

Spring Home & Garden



Spring Energy Savings

A changing season offers new opportunities to use less energy and lower costs.

The first day of spring, for instance, can serve as an annual reminder to check the evaporator coil on your air-conditioning unit, since its cleanliness ensures optimum performance and the lowest utility costs per month. Routine maintenance like replacing air filters can lower your average energy consumption by as much as 15%. Here's a checklist of other things that can help you go green and save some green, courtesy of the U.S. Department of Energy:

WINDOWS

Open your windows as the mild temperatures of spring arrive, allowing for a cross breeze which will naturally cool rooms without using an air conditioner.

Consider updating your home's window treatments. Energy-efficient covers like shades, blinds or film can drastically impact heat gain as temperatures rise in the afternoon. You'll give the home a fresh new look while reducing energy costs.

Use these new window treatments to bring in more sunlight during daylight hours, then turn off artificial lights. Skylights can also significantly brighten a home —



© ADOBE STOCK

at no charge.

FANS AND VENTS

Experts say you can comfortably raise thermostats by as much as four degrees simply by installing and cooling your home with ceiling fans. You'll be lowering costs without sacrificing anything in terms of comfort. Engage the venting systems while cook-

ing and after bathing to remove warm, often humid air that can lead to longer operational cycles for your cooling unit.

LEAKS

Many homes lose pricey air conditioning through leaks around windows and doors. Buy weatherstripping or apply low-cost caulk to seal any

openings. These cracks make a surprising contribution to high utility costs. For instance, air loss through your air-conditioning unit's duct system may account for nearly 30% of its energy consumption.

Check for leaks, then seal and insulate them to lower your electricity bills this spring.

OTHER TIPS

Consider installing a programmable thermostat so that you can raise the settings when you're not home or during off-peak hours, an option that may help reduce energy costs by as much as 10%. Consider using an outdoor grill on nice spring days, rather than heating up your home while using an indoor oven.

Planting for Your Zone

Having trouble getting certain things to grow? You might be planting the wrong things for your home's growing zone, according to the USDA.

These zones detail the minimum temperatures for growing plants by area. Find the zone for your area, then stick to plants that are best suited for those temps. Your lawn or garden will rebound in no time.

ABOUT THE ZONES

This document is officially known as the USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map, and it's meant to set the standard for gardeners to determine which plants thrive by location. There are 11 growing zones in the U.S., with eight located in the lower 48 states. Temperature minimums begin all the way down to -60 to -55 degrees, in Zone 1a. The far warmer Zone 13b, on the other hand, is at the other end of the spectrum with temps in the 65-to-70-degree range. These numbers represent the average coldest temperatures each year, and not the all-time lowest. Be prepared for early spring freezes, where appropriate.

FIND YOUR ZONE

Your growing zone can be found by using the USDA's helpful interactive map at planthardiness.ars.usda.gov.



© ADOBE STOCK

Simply enter your ZIP code to learn more. Static images are also available for those without faster broadband internet access. You can also get more details about zones at your nearest agricultural extension offices and garden centers. Just remember that the USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map can't

account for hyper-local conditions, including moisture, soil, humidity, heat or other weather conditions that might impact how plants grow at any specific point in time.

NEW UPDATES

The USDA map is constantly updated with temperature

data, with information going back to 1976. The high-resolution interactive map allows page views down to the street level in your community. Zones 12 and 13 have been added more recently to account for new annual extreme minimums. Some zones, like those in Puerto

Rico and Hawaii, obviously never freeze but this information nevertheless helps gardeners to plant smarter in tropical and subtropical conditions. Note that zones might change around a larger city since they tend to capture more heat than breezy areas with hills and valleys.

Storing Winter Clothes

Spring means warming conditions, and less of a need for scarves, gloves and bulky winter items. Take care to store it all properly, however, or they may not be in the proper condition to keep you cozy again when the seasons change.

CLEAN IT FIRST

Properly clean all winter wear prior to storing. Cleaned items keep musty odors away, and moths too. Closely follow manufacturer instructions, taking note of proper washing instructions — including requirements to dry clean only. These guidelines will vary depending on the garment. Be on the lookout for stains and address them before storage. Otherwise, they might become permanent after being put away for months. Dry-clean items shouldn't be stored inside the plastic carrying bags from the cleaners, since they can attract moisture which promotes mildew. Wrap everything with cotton sheets instead. This material keeps dust away while also promoting the flow of air.

PACK IT AWAY

Winter wear tends to take up a lot of room in drawers and



© ADOBE STOCK

closets. Storing these bulky items allows space for lighter, more spring-time appropriate items. Purchase storage containers that can be concealed in the back of closets or under the bed, since you won't need easy access to them for many warmer months. These bins, when properly closed, prevent intrusions by unwanted odors,

insects and moisture. Cardboard boxes were commonly used to store clothing in the past, but should be avoided. They're constructed with paper, acid and glues that can attract pests who will then potentially do great damage to your clothing and you won't know until the temperatures start falling again.

WATCH THE TEMPS

Climate control is critically important whether you plan to keep winter clothes in your closet, under the bed or in another storage area. Any space must be properly ventilated, cool and dry — with moisture being the most important element to guard against. Avoid keeping things in an unfinished

basement, attic or most garages, because they don't include important safeguards. Weather extremes and potential pest infestations in storage areas that are not climate-controlled can lead directly to permanent damage to your clothes. If it's increasingly difficult to find room for everything, consider donating some items to charity.

Saving Earth's Pollinators

Pollinators play a crucial role in bolstering nature and food production.

We tend to think of bees as the only pollinators, and they are perhaps the most important single element in this important process. But butterflies, bats, birds, wasps and beetles also play a role. Unfortunately, some are under generational stress while others are actually in decline. Together, we can make a difference in saving them.

COLLAPSING COLONIES

The USDA reports that more than 100 crops rely on pollinators, with an annual economic impact in the tens of billions. Issues even with one key pollinator can have catastrophic results. For instance, the Western honey bee has been struck by colony collapse disorder. Worker bees are disappearing, leaving only the queen and a few others. The cause is likely environmental stressors, according to the USDA, including pollutants, pests, disease and nutritional deficits. Growers, conservationists and government officials leaped into action, and the bee population began to rebound. Still, there are many others who remain at risk.

'BEE BETTER'

One of the easiest ways to support pollinators is at your local grocer, farmer's market



© ADOBE STOCK

or shopping center. Look for products that have been certified through the Bee Better program funded through the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service. Growers and manufacturers earn this certification by using pollinator-friendly practices. Buying things with the Bee Better logo helps support those who in turn support pollinators.

IN THE GARDEN

Try creating landscapes and gardens that feature native species, timing them to flower during different seasons in order to provide a steady source of food for pollinators. Clump flowers with different shapes and colors to attract them. Those who live in areas where monarch butterflies migrate can plant milkweed,

which provides food for caterpillars.

NESTING SITES

Gardeners can also provide nesting sites to encourage these populations to grow. Many prefer specific plants for their young: For hummingbirds, it's shrubs and trees. Monarchs, on the other hand, like milkweed. Bees prefer to

build nests in wood, in the ground or in dry plant stems. If you decide to encourage bees by building a ground-nesting site, make sure it's facing south so the bees get the most sun and that it is well-drained. Hollow stumps make a great habitat; there are also artificial nesting sites available at retail outlets that add a nice touch to any garden.

Power Washing 101

Build-up throughout the winter can leave our windows, doors and home exteriors covered in unsightly muck.

Power washing can leave it all looking as good as new. But don't stop there: This powerful tool is also great at bringing a host of other things to life in your home and garden, including driveways, grills, outdoor furniture, decks, fences and walkways. Just keep important safety guidelines in mind:

HOW THEY WORK

Power washers may be powered by electricity or gas. Gas-powered units are usually more powerful than the electric versions. They typically deliver up to 3,000 pounds of pressure per square inch, which may be too much for certain materials. That's why it's important to match the power of your equipment with the job: Vinyl siding can withstand that level of pressure, but aluminum, soft-grain woods and stucco are only rated to 1,500 PSI.



© ADOBE STOCK

PREPARING TO WORK

Cover items like air conditioner compressors and light fixtures around the home's exterior. Protect nearby plants, too. Note the location of outlets and windows, covering sockets with tape and then avoiding those areas. Put on safety gear before engaging

the power washer, including work gloves and safety goggles. Pre-wash the exterior with a brush or spray in order to remove loose debris, dirt and mildew. Keep the wand at least six feet away from electric wiring, and stay away from cracks and holes in the exterior.

GETTING UNDERWAY

Mix water and detergent, following manufacturer directions, then attach the power washer to a garden hose. Next, attach the preferred wand or extension to the sprayer. Test the power washer from a distance of three feet back, making slight adjustments until you

can clean without creating surface damage. Once you've completed the job, turn off the washer and disconnect it from your garden hose. Rinse off any excess soap before storing.

RENTING OR BUYING?

Power washing equipment can be rented through many

home improvement and hardware stores. That's a smart choice when doing annual cleaning of a home exterior, deck or driveway, since you're saving the cost of buying an expensive piece of equipment that you won't otherwise use. It may make sense to purchase if you have more regular jobs.

Spring Pruning Tips

With winter receding, make smart cuts now to encourage growth.

Many perennials have foliage that provides protection during the winter, but pruning is still an essential part of their growth process. Likewise, many plants actually make stronger returns if longer branches are trimmed. Here's how to handle this essential part of spring gardening.

WHEN SHOULD I PRUNE?

The timing for pruning shrubs and trees mostly depends on when they bloom and whether those blooms are on new or old growth, according to the Farmers Almanac. Generally, plants which flower after midsummer each year should be pruned after they flower. A common worry is that over-pruning or pruning at the wrong time might kill a plant, but garden center experts say that it's rarely fatal. Instead, you'll simply have fewer blooms or less fruit.

WHAT SHOULD I PRUNE?

Fruit-bearing trees like apple, peach, plum and cherry should be pruned in early spring, as should vines like wisteria and trumpet vine. Shrubs that flower in the spring like rhododendrons and lilacs also need pruning as soon as their first blooms fade. This helps ensure a better bloom the following year. Black-eyed Susan, purple cone-flower and globe thistle seed-



© ADOBE STOCK

heads provide a terrific food source for birds, so growers are encouraged to leave them until early spring. Mums, coral bells, hostas, turtleheads and delphiniums need their protective foliage through the winter; now is the time to cut them back.

WHAT DO I USE?

Pruning tools like shears and

clippers must be kept sharp in order to do their best work. Clean cuts heal quickly, eventually strengthening the plant. Botched cuts, on the other hand, actually weaken the plant while making it more susceptible to various diseases. Oil the moving parts before spring pruning to make sure everything works smoothly.

HOW TO PRUNE

Some plants require less aggressive pruning. Talk to representatives from your local extension service or gardening center to learn more about how much to prune a particular plant in your area. The Farmers Almanac is also a helpful guide. In general, focus on removing dying or

dead branches, and sprouts that have emerged from the trunk. With trees and shrubs, remove all branches that are growing toward the center, downward or across other branches. Prune from the outside growth inward to get the most pleasing shape while promoting growth of stronger new branches.

Is Your HVAC Ready?

Your air conditioning unit has been sitting unused for months, while winter held sway.

Spring's return is the perfect time to pop the hood and make sure your HVAC is ready to roll for summer. Checks will need to be made inside and out. You don't want to find out that it's not working when you need air conditioning the most.

SPRING CHECKLIST

Check outdoor components, cleaning out any branches and leaves that have accumulated over the winter period. Sometimes small creatures may have even made a home inside the unit, and they'll need to be removed. Be careful when clearing the area so that critical metal pieces aren't bent or broken. Corrosion is also a concern, particularly with older units or with homes in coastal or very humid areas. Inside, make sure all of your registers are opened and unobstructed. Examine the inside unit and duct work, keeping a sharp eye out for cracks or leaks. If you find anything concerning, call an HVAC technician to have a look before re-engaging the system.

TURNING IT ON

After your unit has passed all its checks, turn down the thermostat and make sure air



© ADOBE STOCK

is arriving through every air duct and at the set temperature. If your HVAC struggles to reach the desired setting, it's time to call an expert. The same is true for anyone who doesn't feel confident in diagnosing some or all of these pre-summer diagnostic issues. Some companies offer con-

tract service plans, making the whole process less stressful. They can also be more cost-effective, since potential problems will be identified before they become a bigger concern.

DUCT SYSTEM

Consider having your air

ducts cleaned by a professional. Ducts that are free of dust and debris will move cool air around the house more freely, without spreading allergy-causing particulates like dust, mold, dander or fungi. Changing your air filters every month will also help achieve cleaner air while saving

money. Dirty filters cause the system to become overworked, shortening your system's lifespan.

It also increases your immediate costs in the form of higher utility bills. Check your owner's manual or the instructions on the filter to find out more.