



Home Improvement

GUIDE

Take Advantage of Staircases

If you live in a multistory home and don't have closets under the stairs, you're missing out on valuable storage area.

With a little help from a professional, open the walls under your staircase to create a hidden room.

WAYS TO USE THE SPACE

Before you undertake a project of this size, you should know exactly how you will utilize the square footage you didn't know you had. Consider these creative suggestions when planning the renovation.

- Build an area for your pets, including their favorite bed, toys and food dishes.
- Create a coffee nook with all the tools you need.
- Showcase your favorite books with a stylish shelving area.

SAFETY FIRST

Altering your home's structure requires serious planning. Hire an expert to determine if the wall surrounding your staircase is load bearing. According to the International Code Council, a load-bearing wall helps support the floors and roofs of a structure. Removing such walls can lead to sagging ceilings, sloping floors and cracks in surround-



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ing drywall.

Especially in older homes, other safety risks to consider when demolishing a wall are:

Asbestos: The Environmental Protection Agency banned sprayed asbestos for use in fireproof-

ing or insulation in 1973. Inhalation can cause irreversible respiratory diseases.

Lead paint: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports lead-based paint was banned for use in housing in 1978. The agency

states exposure to this dangerous chemical is the most hazardous source of lead for U.S. children.

ADDING ELECTRICITY OR WATER

It's likely the area under

your staircase has not been fitted with water or electrical connections. If you are building a new laundry room or a reading nook, make sure to hire a licensed and experienced plumber and electrician to do the job.

Build a Privacy Fence

Make your backyard paradise private by enclosing it with a wooden or vinyl fence. If your household has young children or pets, this barrier can ensure they have a safe place to play outdoors. Depending on the size of your property, this project can be quite an investment, but the benefits can be well worth the cost.

Before you begin searching for a contractor or preparing to do the job yourself, check with the local government to ensure your project is legal. You may be required to get a permit before construction can be started. It is also a good plan to hire a surveyor to make sure the fence doesn't intrude on a neighbor's property. This can cause big trouble and expensive modifications down the road.

CHOOSE THE MATERIAL

Depending on the type of fencing materials you choose to use, it may alter how you plan for the number of supplies you need to complete the job. Here are two of the most common styles you can use.

Vinyl: This type of fence is the way to go if you are looking for a low-maintenance addition. Pre-cut panels are typically offered in six- or eight-foot sections. The downside to vinyl is its cost as it is much more expensive than traditional fences.

Wood: This old-fashioned material is great for those who want an affordable price but don't mind treating it periodically. There are options of using pre-cut panels or individual pickets; the latter is great for uneven yards, allowing for each piece of wood to be placed at proper levels.



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MEASURING THE PERIMETER

After you have double checked that your future fence line won't intrude on your

neighbor's property and you've decided on the material you want to use, it's time to measure. Divide the number of feet by the length of wood you are

using to reveal exactly how much you need.

Contractor or DIY?

Installing a fence is not impossible for those who

choose to do it themselves.

However, professional contractors have the experience and special tools to get the job done right, the first time.

Smart Upgrades for Convenience

Do yourself a favor by adding new levels of convenience to your home. Smart technology gives homeowners the opportunity to relax and allow gadgets to take some of the stress out of their busy lives.

According to the National Association of Realtors, the smart home technology industry is expected to reach \$130 billion by 2025. Keep in mind, when selling, not all technology will be well-received by potential buyers. Statistics from the 2016 Smart Home Marketplace Survey held by Coldwell Banker reveals interesting results regarding technology in homes.

- Fifty-seven percent of people with smart products were men; 43 percent were women.

- Forty-three percent of Americans with smart home technology are millennials.

- Smart Security was the most popular type, gaining interested from 58 percent of the group being researched. Appliances were one of the least desired at only 34 percent.

Even if you're not planning to go to the market, you can still benefit from the many conveniences from smart technology.

VACUUMING BOTS

You are probably familiar with robotic-vacuum cleaners that whip around your living room sensing dirt and debris. While they may benefit some homes, many owners discover they simply aren't effective in their layouts. Consider installing sweep inlets throughout your home and simply brush



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debris towards its opening to eliminate it. These powerful vents do away with the need to search for a dustpan or awkwardly bend over every time you sweep a room.

CONNECTED HOME

Today's technology gives us the ability to stay connected

with our loved ones everywhere we go. So, why not take advantage of the way it also benefits the home? Consider installing these smart upgrades to change the way you interact with your property.

Smart thermostat: Save money with a thermostat that

learns your behaviors and automatically sets the temperature. Most can also be manually changed remotely, from your smartphone.

Security system: Be alerted any time something goes awry at home, no matter where you are. Many services include accessible cameras, so you can

view the interior and exterior of your property from a smart device.

Smart locks: Engage or disengage your home's lock from anywhere. They are great for double checking the door while you're away or unlocking it before hauling in the groceries.

Paint Your Foundation

If a concrete foundation has seen better days, a fresh coat of paint can enhance your home's curb appeal. It is also a great opportunity to inspect the perimeter for cracks and repair them before the problem requires an expensive solution.

To pull off the look you're aiming for, it's important to prep the foundation before applying paint. This typically entails cleaning the concrete with a water hose or bucket of water. Don't forget to clear the area of any weeds or mulch which may have accumulated.

FIX CRACKS

While you're cleaning the foundation, take the time to inspect the concrete for any cracks or damage. It's likely that degrading areas may become even more stressed under the high pressure of your hose. Easily repair small blemishes with concrete filler and sandpaper. However, if you notice an extravagant crack or other damage, it's best to have a professional inspect it to determine the best course of action.

CHOOSE A COLOR

A home's foundation can make a big statement toward the attractiveness of the structure. While a white base can accent the color scheme you have chosen for siding or shutters, don't be afraid to experiment with bold colors. When deciding on a shade, consider more than just matching your home. For instance, plant flower beds around the perimeter of the building that are highlighted by the foundation's backdrop. It will play a large



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role in enhancing the landscape you are aiming for.

USE THE RIGHT MATERIALS

The exterior of our home's experience extreme conditions

from the elements. Using the proper paint is crucial to your foundation remaining attractive. It's important to understand that concrete is porous, meaning it will absorb paint much quicker than wood.

Because of this, you will need to seal the foundation before applying your first layer of color. By applying a suitable sealer, you will effectively fill any pores in the concrete.

Next, you'll want to apply the

concrete-approved paint with a masonry brush or roller. If you are having trouble deciding which paint is best for your climate and project, don't hesitate to ask a professional at your local hardware store.

Easy Weekend Projects

Home improvement ideas don't always have to be massive modifications. Sometimes, a little goes a long way. Plan a renovation that you can complete over the weekend while staying tight on your budget.

Consider tackling one of these easy and enhancing projects, as recommended by the experts at Better Homes & Gardens.

CREATE STORAGE IN YOUR ENTRY

Having space to store a coat or shoes is a great advantage to implement at your home's entry points. Consider installing a shelving system or enclosed closet near your front door to give guests a place to lay their belongings. If this project isn't feasible, you can still gain a lot of storage by purchasing a small table or shelf to place by your door.

REPLACE KITCHEN FAUCET

A simple and affordable way to update your kitchen is to install a new faucet for the sink. To avoid making major modifications, consider the configuration of your current unit and purchase one with the same setup. Simply disconnect the hoses and install them on your new faucet. A good rule of thumb when dealing with the types of fittings on plumbing is to apply a layer of Teflon tape to its threads. This will ensure the connection is tight and help to reduce the risk of leaks.

EYES TO THE SKY

Give your ceiling some TLC. Check for cobwebs near the corners and clear ceiling fans of any dust. If you notice your fans are outdated, it's an easy job to install them with new energy-saving options. Consider the size of your ceiling and purchase a fan that will fit and be effective in heating and cooling. Remember, the Electrical Safety Foundation International urges us to ensure the power is off before attempting to make any electrical repair.

ADD A MEDICINE CABINET

If you are lacking space in your bathroom, a medicine cabinet is a great place to store the necessities of your daily morning routine. Make sure to install the new storage on your structure's studs to ensure it is held tightly. Use a simple stud-finding tool to ensure you are mounting to the proper location.





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Home Equity Loans

If your renovation plans will take a toll on your wallet, you may be interested in acquiring a home improvement loan.

These special finances differ from a traditional borrowing agreement and can offer great advantages.

Before attempting to qualify for a loan, it is a good idea to check your credit score. Sit down with an expert to

discover and resolve delinquent accounts or dispute issues that may be errors. You will have a much better chance at receiving fair financial backing if your credit history is in good standing.

DIFFERENCES FROM TRADITIONAL LOANS

According to the experts at Lending Tree, a home equity loan is defined as one that allows homeowners to borrow against the equity built up in their homes. You can determine how much equity you have in your home by sub-

tracting the balance of your mortgage from the fair market value of the home, which usually requires an appraisal. According to the Federal Trade Commission, lenders will expect you to have at least an 85 percent loan-to-value ratio after you take out a home equity loan.

REQUIREMENTS

Even if you have the appropriate amount of equity in your home, there are other factors that will determine if you're approved. Here are a few things to consider from the Lending Tree.

Income: The amount you make will have a great affect on your loan. You will need to prove you make sufficient income to cover debt and the amount of the future loan. Be prepared to present check stubs and income tax forms.

An appraisal: To determine the market value of your home, a professional appraisal is typically required by lenders. An expert will evaluate your property and determine what it's worth.

Credit history: A lender will scrutinize this log to discover your payment history to your other debtors.

Repair a Damaged Lawn

The health of your lawn will make a difference toward how your home is perceived by others.

In minor cases, you can repair patches, but sometimes a complete overhaul is necessary. Become the envy of your block this year by bringing a fresh breath of life into the greenery.

Here are a few common issues that many Americans notice in their yards and how to correct them, according to Consumer Reports.

CRABGRASS

This irritating weed often sprouts along with the rest of your lawn. It's also notorious for promoting soil erosion, so eliminating it quickly is important. One way to contain the issue is by applying the natural herbicide corn gluten meal. This is a natural alternative to chemical herbicides that works quickly to stop crabgrass in its tracks. You also can lessen the toll it takes by setting the deck on your mower to just over 3 inches. If grass is cut too short, it creates a welcoming environment for the weeds.

NOT ENOUGH SUN

While the position of the sun is out of your hands, you can still use a strat-

egy to enhance the attractiveness of the shady parts of your yard. Consider accepting the loss of green grass and create a beautiful mixture of shade-tolerant flowers or construct a patch of concrete or gravel for a seating area.

BIG PROBLEMS

If you have tried and tried again to grow grass in a certain area without luck, it's possible the ground is beyond repair. To correct this, starting from scratch is usually your best option.

Experts recommend digging up the damaged section, plus six inches of surrounding healthy lawn, to about two-inches deep. You will then want to level out the soil and add a plant-based compost before replanting grass seed. You can have a better chance at success by using sod, but the price difference is significant over seedlings.

You can also to get a soil test. You can find a DIY kit or hire a professional from your local United States Department of Agriculture agency to analyze the state of your soil. An expert will give you first-hand instructions on how to resolve the problem and promote growth.

