spiders to hide. A simple sweep with a soft-bristle broom or a quick pass with a damp microfiber mop keeps the floor looking brand new.

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For those concerned about safety when rain or snow makes the floor wet, modern epoxy systems can be customized. Installers can blend slip-resistant aggregates—such as color flakes or quartz granules—into the topcoat. This provides excellent traction for boots and sneakers, ensuring the space remains safe for your family even during a torrential downpour.

5. Aesthetics That Drive Home Value

Let's face it: a bright, clean garage looks incredible. Epoxy turns a dark, utilitarian space into a seamless extension of your living environment. Whether you choose a classic solid tone or a multi-colored decorative flake pattern, the high-gloss finish reflects light beautifully, making the entire garage feel larger and brighter.

From a real estate perspective, a finished garage floor is a positive selling point. A beautifully epoxied garage signals that the home has been meticulously cared for, giving your property a distinct edge and protecting your equity.

Making the Transformation

While DIY kits exist at big-box hardware stores, they often lack the industrial-grade solids required to survive Iowa's climate long-term. For a floor that truly lasts a lifetime, professional diamond-grinding preparation and a multi-layer polyaspartic or epoxy topcoat are recommended to ensure the ultimate chemical bond.

Your garage is more than just a place to park—it's the workshop, the mudroom, and the first thing that welcomes you home. Upgrading to a premium epoxy floor will ensure it stands up to the demands of daily Midwestern life for decades to come.

Jon Lewerke is the owner of Garage Experts of Greater Dubuque.
You can visit his website at Garageexperts.com/greater-dubuque or call 563.213.6502.

What to Look for in an Electrical Contractor

When it comes to maintaining, remodeling, or building a home in the Tri-State area, few decisions carry as much weight as selecting an electrical contractor. The electrical system is the invisible backbone of your home. It powers everything from your basic kitchen appliances to advanced heating and cooling systems, home automation, and electric vehicle (EV) charging stations.

Because subpar electrical work poses severe safety risks, including electrical fires and equipment damage, finding a qualified, experienced professional is critical. Whether you are upgrading an older historic home in downtown Dubuque or wiring a new home in Asbury, keeping a specific set of criteria in mind ensures your project is completed safely, legally, and efficiently.

State Licensing and Robust Insurance

The absolute baseline for any electrical contractor is proper licensing and insurance. In Iowa, electrical contractors must be licensed through the state. A license guarantees that the contractor has passed examinations covering the National Electrical Code (NEC) and possesses the necessary hands-on field experience.

Equally important are proper insurance, general liability, and worker's compensation coverage. If an uninsured worker is injured on your property, or if faulty wiring causes damage during construction, you could be held financially liable. Always ask for proof of an active license and a certificate of insurance before signing a contract.

A Proven Track Record and Deep Local Roots

The longevity of a business often reflects its reliability and technical competence. While newly formed operations may offer low rates, they lack the verified history that gives homeowners peace of mind. A firm that has anchored itself in the community for decades demonstrates that its workmanship stands the test of time and that it honors its warranties.

Clear Safety Protocols and Ongoing Training

Electrical technology changes rapidly. Codes are updated every few years, and modern energy demands require advanced technical expertise. The ideal contractor invests heavily in the ongoing education and safety training of their field personnel.

When evaluating potential contractors, look for teams composed of state-licensed and trained journeymen and field





personnel. This ensures that the individual working inside your walls has completed thousands of hours of structured training and prioritizes strict safety protocols on every job site.

Comprehensive Residential Capabilities

Some commercial contractors struggle with the nuances of residential service calls, while small-scale handymen may lack the manpower for major home remodels or complex system installations. Look for a full-service contractor capable of handling the entire lifecycle of your home's needs.

A qualified residential contractor should easily manage:

- Panel and Service Upgrades: Replacing outdated electrical panels to safely accommodate 200-amp service for modern household demands.
- EV Charging Stations: Installing dedicated, high-voltage circuits required for safe home electric vehicle charging.
- Whole-House Surge Protection: Safeguarding expensive electronics and appliances from unexpected voltage spikes.
- Lighting and LED Upgrades: Designing and installing energy-efficient interior, architectural, and landscape lighting systems.

Transparent Pricing and Scheduled Reliability

A professional electrical contractor values your time and provides upfront, predictable pricing. Be cautious of vague verbal estimates or contractors who cannot commit to a firm schedule.

Top-tier companies utilize structured scheduling blocks that respect your daily routine. They arrive on time, provide written, itemized breakdowns of labor and materials, and offer clear communication throughout the project. This professionalism eliminates hidden fees and ensures that your home renovation stays on schedule and within budget.

The Takeaway for Tri-State Homeowners

Do not cut corners on your home's electrical work. Investing in an established, fully insured, and highly trained contractor guarantees long-term safety, property value, and peace of mind.

When it comes to maintaining, remodeling, or building a home in the Tri-State area, few decisions carry as much weight as selecting an electrical contractor. The electrical system is the invisible backbone of your home.

5 Pro Tips to Prep Homes for Winter

Before blustery winter days arrive, there are plenty of home improvement projects contractors can tackle for homeowners. Many cooler weather projects focus on cost efficiency and sustainability, making the improvements all around smart investments.

Winter is the perfect time to implement upgrades that boost energy efficiency and lower heating bills, helping to manage household costs while improving comfort and enjoyment of the home. Consider these practical upgrade ideas.



ADD INSULATION

Depending on the age of the home, improving the quality or increasing the volume of insulation can make a difference in the home's energy efficiency. An expert can determine whether old insulation needs to be removed or new insulation should simply be added. A contractor can examine the home to determine where there may be gaps, as well as provide recommendations on the type and amount of insulation needed.

SEAL AIR LEAKS

Air leaks can cause chilly drafts, contribute to frozen pipes and lead to energy loss. Eliminating leaks is an important aspect of winterizing any home, but not all leaks are easily identified. A skilled contractor can scour the home, checking unknown areas like basement through-wall penetrations, sill plates and the tops of concrete walls. Interior features like light receptacles and outlets are also common sources of air leakage. The caulking around windows and doors is another common culprit to be examined by an expert.

For most leaks, a polyurethane foam sealant can seal gaps and cracks to help block air, moisture and pests from entering the home. In some cases, blocking drafty vents with cut pieces of foam board insulation or replacing seals will suffice to address leaks.



INSTALL A PROGRAMMABLE THERMOSTAT

A programmable thermostat helps to regulate temperatures based on daily routines, so homeowners aren't heating homes while no one is there to appreciate it. Experts can ensure electrical installation is done safely and provide guidance selecting a model that is appropriate for managing a home's heating and cooling needs.

REPLACE WEATHER STRIPPING AND SEAL TRIM

Over time and with frequent use, weather stripping breaks down and loses its shape, and can even become brittle. Cracked trim around doors and windows leads to air leaks, and sometimes homeowners think the only solution is replacing windows and doors, but they still end up with drafts. Contractors can periodically replace trim using foam sealant to help eliminate inevitable drafts and save homeowners money in the long run – a more cost-effective approach than paying for new windows and doors.

PREVENT ICE DAMS

Snow-covered roofs and freezing weather can lead to ice dams – thick ridges of solid ice that build up in gutters and along eaves. Dams can damage gutters and shingles and cause water to back up, which could force the water inside where it can peel paint, warp floors and lead to stained or sagging ceilings. To prevent damming, have a professional clear your gutters of leaves and debris ahead of the first snow and consider installing gutter guards to help prevent melting snow from refreezing in gutters.

This article was provided by GreatStuff.com. Photo contributed by Getty Images.

4 COMMON BACKYARD FENCES AND THEIR IDEAL USES



A properly maintained wood fence can help add curb appeal and value to a home.

When it comes to defining property boundaries, ensuring privacy, or simply adding aesthetic appeal to your outdoor space, backyard fences play a crucial role. However, choosing the right type of fence involves more than just selecting a style you like—it's also about understanding the environment in which the fence will be used. Here are four common types of backyard fences and the best environments for each.

1. Wood Fences

Overview: Wood fences are classic, versatile, and available in a variety of styles, such as picket, privacy, or split rail. They are typically made from cedar, pine, or redwood, which are durable and can be stained or painted to match your aesthetic.

Best Environment

- Suburban neighborhoods: Wood fences are ideal for residential areas where privacy and curb appeal are priorities. They're perfect for enclosing yards, pools, or gardens.
- Flat terrain: Installing a wood fence is easier and more cost-effective on level ground.
- Mild climates: While wood can be treated to resist rot and insects, extreme humidity or wet conditions can still shorten its lifespan. Regular maintenance is required in such environments.

2. Vinyl Fences

Overview: Vinyl fences are low-maintenance, durable, and resistant to weather, insects, and rot. They come in various designs, from traditional picket styles to solid privacy panels.

Best Environment

- Coastal or humid regions: Unlike wood, vinyl is impervious to moisture, making it an excellent choice for areas with high humidity or salty air.
- Families with children or pets: Vinyl fences are smooth and splinter-free, reducing the risk of injury.
- Busy homeowners: If you want a long-lasting fence without the hassle of frequent upkeep, vinyl is a practical option.

3. Chain Link Fences

Overview: Chain link fences are known for their affordability and functionality. They're typically made from galvanized steel and can be coated with vinyl for added durability and aesthetics.

Best Environment

- Large properties: Chain link fences are cost-effective for enclosing expansive areas, such as backyards, playgrounds, or dog runs.
- Windy locations: Their open design allows wind to pass through, reducing strain on the fence.
- Temporary fencing needs: Chain link is easy to install and relocate, making it suitable for short-term enclosures.

4. Wrought Iron Fences

Overview; Wrought iron fences are elegant, sturdy, and customizable. Often adorned with intricate designs, they provide a high-end look while maintaining visibility.

Best Environment

- Urban or historic settings: Wrought iron fences complement older homes and properties with a vintage or upscale aesthetic.
- Landscaped gardens: Their open design allows plants and flowers to remain visible while providing a secure boundary.
- Mild climates: Though durable, wrought iron requires regular maintenance to prevent rust, particularly in areas with heavy rain or salty air.

Conclusion

Selecting the right fence for your backyard depends on more than just its appearance. Consider factors such as climate, terrain, maintenance requirements, and the purpose of the fence. Whether you're looking for the natural charm of wood, the durability of vinyl, the affordability of chain link, or the elegance of wrought iron, there's a fence type to suit every need and environment. By aligning your choice with your surroundings, you can ensure your fence enhances both the functionality and beauty of your outdoor space.





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TO CHECK FOR POWER LINES

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Protecting your home, your wallet, and your neighborhood begins with a single phone call.

Whether you are planting a vibrant new privacy screen of arborvitae, erecting a classic picket fence, or finally breaking ground on that dream deck to enjoy warm Tri-State evenings, home improvement projects bring an undeniable sense of accomplishment. However, beneath the lush green lawns of our neighborhoods lies a hidden network of critical utility infrastructure—electric lines, natural gas pipes, fiber-optic communication arrays, and water mains—that keep our households running smoothly. Striking any of these lines can transform a routine weekend DIY project into a costly and potentially life-threatening emergency.

Many homeowners assume that utility lines are buried so deeply that a standard shovel or power auger won't reach them. In reality, erosion, shifting soil conditions, and past landscaping projects can leave major utility lines just inches beneath the surface. It is a common misconception that you only need to worry about major construction excavations; even minor yard updates require cautious planning.

The Hidden Cost of Ambush Digging

Hitting an underground utility line carries significant immediate risks. First and foremost is physical safety. Striking a buried high-voltage electrical cable can cause severe shock, arc flash burns, or fatal electrocution. Similarly, puncturing a gas line can lead to rapid gas accumulation, localized evacuations, and explosive hazards. Beyond the immediate threat to life and limb, the secondary consequences of an accidental utility strike are extensive:

- **Financial Liability:** In almost all jurisdictions, property owners or contractors who dig without obtaining proper clearance are held fully financially responsible for the repair costs, which can easily range from thousands to tens of thousands of dollars.
- **Service Disruptions:** A single severed line can knock out power, internet, or heating services to an entire block, disrupting neighbors, local businesses, and emergency services.
- **Legal Penalties:** Fines for violating state safe digging laws can be severe, compounding the already high cost of physical line repairs.

Know Your Responsibility > In Iowa, making the call to locate underground utilities is not just a smart safety measure, it is the law. Every digging project, regardless of size or depth, requires proper notification beforehand.

The Simple Solution: Call 811

Avoiding these dangers is entirely straightforward and costs absolutely nothing. By dialing 811 or submitting a request online via the local state One Call system at least a few days before your project begins, you initiate a coordinated safety protocol. Professional locators are dispatched to your property to precisely mark the paths of all buried utility lines using color-coded flags or spray paint.

Once your property is marked, you can proceed with confidence, ensuring that your digging path avoids the designated tolerance zones around each utility line. It is a small step that guarantees peace of mind, ensuring your next home improvement project is remembered for the beauty it adds to your property rather than an unexpected call to emergency services.

Understanding the Color Codes

When the flags appear in your yard, they follow a strict national standard representing different utility types. Familiarizing yourself with these colors helps you understand what lies beneath your topsoil:

- **RED:** Electric Power Lines, Cables, Conduit, and Lighting Cables
- **YELLOW:** Gas, Oil, Petroleum, Gaseous Materials, or Steam
- **ORANGE:** Communication, Cable TV, Alarm, or Signal Lines
- **BLUE:** Potable Water Lines
- **GREEN:** Sewers and Drain Lines

Keep your community safe, connected, and powered. Before you lift the first shovel of dirt this season, remember to log on or call 811. It's free, it's easy, and it's the law.



Elevating *the* Home:

THE BENEFITS OF CUSTOM COUNTERTOPS



In the world of home design, few elements bridge the gap between form and function as effectively as the countertop. Whether situated in a bustling kitchen or a serene master bathroom, the countertop serves as the primary workspace and a central aesthetic anchor. While prefabricated options are readily available, the decision to invest in custom countertops offers a level of precision, durability, and personalization that standard off-the-shelf products simply cannot match.

Customization allows homeowners to move beyond the limitations of "standard" sizes. In many homes—particularly older residences or those with modern, avant-garde layouts—walls are rarely perfectly square, and cabinets may have unique depths. Custom-fabricated surfaces are templated to the exact specifications of the space, ensuring a seamless fit that eliminates awkward gaps and maximizes every square inch of usable surface area.

THE ENDURING VERSATILITY OF CUSTOM LAMINATE

Laminate has long been a staple in home design, but modern technological advancements have completely redefined this material. Today's high-pressure laminates (HPL) are a far cry from the versions seen decades ago. For homeowners seeking a balance between budget and high-end style, custom laminate is a premier choice. One of its most significant benefits is the sheer breadth of design options; digital printing technology now allows laminate to mimic the intricate veining of Carrara marble, the rugged texture of industrial concrete, or the warm grain of natural wood.



Beyond aesthetics, custom laminate offers practical advantages. Because it is non-porous, it is exceptionally resistant to staining and does not require the sealing or specialized maintenance associated with natural stone. When custom-built, these countertops can feature "post-formed" edges—a manufacturing process that creates a continuous, rounded front edge and a seamless integrated backsplash. This eliminates the seams where moisture and grime often accumulate, making it an ideal, hygienic surface for both food preparation and bathroom environments.

Solid Surface: The Seamless Professional Solution

For those looking for a mid-to-high-range material that offers unparalleled sleekness, solid surface countertops (such as Corian) represent the pinnacle of functional design. Composed of acrylic or polyester resins mixed with natural minerals, solid surface materials are consistent in color and pattern throughout their entire thickness. This "homogenous" quality provides a unique benefit: repairability. Unlike almost any other material, small scratches, chips, or even minor scorch marks can often be buffed out by a professional, returning the

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The standout feature of a custom solid surface installation is the inconspicuous seam. Using specialized color-matched adhesives, fabricators can join sections of the material so precisely that the seams become virtually invisible to the naked eye. This allows for massive, uninterrupted kitchen islands or long bathroom vanities that appear as a single, sculpted piece. Furthermore, solid surface allows for integrated sinks, where the basin is fused to the countertop with no lip or rim, creating a sleek look that is incredibly easy to wipe clean.

LONG-TERM VALUE AND FUNCTIONALITY

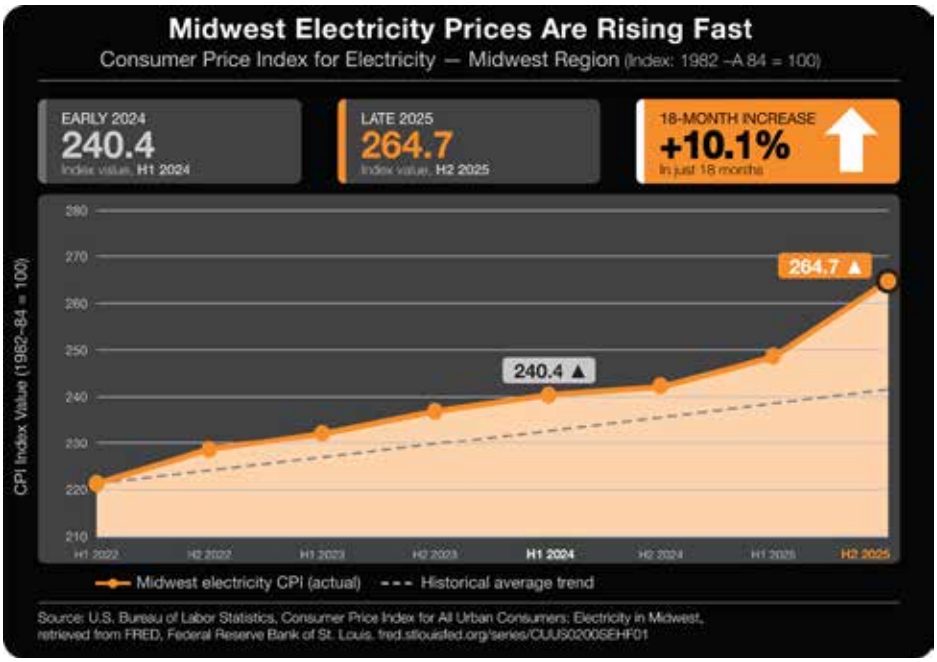
Investing in custom countertops is as much a financial decision as it is a stylistic one. Custom surfaces protect the integrity of the cabinetry beneath them by providing a perfect, waterproof seal at the edges and around sinks. This prevents the swelling and mold issues that often plague poorly fitted prefabricated tops. Furthermore, the kitchen and bathroom are the two rooms that contribute most significantly to a home's resale value. Potential buyers recognize the quality of custom finishes, which often serve as a "wow factor" that distinguishes a property in a competitive market.

Ultimately, the choice between laminate and solid surface depends on the homeowner's specific priorities. Laminate provides a cost-effective way to achieve nearly any visual style with minimal maintenance, while solid surface offers a premium, repairable, and seamless finish that exudes luxury. In either case, opting for a custom fit ensures that the heart of the home is not just functional, but a true reflection of quality craftsmanship.

ELECTRICITY IS A NECESSARY EXPENSE

& Power Bills Keep Going Up

Any homeowner knows that there are certain expenses that must be paid. Groceries must be bought. If you have a mortgage, payments must be made. Electricity sits in that same column. You're going to pay it regardless. If you want to keep the power on, you must pay the electric bill. The question is, can you help dictate how much you pay?



The answer is yes, and not just by remembering to turn lights off before you leave the house. With electric bills rising over the last year-plus and expected to increase in future years, it makes sense to look at the possibility of locking in a predictable cost by installing solar panels.

Why taking control of your home's energy costs with solar makes sense

You have no control over the price you pay for electricity or the rate in which the future cost increases for every kilowatt you purchase from your utility.

Utility rates continue to increase throughout the Midwest due to utilities expanding capacity and making grid improvements. And this trend of electricity price increases isn't expected to stop any time soon. In Illinois, for instance, demand is projected to potentially double by 2040. Rising demand could cause increases in electricity prices to outpace historical trends over the next decade.

You can offset the changes in utility pricing by installing solar panels. Solar owners lock in a predictable rate. They also have the option of paying the cost of a solar energy system at the time of installation or financing it, which allows them to spend a predictable amount for power over the lifetime of the panels.

Studies have also shown that solar installations increase property values which leads to the double benefit of savings on the monthly utility bill and increased equity in your home.

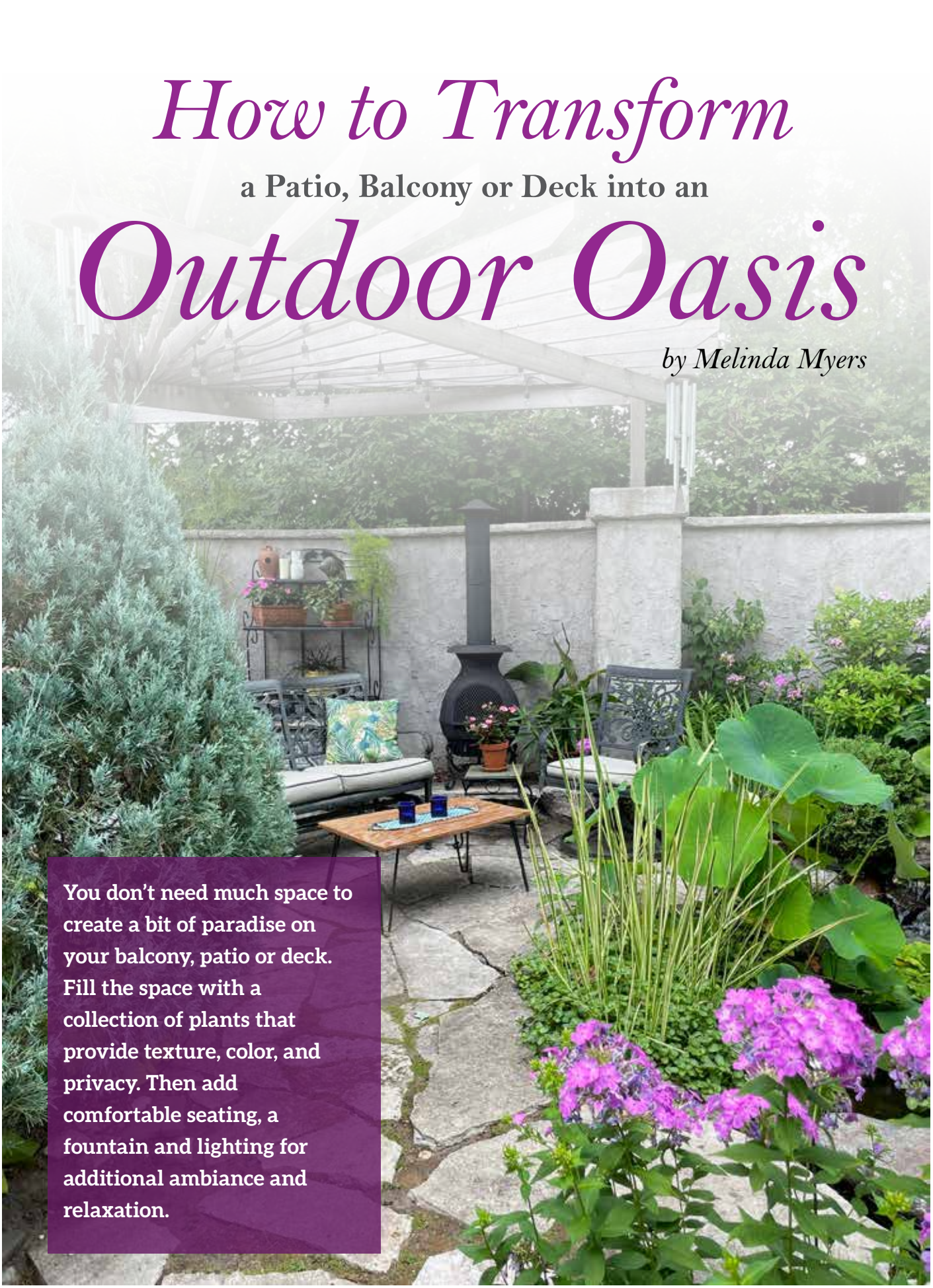
Interested parties should schedule a solar analysis to see how installing solar can impact their electric costs now and in the future.

How to Transform

a Patio, Balcony or Deck into an

Outdoor Oasis

by Melinda Myers



You don't need much space to create a bit of paradise on your balcony, patio or deck. Fill the space with a collection of plants that provide texture, color, and privacy. Then add comfortable seating, a fountain and lighting for additional ambiance and relaxation.

A patio transformed into an outdoor oasis and entertainment area. Photo courtesy of MelindaMyers.com.

Start by evaluating the space you want to transform and how the surrounding views and noise will impact your enjoyment. Before enclosing the entire space, identify the views you need to screen and those you want to keep. Perhaps a view of your favorite flower garden, the park across the street or your neighbor's water feature extends your enjoyment beyond the limits of your garden oasis.

Use tall grasses, large tropical plants, and vines trained on trellises and upright shrubs and trees to define the space. These can be grown in weather-proof containers if no in-ground planting space is available. Just make sure your balcony or deck can handle the weight of the planters once they are filled with soil and plants.

Select plants that provide multiple benefits. Look for plants that deliver several seasons of beauty with flowers, colorful foliage, seedheads and fall color. Include fragrant plants for aromatherapy and those that attract butterflies and hummingbirds to add motion and color.

Decide how you plan to use the space. Are you longing for a quiet area to relax and read, one to entertain or a space to accommodate all your outdoor activities? Select furnishings with the color, form, and style that will create your desired look and feel. Then select plants, containers and accessories that complement the furnishings for your outdoor oasis.

Add a stand-alone or wall-mounted fountain or container water garden to the space. The sound of moving water helps create a sense of peace and relaxation, calming the mind, reviving the spirit and masking noise pollution.

Help reduce mosquito problems by lighting a few citronella candles and placing them near you and others enjoying the space. Use a fan to help keep you cool and the weak-flying mosquitoes away.

Extend your enjoyment into the evening with some lighting. Be mindful of birds and night-flying insects by using shields to point light down to the ground instead of into the night sky. Select lights with lower lumens that aren't as bright but still provide sufficient light and ambiance for you. Avoid white and blue light and opt for amber and yellow greens that are less disruptive to the birds and night-flying pollinators.

Like any decorating or gardening project, be ready to make needed adjustments. While fine-tuning your design, be sure to take time to relax and enjoy your new space.

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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A GUIDE TO CHOOSING A RELIABLE APPLIANCE REPAIR SERVICE



When a major appliance breaks down, it disrupts the entire rhythm of a household. Whether it's a refrigerator that's stopped cooling or a washing machine that won't drain, the urge to find a quick fix can sometimes lead to hasty decisions. Choosing the right repair company is essential to ensure the job is done safely, correctly, and at a fair price.

Here is a guide to navigating the process of finding a professional you can trust.

START WITH RESEARCH AND REVIEWS

The internet is the modern-day word-of-mouth. Start by looking for companies in your local area with high ratings, but don't just look at the star count.

Read the Narrative: Look for reviews that mention punctuality, transparency in pricing, and whether the technician explained the issue clearly.

Check Verified Platforms: Sites like the Better Business Bureau (BBB), Angi, or Google Business Profiles provide a good baseline for a company's reputation.

Ask Your Network: Often, a neighbor or a friend has recently dealt with a similar headache. Personal recommendations are frequently the most reliable.

VERIFY CREDENTIALS AND INSURANCE

Appliances are complex and often involve high-voltage electricity, gas lines, or water connections. You want a professional who is properly covered.

Licensing: Ensure the company holds the necessary trade licenses required by your state or municipality.

Insurance: A reputable company should carry general liability insurance and workers' compensation. This protects you from being held liable if a technician is injured on your property or if the repair causes further damage.

Manufacturer Certification: If you have a high-end or specialized brand, look for "factory-authorized" service providers. These technicians have received specific training from the manufacturer and have better access to OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturer) parts.

TRANSPARENCY IN PRICING

A common red flag is a company that refuses to give any indication of cost over the phone. While a technician usually needs to see the machine to provide a definitive quote, the company should be clear about:

The Service Fee: This is the "trip charge" for coming to your home and diagnosing the problem. Ask if this fee is waived if you decide to proceed with the repair.

Labor vs. Parts: Ask how they bill for labor (flat rate vs. hourly) and if they provide a written estimate before starting the work.

EVALUATE THE WARRANTY

A confident repair service stands behind its work. Always ask about the warranty on both parts and labor. A standard warranty is typically 90 days, but some top-tier companies offer up to a year on specific parts. Be wary of any company that offers no guarantee once they leave your driveway.

COMMUNICATION AND PROFESSIONALISM

From the first phone call, pay attention to the level of professionalism.

- Do they answer the phone promptly?
- Are they able to provide a specific window for the appointment?
- Does the technician arrive in a marked vehicle or uniform?

These details often reflect the organized nature of the business and the level of care they will take with your appliances.

QUICK TIP

Before you call for service, have your appliance's brand, model number, and serial number ready. This allows the company to check for known issues or part availability before they even arrive.

By taking a few extra minutes to vet your options, you can turn a stressful home maintenance moment into a smooth, professional experience.



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HOW TO USE TILE TO MAKE SMALL SPACES FEEL BIG

We can't change the square footage of a cramped powder room, a narrow entryway, or a compact galley kitchen without knocking down walls. But you don't always need a sledgehammer to make a room feel bigger. Sometimes, all you need is a clever visual trick.

Tile is one of the most powerful tools in an interior designer's toolkit for manipulating depth, height, and width. By changing how light bounces and where the eye stops, the right tile selection can make a tight space feel larger and more open.

Here are four design secrets that will help turn a small room into a visually expansive retreat.

1 Go Big with Large-Format Tiles

The most common mistake people make in small spaces is assuming they need small tiles. The logic feels sound: small room, small elements. But the opposite is true.

When you use small tiles—like standard subway tiles or small squares—you create a dense grid of grout lines. Every single grout line is a visual stop sign for your brain. A busy grid makes a room feel chopped up, cluttered, and ultimately smaller. By choosing large-format tiles (usually 12"x24" or larger), you drastically reduce the number of grout lines. The floor or wall becomes a single, continuous plane.

Pro Tip: To maximize this effect, match your grout color perfectly to your tile. When the grout blends in completely, the boundaries disappear, and the surface looks seamless.

2 Erase the Floor-to-Shower Boundary

If you are remodeling a small bathroom, this single trick will completely transform the space. Traditionally, bathrooms are broken into zones: a floor tile, a different shower pan tile, and a third tile for the shower walls. This constant stopping and starting cuts the room into tiny fragments.

Instead, run your floor tile straight through into the walk-in shower. Using a single, uninterrupted material across the entire floor plane tricks the eye into thinking the bathroom footprint is much wider than it is. Combine this with a seamless glass shower panel rather than a bulky framed door or a curtain, and the back wall of your shower suddenly becomes the new visual boundary of the entire room.

3 Direct the Eye with Smart Layout Patterns

The way you lay your tile acts as a set of directional arrows for anyone walking into the room. You can use these patterns to elongate or widen a space depending on what it needs.

- For narrow galley kitchens or entryways: Lay rectangular tiles perpendicular to the long walls (running across the width of the room). This draws the eye side-to-side, visually stretching the narrowest part of the space.

- For short, stubby rooms: Lay rectangular tiles parallel to the long walls to draw the eye forward, giving the illusion of depth.
- The Diagonal Trick: Laying square tiles on a 45-degree angle (a diamond pattern) is an incredible spatial hack. Because the human eye counts squares easily but struggles to calculate the distance of diagonals across a room, a diamond pattern confuses our depth perception in the best way possible, making the floor feel much wider.

Running the long edge of the tile up and down draws the human eye upward toward the ceiling. If you run this vertical tile all the way from the floor up to the ceiling, you accentuate the full height of the space, making the room feel grander and less boxed-in.

Light and Sheen: The Finishing Touch

Beyond size and layout, keep finish and color in mind. Reflective surfaces act like mirrors, bouncing light around a cramped room.

While matte tiles have a beautiful, earthy texture, a gloss or satin finish tile will capture natural or ambient light and reflect it back into the space, instantly brightening dark corners. Keep the colors light and airy—soft creams, crisp whites, cool grays, or gentle pastels. Light colors recede from the eye, whereas dark, heavy colors advance toward you.

By choosing large tiles, minimizing contrast, and laying them with a purpose, you can stop fighting your home's footprint and start outsmarting it.

4 Harness Vertical Lines to Lift the Ceiling

If your issue isn't width but a low, claustrophobic ceiling, you can use wall tile to create height.

Take a classic rectangular tile—like a modern elongated subway tile—and vertically stack them on the wall instead of laying them in the traditional brick joint pattern.







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