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# How to make outdoor living spaces more comfortable

Private backyards are now go-to spaces for recreation and entertainment and great places to recharge the body and mind.

One ripple effect of the COVID-19 pandemic was more time spent outdoors, even if it was predominantly on one's own property. OnePoll, in conjunction with the lawn care company TruGreen, surveyed 2,000 American homeowners and found participants spent 14 hours outside every week in 2021, which was three hours more than prior to the pandemic. In addition, respondents admitted that time spent outdoors was therapeutic.

A separate survey conducted for the International Casual Furnishings Association found that people now spend more time relaxing, gardening, exercising, dining, and entertaining outside than in years past. Though COVID-19 may no longer dominate headlines, the desire to enjoy outdoor spaces has not waned.

While enjoying outdoor living areas, homeowners can do all they can to make these spaces comfortable and welcoming. The following are some good starting points.

## Get all lit up

Outdoor spaces can be enjoyed no matter the hour when there is ample lighting. That could be why the International Casual Furnishings Association reports those who plan to renovate their outdoor spaces list outdoor lighting as a priority. Outdoor lighting not only sheds light on entertaining spaces, but also makes spaces safer and more secure.

## Increase privacy

No matter how friendly homeowners are with their neighbors, there comes a time when privacy is paramount. Fencing, whether it is wood or vinyl, or even a natural fence made from closely planted hedges, can ensure residents feel comfortable venturing outdoors to swim, take a cat nap or even star gaze in private.

## Address the elements

Homeowners should note the direction their backyard faces and the typical daily conditions of the space. For example, a yard that faces southwest may get plenty of strong sun during



the day, requiring the addition of shade trees, covered patios or arbors to cut down on the glare and heat. If the yard is often hit by winds, trees or bushes planted strategically as wind-breaks can help.

## Sit comfortably

High-quality comfortable seating increases the likelihood that homeowners will want to stay awhile in their outdoor spaces. A deep seating set complete with plush chairs, outdoor sofa or love seat and chaise lounge chairs gives people more opportunity to sit and stay awhile.

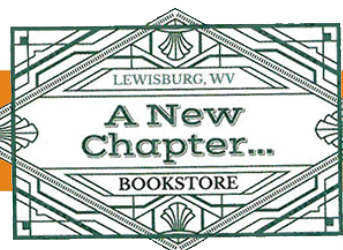
## Take a dip

A pool can be the perfect gathering spot on a warm day, while a spa/hot tub can bridge the gap to cooler weather. According to the Family Handyman, soaking in hot tubs can relax tired muscles after a long day, loosen up stiff joints, improve cardiovascular health, and reduce the time it takes to fall asleep.

## Bite back at bugs

Homeowners may want to consider using a professional exterminator to get rid of ticks, mosquitoes and other nuisance insects from outdoor spaces.

As people spend more time enjoying their properties, they can consider the many ways to make outdoor living spaces more comfortable.



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# How to keep your lawn looking green

Homeowners' fascinations with a lush, green lawn is something that has developed over time and is still "growing" strong. According to a 2019 survey conducted on behalf of the National Association of Landscape Professionals, 81 percent of all Americans had lawns and 79 percent said a lawn is an important feature when buying or renting a property.

Even though lush lawns are still coveted, due to drought, the financial climate and even invading insect populations, many people are taking inventory of their landscapes and deciding if a lawn is a priority, even going so far as to reinvent their spaces with lawn alternatives. Still, there are ways to keep properties green no matter which route is taken. Here's a look at some environmentally friendly ways to address a landscape.

## Irrigate from below

There are many ways to water landscapes, but homeowners may want to take their cues from the commercial farming industry. Drip irrigation systems utilize a network of valves, pipes and tubing close to the roots of

plants or under the soil. Such systems are more efficient than surface irrigation options, helping to save water and nutrients in the soil.

## Water early

Scotts Lawn Care suggests watering a lawn in the morning before 10 a.m. when it is cooler and winds tend to be calmer. This ensures water can be absorbed into the soil and grass roots before evaporation occurs. Watering midday may cause the water droplets on the lawn blades to heat up and actually scorch the lawn.

## Plant a new grass type

Homeowners can experiment with eco-friendly grass seed blends that mix native grasses and may not require as much water nor ideal growing conditions.

## Utilize green alternatives

Rather than focusing solely on grass, some homeowners are turning to alternatives like clover and even moss, particularly if their landscapes do not have the most pristine growing conditions. This may reduce the need for chemical fertilizers and herbicides. The result is still a green, inviting yard.



## Watch the lawn height


Mowing too frequently or at too low a height may compromise the lawn's ability to thrive. Grass cut to the proper height develops a deep root system to better locate water and nutrients in the soil. That means homeowners may not have to water as much or as frequently. Taller lawns also shade the soil and the roots, reducing some evaporation.

## Compost

Leave the clippings on the lawn to break down and further feed nutrients to the lawn, helping it look greener and thrive. Furthermore, rely on supplementation with compost to reinforce the nutrient profile in the soil.

The National Resources Defense Council says composting is the natural process of recycling organic matter, such as leaves and food scraps, into a valuable fertilizer. It doesn't take much to nurture compost in a yard.

Green landscapes are possible with a few tips that help conserve water and maximize natural resources.



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# Why it pays to hire contractors for home renovations

A sense of pride comes from a successful do-it-yourself home improvement project. However, quite often inexperience and time constraints lead homeowners to turn to professional contractors to make sure jobs get done correctly and on time.

Allied Market Research reported in 2021 that the home improvement services market is predicted to reach \$585.3 billion by 2030. The following are some reasons why renovation-minded homeowners benefit from the services of professionals.

• **Tasks can be overwhelming:** A home remodel is a large undertaking with many different steps. Contractors who have been around the block a time or two understand how to organize and manage time to get the job done. Plus, they're devoting all of their attention and time toward the remodel when on the job. This differs from when a do-it-yourselfer tries to work on a remodel in between other responsibilities.

• **Network of suppliers:** A good general contractor will have a list of material suppliers he

or she routinely uses. Often contractors become preferred sellers, which means they get a lower wholesale rate, and will often pass those savings on to the customer.

• **Licensed and bonded protection:** Licensed and bonded contractors not only have the skills for the job, they have insurance protection behind them. Therefore, if an injury occurs or the job goes awry, the homeowner will be protected from liability. A license means the contractor will have to uphold licensing standards, which could mean staying current on trade practices and skills.

• **Expertise:** Experienced contractors have done the work they have been hired to do many times, which means their skills are fine-tuned. Knowing the correct way to do a job results in fewer errors (and thus fewer repairs), shorter time periods to get the work done, and potentially lower costs overall.

• **Frees up time:** Homeowners who hire out for remodels can utilize their time in other ways, such as on the job or spending time with family.

• **Reduces stress:** Putting the work in capable hands means homeowners do not have to educate themselves about how to do the task, purchase tools, prevent injuries, and/or deal with potentially negative outcomes. Certainly having extra people in the house can be challenging, but it may not equal the stress caused by tackling a job on one's own.

There are many advantages to hiring contractors to renovate a home instead of taking the DIY route.



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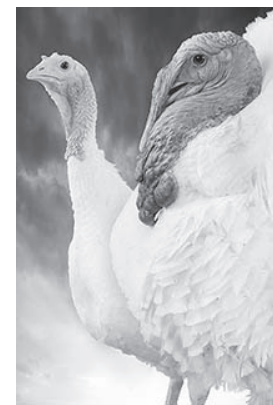
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# 3 potentially low-maintenance trees to consider for your property

Few things in nature are as breathtaking as a beautiful landscape. That beauty is perhaps one reason why many homeowners spend so much time and expend so much effort on their lawns and gardens.



Though plenty of homeowners love spending time in the yard, others may not be so inclined. For the latter group, low-maintenance trees can be just what the doctor ordered. Low-maintenance trees can provide the beauty nature-loving homeowners desire without all the extra work of more needy plants. It's always best to consult a local landscaping professional prior to planting to ensure a tree will thrive in a given climate. In preparation for that consultation, homeowners can study this list of three low-maintenance trees while recognizing that all trees may need a little extra TLC in extreme weather.

**1. Jacaranda:** Instantly identifiable by its

purple blooms, the jacaranda tree is native to South America, which makes it ideal in warm climates. The jacaranda tree is considered a shade tree and if or when it sheds its leaves, those leaves can typically be mowed, saving homeowners the work of raking them. However, the online home and garden resource The Spruce notes that jacaranda trees can require substantial maintenance when planted near surfaces where people walk, such as driveways and patios. So, when planting jacaranda trees, it's ideal to do so in locations where falling leaves will land exclusively on grass.

**2. American arborvitae:** The Arbor Day Foundation® notes that the American arborvitae requires almost no care when it's used as a hedge or a screen. That's a popular use for this versatile specimen with a narrow, pyramid shape. Though it does not provide the bright blast of color offered by the jacaranda, the American arborvitae creates an elegant look that offers considerable privacy as well.

**3. Japanese red maple:** The Home Depot notes that the Japanese red maple are very low-maintenance trees that can adapt to various soil types and grow in an assortment

of light conditions. During dry periods, however, the ADF notes the importance of keeping soil consistently moist. Various types of soil can accommodate the Japanese red maple, so this is a consideration for any homeowner looking to add some color to their lawns without a lot of extra work.

When consider new trees for a property, homeowners can easily be persuaded by the beauty of the tree. Though that's worthy of consideration, homeowners who want low-maintenance trees should speak to a gardening professional about the work required to maintain a tree's beauty throughout the year, especially during periods of drought or other adverse conditions. In addition, ask the gardening pro to recommend non-invasive trees. Planting invasive trees can be harmful and cause damage to surrounding plants, which can be costly and time-consuming to address.



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## Exterior renovations that boast the best ROI

Remodeling with a return on investment in mind can be a smart strategy for homeowners, whether one is thinking about moving in the next few months or further down the road. Though this approach is an inexact science, in many instances, it's savvy for homeowners to consider what buyers may want when planning home improvements.

Homeowners may be surprised to learn which renovations garner the best ROI at resale. The home loan and refinancing

company RenoFi indicates that overall home improvement projects provide a 70 percent ROI on average. Many high-ROI projects add functional space and improvement. The following are some exterior renovations that help homeowners recoup the most money at resale,

according to Remodeling magazine's "2022 Cost vs. Value Report."

1. **Garage Door Replacement:** 93.3 percent recouped of \$4,041 cost
2. **Manufactured Stone Veneer:** 91.4 percent recouped of \$11,066 cost
3. **Siding replacement (Fiber Cement):** 68.3 percent recouped of \$22,093 cost
4. **Window replacement (Vinyl):** 67.5 percent recouped of \$20,482 cost
5. **Siding replacement (Vinyl):** 67.2 percent recouped of \$18,662 cost
6. **Window replacement (Wood):** 66.3 percent recouped of \$24,388 cost
7. **Deck addition (Wood):** 64.8 percent recouped of \$19,248 cost
8. **Entry Door Replacement (Steel):** 63.8 percent recouped of \$2,206 cost

The majority of renovations on Remodeling magazine's list of the best investments are exterior renovations, making this area of a home a particular point of interest for homeowners.

The only interior project that cracked the Top 10 ROI for projects was a minor midrange kitchen remodel.

Exterior renovations perhaps add the most bang for your buck because they're not only functional, but also because they add immediate curb appeal. Much in the way it has been said people eat with their eyes first - which is why chefs spend so much time on elaborate plating - buyers will judge a property by how it looks when they arrive, even before they've stepped inside a home. In essence, home buyers often judge a book by its cover. A worn exterior may indicate to potential buyers that the home was not maintained, however false that assumption may be.

It's important for homeowners to consider all factors before beginning a renovation. Certain projects offer a stronger return on investment than others, and that's a significant consideration for homeowners thinking of selling their homes.





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# Design ideas that can create a peaceful feel

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.

- **Paint with neutral colors.** 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 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, scanning 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.

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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## Signs a home exterior needs updating

Renovations are a great way for homeowners to reshape their homes. Some may aspire to renovate so their home is more

reflective of their personal taste, while others may do so in an effort to make their homes bet-

ter align with modern styles and sensibilities. Regardless of why a homeowner chooses to renovate, the need to do so is often evident to the naked eye, especially when the time comes to update home exteriors.

Curb appeal is often discussed in regard to the effects it can have when selling a home. But curb appeal is equally important for homeowners who aren't putting their homes on the market. A well-maintained, aesthetically appealing home is a source of pride, while a home with fading curb appeal can make homeowners feel a little sheepish. Homeowners who want their

homes to maintain their curb appeal can look for signs that it's time to update their home exteriors.

• **Curling shingles:** The roof may not be the first thing people think of when pondering curb appeal, but a damaged roof can contribute to problems that ultimately affect the exterior and interior of the home. Multiple curling shingles indicate it's time to replace the roof. The sight of curling shingles is not pretty, but the larger issue in such instances is the potential for costly water damage when water gets in through the affected shingles.

• **Dated entry door:** Many home improvement experts insist they can determine when a home was built or most recently renovated simply by looking at the front door. Steel and glass doors are popular in modern homes, so homeowners with front doors with ornate designs and oval glass inserts can likely benefit from an upgrade to their entryway. A modern front door can make a statement and real estate experts note how popular updated front doors

are among buyers.

• **Unightly landscaping:** It's not only the physical components of the home that may suggest an update is necessary. Homeowners without a green thumb may have exterior landscaping that has seen better days. If a spring or summer day spent tending to your landscaping is not your ideal weekend pastime, then consider replacing unsightly landscaping with low-maintenance plants or hardscaping. These alternatives to more needy plants can create curb appeal without requiring any extra work for homeowners.

• **Cracked driveways/walkways:** If the driveway looks like a busy road at the end of snow plowing season, chances are that's adversely affecting the impression people have of your home. In addition, cracked walkways indicate a need for renovations, as these areas are front and center when welcoming guests.

Updating a home's exterior can restore curb appeal and help homeowners feel better about their properties.

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# Budget-friendly ways to freshen up your home's exterior

As any homeowner knows, renovation projects tend to cost a lot of money. The average cost of a home renovation is difficult to gauge, as such endeavors run the gamut from complex projects like a kitchen overhaul to simpler ones like painting a room inside a home. Indeed, the National Association of the Remodeling Industry notes that scope is what drives the cost of a renovation project.

Though there might not be an "average cost" of a renovation project, homeowners can expect to spend thousands of dollars on projects that are not very small in scale. Navigating such an expense at a time when inflation remains high might be difficult for some homeowners looking to maintain the appearance of their home exteriors. However, there are many budget-friendly ways homeowners can tend to the exterior of their properties.



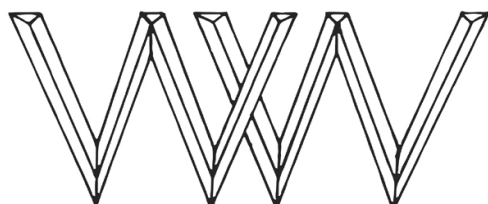
• **Power washing:** Power washing won't break the bank but it can revive the look of a home. Power washing removes dirt and grime from the siding of a home and a power washing can be used to clean porches, walkways and patios as well. Hardware chains like Home Depot and Lowe's typically rent power washers, but homeowners who don't want to do it themselves can hire a professional for a few hundred dollars, if not less. Power washing after winter can be a good idea, as the elements can take a toll on a home's exterior. A good power washing before spring and summer entertaining season can thus give a home a fresh, clean look without breaking the bank.

• **Furnished front porch:** A furnished front porch can serve as a welcome sign to neighbors and provide a great place to relax with a morning cup of coffee and a good book. Homeowners with a small porch won't need to bust their budgets to upgrade their front porch furnishings. Some small chairs with bright cushions, a small table and a rug underfoot can revamp an entryway at low cost.

• **Window box installation:** Installing window box planters is another cost-effective way to brighten up a home's exterior. Homeowners can hang window boxes outside windows on the front of their homes and then fill them with brightly colored flowers to add an inviting pop of color to their home exteriors. The experts at Better Homes & Gardens urge homeowners to take weight into consideration before buying window planters. Keep in mind that soil and developed plants can be heavy, so look for a sturdy box as well as one that has drainage holes.

• **Replace hardware:** Another simple way to freshen up a stale exterior is to replace hardware. Door knobs, knockers, house numbers, and even the mailbox can appear dated after a while. Replacing these items is inexpensive and quick but can have a profound impact on how the exterior of a home appears to residents and visitors.

Exterior renovations need not break the bank. Various simple and inexpensive tweaks can quickly revitalize the exterior of a home.



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# Learn the risks of plants to cats and dogs

Plants can be beautiful additions to a home and provide a natural way to filter interior air. Many homeowners prefer to enhance their spaces with greenery and various flowers. Though that's a great way to design a home's interior, pet owners must exercise caution

with plants to safeguard their furry friends.

Adults understand that they may need to wash their hands after handling certain types of plants, and that it can be unsafe to consume them. Children are instructed by their parents to do the same. Even though many pets can be trained to steer clear of certain dangers, their natural propensity to gnaw on various items out of curiosity or even boredom may entice them to investigate plants.

Some plants are more dangerous than others. According to the Farmer's Almanac, more than 700 indoor/outdoor plants contain toxic substances that are not safe for cats and dogs. Learning about common plants and their hazards can help keep pets safe. The following are some plants that are toxic to cats and dogs, courtesy of the ASPCA.

• **Adam and Eve (Arum, Starch Root):** This plant can cause oral irritation, pain and swell-

ing of the mouth, tongue and lips, excessive drooling, and difficulty swallowing.

• **Aloe vera:** While the gel is considered edible, the rest of the plant may cause lethargy, diarrhea and vomiting.

• **Amaryllis:** There are many different types of amaryllis, and most will cause vomiting, depression, diarrhea, abdominal pain, hypersalivation, and tremors in cats and dogs.

• **Azalea:** These plants of the rhododendron family cause vomiting, diarrhea, weakness, and potential cardiac failure.

• **Begonia:** The most toxic part of this plant is underground. Still, it may cause vomiting and salivation in dogs and cats.

• **California ivy:** The foliage is more toxic than the berries, and could contribute to vomiting, abdominal pain, hypersalivation, and diarrhea.

• **Clematis:** Salivation, vomiting and diarrhea are common if the plant is ingested.

• **Daisy (and other chrysanthemum species):** Dermatitis, vomiting, diarrhea, hypersalivation, and incoordination may occur.

• **Elephant ears:** This plant may cause oral irritation, pain and swelling of the mouth, tongue and lips, excessive drooling, and difficulty

swallowing.

• **Foxglove:** This may cause cardiac arrhythmia, vomiting, diarrhea, weakness, cardiac failure, and death.

• **Geranium:** Ingesting geranium may lead to depression, dermatitis and vomiting.

• **Holly:** Vomiting, diarrhea and depression may occur. However, leaves and berries are low toxicity.

• **Mother of millions:** This succulent could cause vomiting, diarrhea, and, in rare instances, abnormal heart rhythm.

• **Philodendron:** Oral irritation, pain and swelling of the mouth, tongue and lips, excessive drooling, vomiting, and difficulty swallowing could occur.

• **Sago palm:** The Sago palm can cause vomiting, increased thirst, hemorrhagic gastroenteritis, bruising, coagulopathy, liver damage, liver failure, and death.

• **Snake plant:** Nausea, vomiting and diarrhea could occur if pets ingest this plant.

For a complete list of plants that can be toxic to cats, dogs and horses, visit [www.aspc.org](http://www.aspc.org). Those who suspect their pets may have ingested a potentially toxic substance should call their local veterinarians as soon as possible or the ASPCA at (888) 426-4435.

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# Did you know?

*A recent survey of home renovation industry professionals conducted by Fixr.com found that creating indoor spaces outdoors was homeowners' biggest priority regarding renovations in 2022. Sixty-two percent of renovation-minded homeowners surveyed indicated outdoor dining areas are their most sought-after living space. In addition, 41 percent of respondents felt outdoor kitchens were their biggest priority. The survey found that certain outdoor living space features were especially popular, none more so than comfortable outdoor furniture. Firepits, outdoor fireplaces, swimming pools, hot tubs, and outdoor connectivity were some additional popular features among homeowners focused on their outdoor living spaces.*



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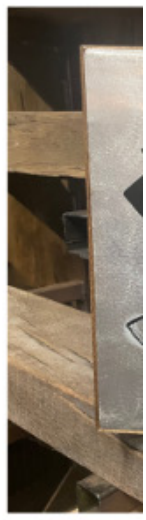
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