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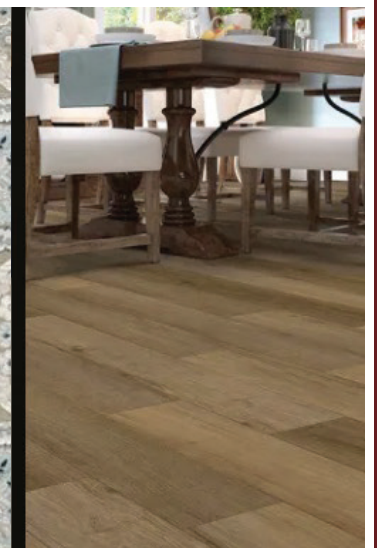
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How to recognize when it's time to replace your windows

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Windows are a major component of a home. Window installation professionals will tell homeowners that the average lifespan of residential windows is between 15 and 30 years.

Most well-maintained products can last 20 years, so homeowners who have windows approaching that age may want to schedule a window assessment and possible replacement.

Replacing windows is a job that requires advanced skill, and this is not a do-it-yourself project.

There are many qualified professional window installation companies that will work with homeowners to measure, order and install win-

dows that will fit with the style of a home and local weather, all while providing features the homeowner desires.

For those wondering when to replace windows, window manufacturers, offer these guidelines.

DIFFICULTY OPENING AND CLOSING WINDOWS

A window that does not operate as it should can aggravate homeowners. If windows are sticking shut or cannot be securely closed, it's probably time for something new.

THERE'S APPARENT WINDOW DAMAGE

Accidents happen, and if a rock is kicked up from a lawnmower and cracks a window or if



COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

Window replacement may be necessary when existing windows are showing signs of aging or damage.

spring baseball practice has gone awry with an errant throw, windows may require replacement.

DRAFTS IN THE WINDOW ARE COMMON

If heating and cooling systems are working overtime, drafty, poorly insulated windows could

be to blame. Various agencies can perform energy efficiency tests in a home. Windows that are determined to be the weak spots should be replaced.

DATED WINDOWS ARE PRESENT IN THE HOME

Older windows may pose safety hazards, especially those in older homes. A larger window may be needed to comply with fire safety codes allowing for window egress. Dated windows also may simply look "old" and compromise the aesthetics of a home.

OUTDOOR NOISES ARE NOTICED QUITE READILY

Newer windows can help reduce noise transmission. So those leaf blowers, airplanes,

barking dogs, and kids playing basketball up the street won't disturb homeowners as they try to enjoy some peace and quiet indoors.

FADING INDOORS IS NOTED

Windows that do not feature low-emissivity (Low-E) glass coatings will not block UV rays. Those rays can cause fading to wood floors and furniture or pretty much anything the sunlight touches. Replacing existing windows with Low-E coating alternatives can safeguard belongings and improve window efficiency.

A portrait of a smiling man with short brown hair, wearing a blue and white checkered button-down shirt.

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Design ideas that can create a peaceful feel

STAR NEWS GROUP

PAINT WITH NEUTRAL COLORS

Homes are often characterized as sanctuaries for their residents. A calm place to come home to after a busy day at work or school is often just what people need to unwind.

Certain design components can help individuals turn their homes into relaxing respites from the daily grind. With that goal in mind, individuals can consider these ideas to create a peaceful feel inside their homes.

Wall colors can define the mood in a given room, and neutral colors have long been linked to a calming effect. Subtle shades like beige, taupe and light gray are known to create a relaxed vibe in a room, so these colors can be a go-to choice. Some people consider neutral colors a tad boring, so individuals concerned by that impression can limit neutral

SEE **DESIGN** PAGE 14



COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

A peaceful home makes for the perfect respite at the end of a busy day. Various design choices can help individuals establish a serene vibe throughout their homes.



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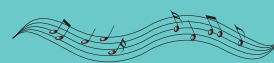
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DESIGN

FROM PAGE 12

colors to rooms designated as sanctuaries, like a reading room, a spa bathroom or a bedroom.

EMPLOY NATURAL LIGHT

Natural light also can help to establish a serene setting at home. Large windows that let daylight in can improve anyone's mood. A 2022 study from researchers at the University of Chile in Santiago found that the more natural light that entered a home, the happier people said they felt. Study authors even noted that the largest uptick in well-being was found among participants who lived in homes in which windows covered at least 40 percent of the dwelling's wall space. Opening

blinds or curtains and, if possible, installing larger windows in a home can help to establish the relaxing, happy vibe individuals are aiming for.

UTILIZE PLANTS TO SET A PEACEFUL TONE

The United Kingdom-based Royal Horticultural Society notes that research has found that indoor plants can benefit psychological well-being. The RHS notes that improved mood and reduced stress levels are two benefits that indoor plants can provide. A good mood and less stress can help individuals establish the peaceful feel they're aiming for at home.

KEEP DEVICES OUT OF BEDROOMS

Watching television while lying in bed, scan-

ning a smartphone before turning off a nightstand light and retiring for the night, or reading an e-reader instead of a print book at night can transform a bedroom from a serene setting into one that's overrun with stimuli. According to the Sleep Foundation, technology stimulates the mind, which can make it harder to fall asleep. In addition, blue light emitted by devices disrupts the natural production of melatonin, a hormone that makes it easier to fall asleep. That can negate any efforts individuals have undertaken to make their bedrooms as peaceful as possible. Designate bedrooms in the house as technology-free zones to ensure the peaceful vibe continues uninterrupted until everyone goes to bed.



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What to know about kitchen countertop materials

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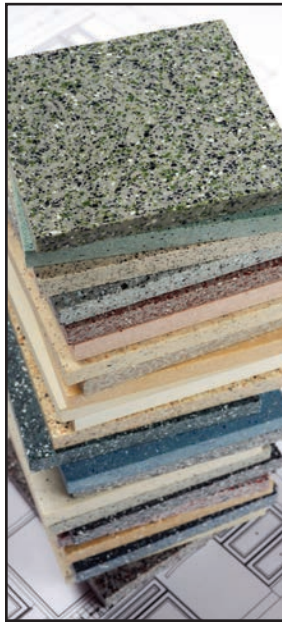
Kitchens are the busiest rooms in most homes. Kitchens have become more than just places to prepare meals, with many functioning as gathering spaces and even go-to dining spots in homes that do not feature formal dining rooms.

So much time spent in the kitchen makes it worthwhile to invest in these popular spaces. Kitchen renovations are high on many homeowners' to-do lists, and there's many decisions to make once they commit to redoing the room. When renovating a kitchen, homeowners will have to choose which countertop material they want to install, and the following rundown of

popular options can help simplify that decision.

QUARTZ

Quartz is considered a low-maintenance and durable countertop material. The home improvement experts at This Old House note that quartz countertops are typically 94 percent ground quartz and now come with an honed, sandblasted or embossed treatment, which makes them appealing to homeowners with varying ideas on the ideal look of a kitchen countertop. Quartz can crack if it's not handled properly, and edges and corners can chip over time. Rounded edges can minimize the risk of chipping. Costs vary by location and product availability, but quartz



COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

Kitchen countertops can define how the room looks, and homeowners have many options to choose from when designing a new kitchen.

typically costs about the same as natural stone.

GRANITE

Consumer Reports notes that no two slabs of granite are the same, and that uniqueness has long appealed to homeowners. Tests run by Consumer Reports found that heat, cuts and scratches did not harm granite, though this material, like quartz, can crack around edges and corners. Granite is a durable material that, if properly maintained, can last several decades. Granite also is nonporous, which makes it resistant to bacteria.

LAMINATE

Laminate countertops appeal to budget-friendly homeowners and Consumer Reports notes that

they're easy to install. Home Depot also notes that laminate countertops come in a wide range of colors, textures and designs. Laminate countertops also are durable, which helps budget-conscious homeowners stretch their dollars even further. Laminate countertops are easily maintained, though it's also easy to permanently damage them with knives, so Consumer Reports recommends always using a cutting board when preparing meals on laminate.

BUTCHER BLOCK

Butcher block countertops are among the more unique options homeowners may consider. Sometimes referred to as "wood countertops,"

butcher block countertops are made from wooden strips that are fused together. The home improvement experts at BobVila.com note that butcher block is among the more affordable materials, but the final cost will be dictated by location and availability. BobVila.com notes that butcher block countertops are highly sensitive to liquid, so exposure to moisture should be limited. Sealing butcher block countertops immediately after installation can help protect against bacteria and warping. Though butcher blocks can be high maintenance, many homeowners find the unique look is well worth the extra elbow grease.

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How sellers can get top dollar for their homes

STAR NEWS GROUP

The process of buying and selling a home includes many movable parts. North America has experienced historic trends in the housing market in recent years. Most notably, record-high prices have dominated the real estate market over the last several years.

High prices are good news for sellers, who can probably anticipate receiving offers above listing price. In New Jersey, inventory is so low that 12.5 percent of homes in the Garden State sold above list price, according to data from RedFin. This is good news for sellers currently looking to make an excellent profit on their properties.

Sellers who don't want to rely on the market alone to earn more for their homes can take various steps to get top dollar.

STAGE YOUR HOME

According to the 2023 Profile of Home Staging conducted by the National Association of Realtors®, 81 percent of buyers' agents said staging a home made it easier for the buyer to visualize the property as a future home. Focus your attention on the living room, owner's suite and kitchen. Hiring a staging professional can be an investment that turns a sizable profit.

KNOW YOUR LOCAL MARKET

A good way to price your home and gauge if it

will sell quickly is to look at the average "days on the market" for similar homes nearby. If homes are selling faster than the average days on the market, that suggests high demand, which can work in your favor.

MAKE ADDED-VALUE IMPROVEMENTS

Focus renovation dollars on the types of projects that will reap the highest return on investment. Remodeling magazine annually reports the projects that offer the best ROI. In 2023, the project that reaped the highest ROI was an HVAC Conversion/Electrification, which involved converting a fossil-fuel-burning furnace into an electric heat



COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

A few simple strategies can help sellers get more money for their homes.

pump. The cost recouped was 103.5 percent.

SELL AT THE RIGHT TIME

Fewer people are shopping for homes in the dead of winter or during the middle of the school year, so putting your

home on the market in spring typically brings out the largest number of interested parties, according to Opendoor. But this isn't the only time-related factor to consider. To sell for the most money, you want to list your home when

you have enough equity to pay off your current mortgage, the costs of selling, and the costs of moving, says Bankrate.

GIVE CURB APPEAL A BOOST

Make sure that buyers see your home in a positive light from the first moment they pull up for a walk-through showing. According to Home & Garden, improving the landscaping can result in a value increase of up to 12 percent. Additional projects can include investing in a new front door and garage doors. Be sure that hedges are trimmed, there are fresh flowers growing, and that walkways and the driveway are clean and tidy.



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Turn your yard into a vacation-worthy oasis

STAR NEWS GROUP

Warm weather means more time to relax outdoors. For those homeowners lucky enough to have entertaining spaces outside, spring and summer provides plenty of opportunities to enjoy fresh air under the sun or stars.

Over the last few years, families have become especially familiar with what works about their yards and where there is room for improvement. Pandemic-related travel restrictions and early stay-at-home mandates resulted in plenty of time spent in backyards on staycations. Even though many such restrictions have been lifted, homeowners may have seen the benefits of having

functional respites right outside their doors.

A backyard renovation can cost anywhere from \$5,000 to \$50,000. The American Society of Landscape Architects suggests homeowners budget the cost of a major landscaping project at between 5 and 10 percent of their home's value. Large or small, here are ways to make an outdoor oasis at home.

CREATE LIVING PRIVACY

Living in close proximity to neighbors may make privacy harder to come by. Wood or vinyl fences, however effective, may not provide the all-natural look many people desire. Vertical

SEE OASIS PAGE 30



COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

Additional oasis-inspired ideas include outdoor kitchens, letting up lanterns, cascading water features, and bird feeders to attract the sounds of nature.

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How to prepare soil for spring planting

STAR NEWS GROUP

Spring is a season of rejuvenation, and perhaps nowhere is that rebirth more noticeable than in the yard. Each spring, grass begins to grow again as inviting landscapes beckon people outdoors.

Extra sunlight and rising temperatures make spring a great time to plant flowers, grasses and trees. To ensure successful planting, homeowners must take steps to prepare the soil. Healthy soil can provide the ideal conditions for roots to take hold, helping plants establish themselves before potentially harsh summer conditions arrive. Preparing soil might seem like an extensive job, but a simple approach may be all that's necessary to create condi-

tions that promote plant growth this spring.

CLEAN UP THE PREVIOUS MONTHS' MESS

Whether homeowners live in regions marked by year-round warmth or places where winter typically features heavy snowfall, it's a good idea to clean up an area prior to spring planting. Fallen leaves, rocks, grass clippings, and other debris can contribute to compacted soil that makes it hard for plants to establish strong, healthy root systems. Clear away any debris prior to planting before taking the next step in your soil preparation routine.

LOOSEN THE SOIL

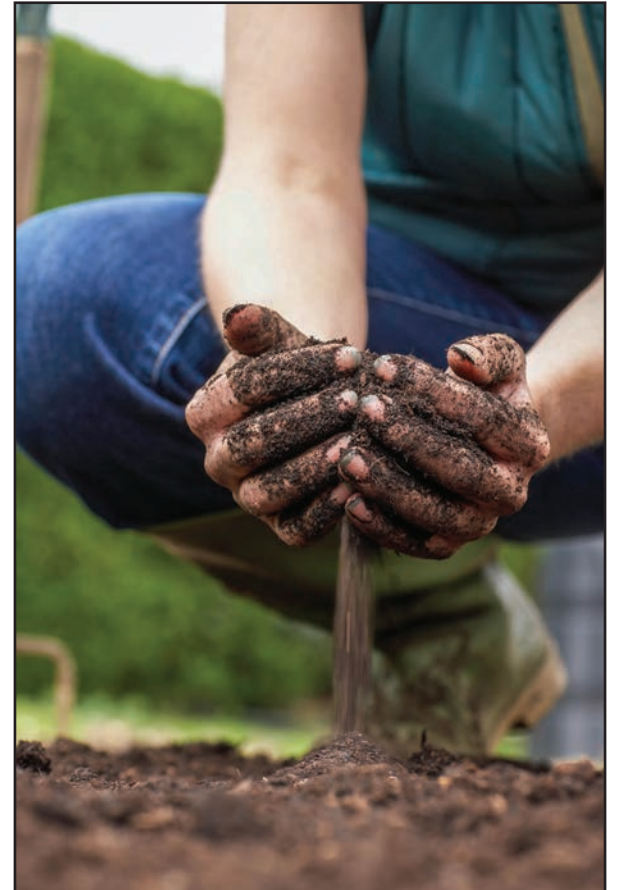
Once debris has been cleared away, loosen the soil. Depending on the size

of the area where you'll be planting, you may need to invest in tools like a shovel, spade, spading fork, and/or a lawn edger. If you're planting in a small area, such as a deck planter box that still has soil from last year's planting inside it, you can either clean the box and replace the soil entirely or dig around with a handheld trowel, cultivator and/or weeder. It's important to loosen all of the soil around where you will ultimately plant prior to planting to ensure water can reach the roots and help them establish themselves once planting is completed.

TEST AND, IF NECESSARY, AMEND THE SOIL

A simple pH test can help determine the acidity or alkalinity of the soil.

This is an important step as soil that is too acidic or alkaline can decrease the availability of nutrients the plants will need to thrive. In addition to conducting a pH test, which can be purchased at little cost at a local home improvement store, homeowners can contact their local Cooperative Extension Service to test their soil quality. These tests will reveal soil pH, but also can shed light on the texture of the soil and other components. Once the test is conducted, the local Coop Extension Service may recommend amendments to improve the nutritional quality of the soil so new plants can thrive.



COURTESY OF METRO CREATIVE CONNECTION

Soil conditions go a long way toward determining if new plants will thrive. Preparing the soil prior to spring planting can ensure a successful season.

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Quick and easy ways to give your kitchen a new look

STAR NEWS GROUP

Kitchens are often described as the busiest rooms in a home. Kitchens are where meals are prepared and tend to be go-to gathering spots on holiday get-togethers and during other events when homeowners host family and friends.

With so much time spent in the kitchen, it's easy to see how homeowners might grow a little bored by these rooms.

There are many quick and easy, not to mention less expensive, ways to give a kitchen a new look.

REPAINT AND RESTYLE THE CABINETS

Cabinet space is an undeniably precious commodity in a kitchen, especially as more and more homeowners em-

brace their inner chef and cook more complicated meals at home. After all, the more expansive a home chef's culinary repertoire, the more space that person needs to store all the tools of the cooking trade. A full cabinet replacement is unnecessary if the cabinets are still functional and not overcrowded, so repainting them can be a great way to give the kitchen a new look while keeping costs reasonable. New cabinet knobs and/or drawer pulls can also freshen up the style of kitchen cabinets further.

INSTALL UNDER-CABINET LIGHTING

Another inexpensive way to give a kitchen a new look is to install under-cabinet lighting.

Under-cabinet lighting serves both an aesthetic and practical purpose. From a purely aesthetic standpoint, under-cabinet lighting can make a kitchen feel more warm and keep the kitchen illuminated when meals aren't being prepared and homeowners don't want to have their overhead lights on but still want to be able to navigate the kitchen safely. During meal prep, under-cabinet lighting can illuminate counters so it's easier to perform prep tasks.

REPLACE EXISTING BACKSPLASH

Replacing backsplash is another simple, inexpensive and effective way to give a kitchen a new feel. Homeowners can opt for something neu-

tral that won't upset their existing decor or go with a more bold backsplash that immediately draws the attention of anyone who enters the room. This simple job can be done by the average do-it-yourselfer and the cost of new backsplash won't break the bank.

REPLACE EXISTING SEATING

Whether you have an island countertop with bar stools or a breakfast nook with cushioned seats, replacing the seating is a budget-friendly job that can create a new look when entering the room. Countertop bar stools come in many styles, so giving this area

of the kitchen a new feel can be as simple as shifting from classic, high-back stools to more modern swivel stools with a chrome base. For the breakfast nook, replacing a light-colored bench cushion with a bolder alternative can instantly transform the look of the space.

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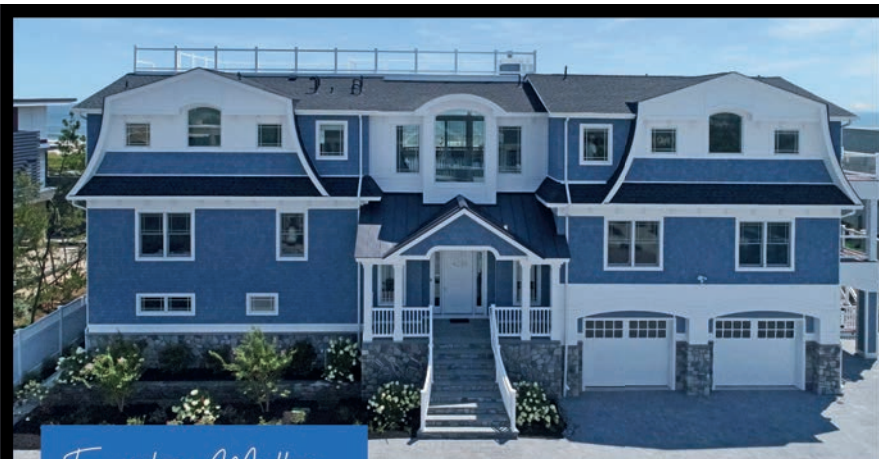
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Create a backyard oasis

OASIS FROM PAGE 26

gardening, which trains easy-care vines like English ivy, Clematis or various climbing roses to grow on trellis or fencing adds greenery and privacy. Hedges and fast-growing shrubs also can be used for natural barriers.

INSTALL A POOL

Pools are the ultimate spots to cool off on hot days. An elaborately shaped inground pool can blend in with the landscape and offer the ultimate hang-out zone. However, above-ground pools also serve the purpose and are more budget-friendly. Stock tank pools are popular among those who want mini-

mal pool expenditure or have small spaces to work with. Stock tanks are metal vessels traditionally used as watering holes for livestock. They also can be “adult kiddie pools” when combined with some plumbing. Galvanized steel frames make them sturdy. With floats and other accessories, they can become the perfect oasis.

PROVIDE OUTDOOR ATMOSPHERE

Create a bespoke bistro vibe by using free-standing planters and posts along with hanging lights to make an intimate outdoor hangout spot at night. For those with permanent structures, like a deck or a gazebo, lights can be strung across the area or on railings or edging.

EXTEND THE LIVING SPACE

Decks and patios can help make outdoor entertaining areas more comfortable by eliminating the need to sit on the grass or gravel. Plus, they add another “room” to the home. When paired with weatherproof patio furniture, such as sofas, loungers and tables, a private seating area can be crafted and utilized for any number of entertaining desires.

HANG A HAMMOCK

Few things evoke feelings of relaxation better than a hammock. Fitted between two trees (or two posts if trees are sparse), a hammock is an ideal place to grab a nap or read a book.



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