

## LANDSCAPING TIPS

*These ideas offer some of the best returns for your renovation dollar. Plus, the payoff increases over time.*

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If prospective buyers looked at your house today, what would they see outside? A giant evergreen that looks as if it might swallow the station wagon, perhaps, scraggly old foundation plants or maybe a kitchen-table view of the neighbors' kids' trampoline?

If so, you have a truly inexpensive opportunity to boost your home's curb appeal. By spending \$500 to \$3,000 on plants and materials and a few hours of time, you can achieve a well-landscaped look without shelling out for professional help.

Besides the personal enjoyment you'll get from a prettier yard, landscaping adds more value than almost any other home renovation.

A recent Michigan State University study found that depending on where the house is located, high-quality landscaping adds 5 percent to 11 percent to its price.

If you have no immediate plans to move, all the better: Landscaping is the one home improvement that actually appreciates over time.

So how do you decide which projects to tackle? That depends on how long you think you'll be around to enjoy the results.

### *If you're selling in a year or less*

**Edge the beds** Cutting fresh edges where grass meets mulch makes the lawn look well kept. A move as simple as curving the edge of your flower beds could increase the value of your home by 1 percent, says horticulture professor Bridget Behe, the lead researcher on the MSU study.

Also, if your foundation plants are overgrown, widening the beds by two feet will make the shrubs seem smaller.

**Nourish the grass** For truly lush turf, ideally you should start regular fertilizer treatments a year before listing the house. But you can green up the lawn with just a single application.

Spend \$45 on a broadcast spreader, which quickly distributes fertilizer over a lawn, enabling you to nourish a quarter-acre lot in about 10 minutes.

For a yard that size, expect each monthly application to cost about \$20 (for straight fertilizer) to \$30 (with weed killer).

**Scatter color throughout** For about \$1 a plant, you can blanket your yard with petunias, impatiens and other small annuals that will flower throughout the current growing season.

Also invest a few hundred dollars in some larger perennials and in shrubs that stand at least four feet high.

"A few good-size plants have more sex appeal than 20 little ones," says Chicago landscape architect Douglas Hoerr.

### ***If you're improving for the long-term***

**Cut back the jungle** Many everyday yard plants, such as azaleas, forsythia, hollies and rhododendrons, will fill out with new growth after a season or so even if you hack them down to stumps, says Christopher Valenti, a landscape contractor in Lewes, Del.

Be careful, though, of yews and junipers, which won't grow new leaves on old wood and may need to be removed altogether if they're severely overgrown.

**Add drama with foliage** A distinctive yard will make your home more appealing to buyers, says Los Angeles realtor Dana Frank. So replace plants that don't flower, or provide interesting foliage with eye-catching alternatives, like a patch of blackeyed Susans, a flowering crabapple or a cutleaf Japanese maple.

If you're planning to stay put, you don't need to spend hundreds of dollars for big plants. You'll save 50 percent or more by buying small ones and waiting a few seasons to get the full visual impact (when planting, make sure to space them based on the mature size listed on the label, not how they look now).

**Consider new angles** Most yards have almost all the plants along the foundation and the property lines. But if you place yours throughout different parts of the property, you'll create a depth of field that makes your home look farther away from the road, says architect Hoerr.

Try putting some near the house's corners to accentuate its shape, others near the street to define the yard, and some in between, where they can block unfortunate views and be admired from indoors. Many nurseries offer free design help to buyers.

**Cover your rear** It's nice to wave hello to your neighbors out front, but the backyard should be a private space. If yours feels overexposed, fencing can offer a quick fix.

For each eight-foot section, you'll pay about \$100 (for a plain cedar stockade fence) to \$300 (for an elaborate Victorian model), plus another \$50 to \$150 a section for installation.

You can also achieve the same effect at a much lower cost by planting small evergreen shrubs, although you'll have to wait a few seasons for full coverage.

Or, rather than pruning those hulking foundation plants, hire a landscaper to transplant them along the property line. As long as they're healthy and evergreen, it's a great way to maximize the value of the plants you already own.