

your home

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Tips and trends for homeowners, buyers and sellers



EXTRA yardage

Want to make better use of your outdoor space without spending a lot of money? Try these three simple tricks that can make all the difference between using your backyard and just looking at it.

❶ Romantic lighting can really add drama and whimsy to an otherwise dull outdoor space. Try stringing lights over a patio for a look that recalls street cafés and romantic restaurant patios. If you don't have natural hanging spots for your lights to hook onto, install a simple, wood pole with a loop or hook screw on top. You can install the poles directly into the ground, or attach them onto your pre-existing railings or a heavy base.

- ❷ Potted trees and bushes can divide designated areas, provide shade in the summer heat and create privacy. Consider 'Skyrocket' juniper trees, bamboo or arborvitae to start. You may want to ask your local plant center for ones that grow well in your area of the country and how they survive winter, if that is a consideration.
- ❸ Add a chimenea. If you live in a climate where it's cooler at night and you want to extend the life of your patio past summer, add a simple, small chimenea. These are fire pits with a round, open belly and a thick pipe on top. The fires start quickly, don't get too hot or too big, and are more easily controlled than a traditional open fire pit.

TAP INTO YOUR HOME'S VALUE

For years, homeowners were afraid of tapping into their home equity—and rightfully so, considering the downward trend of home values in markets across the country.

But since prices began rising in late 2012, many homeowners have recovered significant chunks of equity and are now starting to feel more comfortable tapping into it, particularly to make renovations and repairs that may ultimately increase the value of their homes.

This combination of rising equity, tight

inventory and historically low interest rates make home equity lines of credit (HELOCs) look pretty attractive, but homeowners looking to take advantage should make sure they understand the following information first:

- ➔ Does the HELOC have a fixed interest rate or a variable interest rate and what is the rate?
- ➔ What is the limit?
- ➔ What are the terms of the draw period, when does it end and what are the terms thereafter? Particularly note how the

monthly payment changes during and after this period.

➔ Is the interest tax-deductible?

Savvy homeowners may want to check their credit beforehand at AnnualCreditReport.com to help determine what kind of terms they might get, and if there's anything they can do to improve their creditworthiness. Make sure your creditor walks you through the process so you completely understand the terms of your agreement.



SUMMER SECURITY

Summer is a care-free time: School's out, the weather's nice and vacations are planned. But that easy-going attitude can leave your house vulnerable, especially if you're leaving it unattended while you're kicking back at the beach. You know the standard tricks—stop the mail, have a trusted neighbor on the lookout—but you don't have to stop there.

Go for a smart home. A smart home set-up allows you to control lights, appliances, thermostat and security systems from your smartphone. So with the tap of a button you can turn the lights on and off from anywhere. Products differ, but simple starter kits are often available starting at around \$100.

Fake your TV. Rather than leave your TV on, fake it, and utilize a product that mimics the light made from a real HDTV, including mimicking scene changes, fades and on-screen motion. These small devices start at around \$20.

Install fake security cameras. A security camera can be a strong deterrent, but it is expensive. Fake ones, however, are quite cheap—they sell for as little as \$10.

Get a sophisticated light timer. Plugging your lights into a timer is the age-old burglar deterrent, which means that determined burglars are wise to this trick. So make sure your timer either turns the lights on and off at random, or allows you to program separate times for each day of the week.



Activate a barking dog. Although a little more expensive, several products mimic the sound of a barking dog as someone approaches the home. Attached to a motion sensor, the "dog" will start barking if someone is near the home and get louder and more persistent as the person gets closer.

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