

HOMIE

Spring Edition



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For pollinators' sakes, don't spring into garden cleanup too soon!

By JUSTIN WHEELER
Xerces Society

Spring is here. A time when warmer weather naturally turns a winter-weary homeowner's thoughts towards tackling outdoor chores. The first warm weather of the season may coax us out into the yard, but pollinators in your garden aren't ready to take a chance on the first warm day.

Chrysalides still cling to last season's dried standing plant material. While you may begin to see bumble bees and ground-nesting bees emerge as flowering trees and shrubs burst into bloom, they still need cover during chilly nights and heavy spring showers. While mining bees, mason bees, carpenter bees, and bumble bees may be out and about by early April, other species such as sweat bees are still hiding out, waiting for the warmer days that arrive in May. Meanwhile, last year's leaf litter is still providing protection for both plants and invertebrates against late-season frosts.

So when is the right time to unleash your itchy green thumbs and reach for the rake? Unfortunately there isn't a hard and fast answer to this question, and the exact date will vary based upon where you are in the country. To offer some guidance, consider asking yourself the following questions.

Here's some suggestions on how to determine when spring cleaning won't bug your pollinators.

Have I put away the snow shovel, mittens, and winter coats?

If you haven't tempted fate yet by relegating the snow shovel to the back of the garage, and if you're still wearing wool socks and long

underwear — it's too early. Go make some hot chocolate and keep knitting that scarf you've been working on all winter.

Would I plant tomatoes now?

Any gardener will tell you it's not a good idea to plant your tomatoes outdoors until evening temperatures are reliably in the 50s. The tender tomato will shut down and suspend growth and fruiting if subjected to temperatures below 50 degrees or above 90 degrees. If it's time to plant tomatoes in your area, chances are conditions are neither too hot nor too cold for pollinators to be out and about.

Is the lawn growing tall?

Cool-season lawns begin growing when soil temperatures reach 50 degrees. In all but the warmest climates, if grass is growing enough to justify regular mowing, it's probably a safe bet that most pollinators have emerged.

To help pollinators the most, wait a little longer to mow. No Mow May is a movement to allow grass and wildflowers in lawns to grow unmown until after May, creating habitat and forage for early season pollinators when floral blooms can be less common. If you do mow before then, consider reducing intensity or frequency.

Have I paid my taxes?

In northern states mid-late April should be the earliest you consider cutting back perennials and clearing garden debris. Keep in mind that some bees don't emerge until late May, so the longer you can tolerate your "messy" garden the better.

Are apples and pears finished blooming?

Apricot, peach, plum, and cherry



trees are the earliest to bloom, coinciding with the emergence of many ground-nesting bees. Apple and pear trees bloom between mid-April and mid-May. If you can manage to wait until apple trees are no longer in bloom, then you should be safely in the clear from disturbing those pollinators that emerge a little later than the rest.

Resist the temptation of spring fever

We get it, it's tough to turn a blind eye to the "messy" garden, especially when gardening magazines, catalogs, and TV ads provide temptation daily. Each spring we beg gardeners and homeowners to press pause and find other ways to occupy their weekends.

Instead of disturbing critical habitat, read a book, do a jigsaw puzzle, do your taxes, tidy up the garage, or clean the gutters. While you may be eager to get outside and play in the garden — there will be time enough to toil in the soil before you know it!

Editor's note: This story was provided by the Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation.

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MEMBERS OF THE Bristol Fired Department arrived at the home of Alice Leeds on a recent sunny Thursday morning to check air quality after a small but dramatic explosion of one of the coils on the electric stove while cooking oatmeal. While there, the firefighters also installed new carbon monoxide detectors — for free. “We appreciate their invaluable service to our community,” Leeds said. “You folks are the greatest!”
 Firefighters pictured from left are Adrian Ludka, Nathan Booska, Brian Wendel, Brett LaRose and James Cole. Not pictured are those outside staffing Bristol’s Engine #1, Kevin LaRose and Terry Farr.
 Photo courtesy of Alice Leeds



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Tips to prevent fires, stay safe

The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) reminds homeowners about the risk of home fires during the winter months and on into the spring. The organization also offers simple but critical ways to prevent fires and stay safe.

According to NFPA, heating equipment is the leading cause of U.S. home fires between December and January, while cooking equipment is the leading cause of home fires year-round. The third-leading cause of home fires is electrical equipment, with three in 10 electrical fires occurring between November and February. Also, more than a third (34 percent) of Christmas tree home fires occur in January.

ELECTRICAL SAFETY

- Only use one heat-producing appliance (such as a coffeemaker, toaster, space heater, etc.) plugged into a receptacle outlet at a time.
- Check electrical cords to make sure they are not running across doorways or under carpets.
- Extension cords are intended for temporary use. Have a qualified electrician add more receptacle

outlets so you don’t have to use extension cords.

- Call a qualified electrician or your landlord if you have frequent problems with blowing fuses or tripping circuit breakers, a tingling feeling when you touch an electrical appliance, a discolored or warm wall outlet, a burning or rubbery smell coming from an appliance, flickering or dimming lights, or sparks from an outlet.

COOKING SAFETY

- Keep a close eye on what you’re cooking; never leave cooking food unattended. For foods with longer cook times, such as those that are simmering or baking, set a timer to help monitor them carefully.
- Clear the cooking area of combustible items, keeping anything that can burn — such as dish towels, oven mitts, food packaging and paper towels — at least three feet away from cooking equipment.
- Turn pot handles toward the back of the stove. Keep a lid nearby when cooking. If a small grease fire starts, slide the lid over the pan and turn off the burner.

- Create a “kid and pet free zone” of at least three feet around the cooking area and anywhere else hot food or drink is prepared or carried.
- Keep a lid nearby when cooking. If a small grease fire starts, slide the lid over the pan and turn off the burner.

OTHER TIPS

Smoke alarms, which reduce the risk of dying in a fire by more than half (54 percent), must be installed in all required locations and working properly. Home escape planning is another critical element of home fire safety, as people may have as little as two minutes to escape a home fire from the time the smoke alarm sounds. Knowing what to do when the smoke alarm sounds and using that time wisely is critical to safety.

“Our goal is to make sure people know what the main causes of home fires are and how to prevent them,” said Lorraine Carli, vice president of NFPA Outreach and Advocacy. “A little added awareness, effort, and planning can go a long way toward minimizing those risks.”







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What to know when picking new interior doors

Renovation projects run the gamut from patio paver installations to home additions to exterior lighting projects. There's no end to the ways homeowners can tweak their properties as they aspire to renovate and transform the interior and exterior of their homes.

Interior door replacement projects can dramatically alter how a home looks, especially when existing doors are dated, damaged and/or fading. Though homeowners may have grand visions of a new kitchen or outdoor living room when beginning such projects, they may not know where to begin when the time comes to replace interior doors. The following rundown can help homeowners as they begin to explore their options and start down the path of replacing interior doors.

Materials

Interior doors are manufactured from an array of materials, some of which may be more effective at reducing noise than others. Wood, medium-density fiberboard (MDF), solid-core, hollow-core, and even metal and glass are some of the materials categories for interior doors. Homeowners can define what they prioritize with each door and then choose the material that aligns best with that goal.

Installation

The cost of installation is another variable to consider when replacing interior doors. If the frame of the door is being replaced along with the door, homeowners may benefit from using a professional installation team, as removing an existing frame and installing a new one is a complicated project. Pre-hung doors come ready to hang with hinges already attached,



Metro Creative photo

so skilled do-it-yourselfers may be able to hang these on their own. Installation costs can be expensive, but homeowners with little DIY experience are urged to work with professionals so a job can be completed correctly, on time and within budget.

Style and design

Style and design merits consideration as well, and homeowners are urged to afford ample time to explore a wide array of options that might be more expansive than homeowners realize. Hinged doors, pocket doors, French doors, and barn doors are just some of the styles homeowners can choose from, and it may make sense to choose various styles when replacing all or most interior doors in a home. Each type of door typically comes in an assortment of designs as well, and it can take time to choose the right design for a given home.

Hardware

Doorknobs, locks and other hardware is easy to take for granted. However, homeowners replacing their interior doors will need to make these choices when picking new doors. Standard hardware offerings may disappoint upon installation, so afford ample time and attention to doorknobs and other hardware to ensure the finished product impresses from the get-go. Customization of hardware may add a little extra to the final cost, but it should not be enough to bust a budget and will likely result in a more impressive finished product.

Interior door replacement can create a whole new look inside a home. Homeowners are urged to afford themselves ample time to consider their many options when replacing interior doors.

— Metro Creative

Do research when you're buying yard equipment

With the weather warming up, now is the time to think about how you want your yard to serve your family, pets and wildlife. Maybe you're aiming to have the best yard on the block, want to install an outdoor family room or outdoor office, or want to expand your space for entertaining. Perhaps your kids or pets could use a better space for play. Regardless of need, now is the time to get "backyard ready" for spring. What tools do you need?

"Completing big outdoor jobs is always easier with help from outdoor power equipment," said Kris Kiser, president and CEO of the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute, or OPEI. "The right outdoor power equipment can help you get the work done faster and can help you safely maintain your yard."

Here are some tips from Kiser to help you select the machinery you need to get the job done.

Plan your needs. Draw a sketch of your yard. Include any major features like trees, bushes, an herb or vegetable garden, flower beds, lawn furniture, play or sports equipment, an outdoor patio, or bird bath. Note where maintenance may be required. Will bushes need to be trimmed back from your home or garage? Do you want to put in some flowering bushes or a tree?

Are you planning to install a fence and more grass for your pet? Now list the tools and equipment needed to take care of your yard, and what will make the job easier.

Consider equipment needed.



Visit your garage or shed and find your lawn and garden tools. Wheel out your mower and get out other equipment. Look it over and make a list of what is needed or could be upgraded. Repair anything that needs attention or identify where a newer or other machine is required. If you have a large vegetable garden,

you may need a cultivator or tiller. If you have a large lawn, an upgrade to a riding lawn mower might make mowing easier. A string trimmer might make caring for bushes or trimming grass near a fence

line easier. A pole pruner can help trim back limbs that are too high to reach safely with a saw, and a leaf blower can clear leaves faster than a rake.

Research equipment online before you buy. Think about

efficiencies of scale. The right equipment can mean more time for other activities, and make doing yard work more enjoyable, too. Doing online research in advance will help you pick the right equipment for the job. Outdoor power equipment can be gas, electric or battery powered, and technology is rapidly having an impact on product design. There are even robotic lawn mowers available today. Equipment may be sized to handle a smaller job or a massive one. Ultimately, your decision should be based on your needs.

Ask questions. Talk with the staff at the store or ask online about the equipment. In the store, ask to pick up and hold equipment to determine its "fit" for you. Discuss safety features and ask about manufacturer fueling and care instructions. Find out how often equipment may need to be serviced.

Make a plan for storage and maintenance. Store your equipment in a cool and dry place. It also should typically be serviced at the end of the fall and the beginning of the spring. Put service dates on your calendar with a reminder.

"Completing big outdoor jobs is always easier with help from outdoor power equipment."

— Kris Kiser

Small renovations can add up to a big difference

Home renovation projects were high on homeowners' priority lists during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout much of 2020, people across the globe were forced to

spend much of their time at home as leaders and governments across the globe sought to prevent the spread of COVID-19. More time at home compelled millions of homeowners to invest more in

their properties, thus sparking a renovation boom.

By early 2023, the renovation boom that marked the initial days of the pandemic appeared to have

(See Renovations, Page 6C)

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Renovations

(Continued from Page 5C)

burst. In May 2023, the popular home improvement retailer Home Depot reported its sales had fallen by 4.5 percent in the first quarter of the year and that its income had fallen by more than 6 percent from the same period a year earlier. That marked the end of what Home Depot CEO Ted Decker characterized as “a three-year period of unprecedented growth” in the home improvement sector.

Home Depot’s decline in sales was attributed to a number of factors, including a pivot among homeowners from large projects to smaller renovations. Inflation and the looming threat of a recession have led many homeowners to emphasize smaller projects. With that in mind, the following are some small renovations that can have a big impact.

- Storage addition: Regardless of where storage is added, be it the kitchen or a home office or a laundry room, extra space to keep

items out of view can dramatically alter the look of a home. Unused kitchen walls can be transformed with some inexpensive, easily hanged shelves, while some laundry pedestals with storage drawers can help keep washrooms clear of clutter.

- Polish floors: Elbow grease might be the biggest expenditure when cleaning hardwood floors. Some wood flooring experts advise homeowners to polish their floors once every two to four months depending on how much foot traffic the floors get. A fresh polishing can make floors look brand new and ensures dirt and dust are not hanging around as uninvited houseguests.

- Paint: Painting is another inexpensive option for budget-conscious homeowners who want to update their homes. There’s no shortage of places in a home, both inside and out, where a fresh coat of paint can make a statement without breaking the bank. Fading

paint on bedroom walls and kitchen cabinets can be painted over with a fresh coat of the same color or even something more vibrant. Outside, apply a fresh coat to a wooden deck or paint over brick siding to create a whole new look.

- Molding: Crown molding can add a touch of elegance to any room. Rooms can be transformed in a single weekend with the installation of new or replacement crown molding. A simple molding installation is a task many do-it-yourselfers can handle on their own, while homeowners with less DIY experience may benefit from hiring a contractor to create a layered molding look.

Homeowners are pivoting away from costly renovations to more budget-conscious projects. Various less expensive undertakings can transform spaces at a fraction of the cost of more extensive renovations.

— Metro Creative

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THE SAWDUST FLIES so it's good that carpenter Cooper Smith-Stackhouse moved outside before he cut up some wood trim for a remodeling project at a Middlebury home recently. One would expect that he moved inside after the recent heavy snowfall.

Independent photo/Marin Howell



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Tips to revitalize a garden this spring

Gardening is a rewarding hobby that pays a host of significant dividends. Many people love gardening because it allows them to spend time outdoors, and that simple pleasure is indeed a notable benefit of working in a garden. But the National Initiative for Consumer Horticulture notes that gardening provides a host of additional benefits, including helping people get sufficient levels of exercise, reduce stress and improve mood.

With so much to gain from gardening, it's no wonder people look forward to getting their hands dirty in the garden each spring. As the weather warms up, consider these tips to help bring a garden back to life.

- Discard the dead weight. Winter can take its toll on a garden, even in regions where the weather between December and early spring is not especially harsh.

Discard dead plants that have lingered into spring and prune any perennials that need it. Branches that fell during winter storms also should be removed at this point if they have not previously been discarded.

Mulching benefits a garden by helping soil retain moisture and preventing the growth of weeds.

- Test the soil. Soil testing kits can be purchased at local garden centers and home improvement retailers. Also, check out UVM Extension for soil tests. Such tests are inexpensive and can reveal if the soil needs to be amended to help plants thrive in the months to come.

- Mulch garden beds. Mulching benefits a garden by helping soil retain moisture and preventing the growth of weeds. Various garden experts note that mulching in spring can prevent weed seeds from germinating over the course of spring and summer. That means plants won't have to fight with weeds for water when the temperature warms up. It also

means gardeners won't have to spend time pulling weeds this summer.

- Inspect your irrigation system. Homeowners with in-ground irrigation systems or above-ground systems that use a drip or soaker function can inspect the systems before plants begin to bloom. Damaged sprinkler heads or torn lines can deprive plants of water they will need to bloom and ultimately thrive once the weather warms up.

- Tune up your tools. Gardening tools have likely been sitting around gathering dust since fall. Serious gardeners know that tools can be expensive, so it pays to protect that investment by maintaining the tools. Sharpened pruners help make plants less vulnerable to infestation and infection. Well-maintained tools like shovels and hoes also make more demanding gardening jobs a little bit easier, so don't forget to tune up your tools before the weather warms up.

It's almost gardening season, which means gardeners can start on the necessary prep work to ensure their gardens grow in strong and beautiful this spring.

— Metro Creative

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Easter blooms bring a little spring inside

By DEBORAH J. BENOIT
UVM Extension Master Gardener

It's no surprise that the Easter lily (*Lilium longiflorum*) is the most popular floral gift for Easter giving, but did you know that, contrary to its name, it isn't a spring-blooming flower?

When grown outdoors, they bloom during the summer. Commercial growers go through a carefully timed process to coax them to bloom at the proper time each spring.

Easter lilies are commonly sold as a plant, but their white, trumpet-shaped flowers often take center stage in cut flower arrangements. They symbolize rebirth, new beginnings and hope.

After the holiday, potted Easter lilies can be planted in your garden after all danger of frost has passed. Be sure to introduce them to the outdoors over the course of several days by bringing them out for a while each day, gradually increasing the number of hours.

Easter lilies are hardy in U.S. Department of Agriculture Hardiness Zones 5-11, possibly Zone 4, if protected from winter temperatures by sufficient snow cover and a generous layer of mulch. Choose a sunny location with soil that drains well. The leaves will eventually yellow and die back in the fall.

As beautiful as they are, be aware that every part of an Easter lily can cause stomach upset in dogs if eaten but is highly poisonous to cats. That includes the yellow pollen that is easily shed. If you have pets, be sure to keep Easter lilies well out of their reach.

In addition, the pollen can permanently stain fabric. An easy way to prevent the spread of pollen is to simply remove the anthers (the yellow part of the flower that produces pollen).

Of course, Easter lilies aren't the only flower popular for Easter gift giving.



THE EVER-POPULAR EASTER lily, sold as a potted plant or cut flowers, symbolizes rebirth, new beginnings and hope.

Photo by Ashlee Marie/Pexels

Daffodils (*Narcissus*) are one of the first flowers to emerge as winter ends and are true harbinger of spring. They appear in cut flower bouquets and as potted plants at florists around this time of year. Their bright yellow, trumpet-shaped blooms represent rebirth and are a popular gift for Easter.

Daffodils are hardy in USDA Hardiness Zones 3-8. While bulbs are traditionally planted in the fall, potted daffodils can be transferred to the garden after flowers have

faded. Simply deadhead the flowers and allow the greenery to continue to grow until it dies off naturally. Remove from the pot and plant in the garden once temperatures have warmed and the ground is workable.

Like daffodils, tulips (*Tulipa*) are a classic spring-blooming flower. They're available in a rainbow of colors and can be found at florists as cut flowers or potted plants. The egg-shaped flowers can represent rebirth and love.



TULIPS, A SYMBOL of rebirth, are a classic spring-blooming flower, often gifted to someone special around Easter time.

Photo courtesy of Deborah J. Benoit

Tulips are hardy in USDA Hardiness Zones 3-7. Potted tulips can be transplanted in the garden in the same manner as daffodils. Like daffodils, they're toxic to dogs and cats if eaten.

You may already be familiar with other holiday cacti — Thanksgiving cactus (*Schlumbergera truncata*) and Christmas Cactus (*Schlumbergera bridgesii*) — but have you heard of the Easter cactus (*Rhipsalidopsis gaertneri*)? Its flowers come in shades of red, orange and pink. It's easy to care for and generally considered pet friendly.

Like other holiday cacti, Easter cactus is actually a succulent. Treat it to bright, indirect sunlight and water when the soil feels dry. It's hardy only to USDA Hardiness Zones 10-12, so while it can spend warmer months outside (avoid hot, direct sunlight), be sure to bring it back indoors before there's danger of frost.

Whether you receive Easter flowers as a bouquet, a potted plant or a mixed-bulb planting, they're a wonderful way to celebrate and a sure sign of spring.

Deborah J. Benoit is a UVM Extension Master Gardener from North Adams, Mass., who is part of the Bennington County Chapter.

Renovations that sell homes

The adage "there's a lid for every pot" suggests that, even in relation to the real estate market, there's bound to be a buyer for every home on the market. Price is a significant variable in the minds of potential buyers, but there are additional factors that can affect the impression people get of a given home.

Certain home features can tip the scales in favor of sellers. In fact, various renovations can help sell homes more readily. And these renovations need not cost a fortune.

Putting a home on the market can be stressful, but these renovations may help it sell fast.

• A fresh coat of paint: Although painting is relatively inexpensive and a job that some do-it-yourselfers can tackle, it's not a task relished by many. Painting is messy, it takes time, and requires moving furniture. In fact, prepping a room for painting often is the toughest component of any painting job. But fresh coats of paint can create a strong first impression. Choose a neutral color and get painting. Jennie Norris, chairwoman for the International Association of Home Staging Professionals, says gray is a "safe" color that has been trending in recent years.

• Minor bathroom remodel: Remove dated wall coverings, replace fixtures, consider reglazing or replacing an old tub, and swap old shower doors for fast fixes in a bathroom. If there's more room in the budget, replacing a tub, tile surround, floor, toilet, sink, vanity, and fixtures can cost roughly \$10,500, says HGTV. You'll recoup an average of \$10,700 at resale, making a minor bathroom remodel a potentially

worthy investment.

• Redone kitchen: The kitchen tends to be the hub of a home. This room gets the most usage and attention of any space, and it's a great place to focus your remodeling attention. The National Association of the Remodeling Industry estimates that homeowners can recover up to 52 percent of the cost of

a kitchen upgrade upon selling a home. Buyers want a functional and updated kitchen. Trending features include drawer-style microwaves

and dishwashers, commercial ranges, hidden outlets, and even wine refrigerators.

• Updated heating and cooling system: Better Homes and Gardens reports that homeowners may be able to recoup 85 percent of the cost of new HVAC systems when they sell their homes. Heating, cooling and ventilation components are vital to maintain. You don't want buyers to be taken aback by an older system, and many millennial buyers are not willing to overlook old mechanical systems.

• Fresh landscaping: A home's exterior is the first thing buyers will see. If they pull up to a home with eye-catching landscaping and outdoor areas that are attractive yet functional, they're more likely to be intrigued. Often buyers will equate a home that features an impressive exterior with upkeep inside as well. The American Nursery Landscape Association says the average homeowner may spend \$3,500 for landscaping.

Improving a home's chances to sell quickly and at a higher price often comes down to making smart improvements that catch the eyes of buyers.

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IN ORDER TO root properly, red twig dogwood cuttings should be placed with the buds pointing up in a clean container with about 2 to 3 inches of water in a spot that gets natural light and not direct sun. Photo courtesy of Bonnie Kirn Donahue

Here's how to propagate dogwoods and willows

By **BONNIE KIRN DONAHUE**
UVM Extension Master Gardener

Looking for versatile, native shrubs? Look no further than willows (*Salix spp.*) and dogwood (*Cornus spp.*).

Both species are exceptional landscape plants. They have strong roots that can help secure steep banks and prevent erosion. They grow in tough conditions, and after being cut down, they grow right back.

Willows are some of the first plants to flower in the spring, offering much needed early pollen and nectar to spring pollinators. They have a lovely wispy look in the summer, and some varieties have colorful stems in the winter.

Dogwoods, especially red twig dogwood (*Cornus sericea*), have white, pollinator-friendly flowers in the spring, and fabulous bright red stems in the winter.

Another quality they both share is that they can be easily propagated in water. This can be a fun, simple and low-cost project before the growing season starts.

In late winter/early spring, before the shrubs have come out of dormancy, look for stems in their first-year of growth that are about the width of a pencil with big, healthy buds. Make a clean cut at the base of the stem, and remove any extra branches.

If you take cuttings after the buds have already started to leaf out, remove new growth from the bottom part of the stem that will

be submerged in water.

Cut the cleaned stems to 8 to 10 inches long, being careful to make cuts just beneath leaf



Metro Creative photo

nodes. The nodes are places with hormones that will stimulate growth. Depending on the length of your stem, you may get 4 to 6 cuttings out of one branch.

Place stems in a clean container with about 2 to 3 inches of water. Make sure that the buds are pointing up in order to root properly. Place the container in an area that receives natural light, but out of direct sun. Refill and refresh water as needed.

Roots should start to grow within a week or two. Once roots have developed further, the cuttings can be placed in containers with potting soil. Plant the stems about halfway into the soil (about 4 inches deep).

Keeping the cuttings moist at this stage is critical to their survival. Willows in the wild are often found in wet areas, so they naturally need more water. Dogwoods are found in riparian areas and need less water when mature, but keeping the soil moist is necessary while the cuttings are getting established.

Place containers in an area outside of direct sunlight to avoid drying the cuttings out. You will know the propagation worked when leaves start to grow from the stem. Keep the plants well watered until planting. Planting in the ground should be done ideally in the spring or fall.

Bonnie Kirn Donahue is a UVM Extension Master Gardener and landscape architect from central Vermont.

Discover your backyarding personality

Spring and backyarding — the act of doing indoor activities such as dining, working, entertaining and exercising in our own backyards — go hand in hand. As homeowners prepare to create the yard of their dreams this spring, the TurfMutt Foundation, which celebrates 15 years in 2024 teaching families how to save the planet one yard at a time, encourages them to start by identifying their backyarding personality type.

“Knowing your backyarding personality type can help you be better prepared to craft a yard that is not only beautiful but is also purposeful and specifically suited to how you backyard,” says Kris Kiser, President & CEO of the TurfMutt Foundation. “There really are no rules. Create an outdoor area that reflects your unique personality and style while supporting the things you like to do in your green space.”

Here are TurfMutt’s backyarding personality types to help inspire you to “yard your way” this spring:

• **Outdoor Athlete:** Likes to stay active in the fresh air.

The Outdoor Athlete’s gold medal backyard might include a strip of grass for running sprints, built-in outdoor fitness equipment, or even a lap pool to channel your inner Michael Phelps.

• **Nature Lover:** Favorite thing is watching birds and backyard wildlife.

The perfect backyard for Nature Lovers will feature native plants in bright colors that bloom year-round to attract, feed, and shelter pollinators and backyard wildlife. The Nature Lover will also need to find the perfect perch for backyard wildlife viewing.

• **Work from Home Pro:** Seals business deals in the sunshine.

A quiet corner of the yard complete with seating and shade (and a strong Wi-Fi signal) is the start to a beautiful and functional outdoor office. Other creature comforts like an outdoor heater, string lights, curtains, a warm rug, or even a semi-enclosed patio can

enhance the space.

• **Landscaper:** Makes neighbors green with yard envy.

Put the right plant in the right place so your yard is always thriving and consult the USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map to find plants that will do well in your location with minimal input. Having the right outdoor power equipment is key to success for Landscapers, who know when to call in the professionals to help with their backyarding to-dos.

• **Entertainer Extraordinaire:** Loves nothing more than treating great friends to delicious burgers in the backyard.

Ambiance is everything for this backyarder. String some lights, build a fire pit or fireplace, and even create an outdoor kitchen if the budget allows. Patio furniture and outdoor seating with comfortable cushions are a must, and colorful flowers in pots add a just-right touch.

• **Zen Master:** Wants an outdoor (See Backyarding, Page 10C)

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Snugging up the details

LOCAL CARPENTER COOPER Smith-Stackhouse of Grass Roots Carpentry uses a chop saw, above, to cut baseboard for a Middlebury client's dining area. After using the power saw, he switches to a human-powered pull saw, left, on the fine detail work required to make the pieces fit together perfectly.

Independent photos/Marin Howell

Backyarding

(Continued from Page 9C)
space to relax and unwind.

A hammock strung between a couple of shade trees, a soothing water feature that also beckons backyard birds, and simple, manicured plantings are just a few ways to create a peaceful setting outside.

• **Kid Zone Creator:** "Fun" is your middle name, and creating kid space is the name of the game.

Safe space that lures kids away from their screens and into the great outdoors right outside your home begins with a large patch of turfgrass, perfect for sports practice, cornhole, or pitching a tent. Trees are great for zip lines, treehouses, and swings. You can even plant a garden to teach kids about the origins of the food we eat.

• **Pet Pamperer:** Designs their yard as a pet sanctuary.

Who needs a dog park when you have a pet playground in your own backyard? Hardy turfgrass, sturdy plants, lots of shade trees, and shrubs that naturally section off pet "business" areas from the rest of the yard are some of the features you may want to consider. (Be sure to select non-toxic plants that are safe for pets.) Go all out with a splash pool or a sandbox for digging.

How DIY can be bad for homeowners' bottom lines

Homeowners know it can be tempting to go the do-it-yourself (DIY) route when starting a home improvement project. Home repairs and renovations can be costly, and the notion of saving money on such projects compels many homeowners to try their hand at home improvements. However, the DIY approach can be costly as well, and if things go awry, homeowners may end up with empty pockets and unfinished projects.

Online tutorials and advertisements for home improvement retailers can make DIY seem like a snap. However, there are potential pitfalls to consider that could make the ostensibly less expensive DIY route far more detrimental to the bottom line than homeowners may recognize.

• **Permits:** Permits ensure work is done in accordance with local codes, which are designed to ensure the safety of residents and their

neighbors. Licensed contractors know which permits are necessary for projects they're hired to work on, and many even procure permits for their clients (homeowners are urged to read estimates and contracts to determine who will be responsible for acquiring the appropriate permits). DIYers may not know about local permits, and therefore go ahead with projects without procuring any. That can be harmful in the short- and long-

(See Bottom lines, Page 11C)

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Bottom lines

(Continued from Page 10C)

In the short-term, a failure to procure the appropriate permits can make a home less safe and potentially lead to costly fines and necessitate a complete do-over of the project. In the long-term, homeowners who did not secure the appropriate permits may not be given a certificate of occupancy (CO) when putting their homes on the market, which can make it very difficult to sell the home.

• **Ancillary costs:** The ancillary costs of DIY are not often noted in online tutorials. However, such

costs can dramatically increase the amount of money DIYers shell out in order to complete projects on their own. Ancillary costs include but are not limited to the price of tools and equipment; disposal fees for materials that will need to be discarded; and the cost of permits. These costs are often included in estimates provided by contractors, but they're easily overlooked by novice DIYers.

• **Repairs:** Even experienced contractors make mistakes, so DIYers, particularly novices, can anticipate making a few errors along the way. Minor mistakes may not prove too costly, but more

significant mishaps can quickly negate any cost savings associated with DIY renovations. The cost to fix DIY mistakes varies depending on the project, but a 2019 survey from Porch.com found that the average DIY mistake cost homeowners \$310 and added five and a half hours to the overall time spent to complete a project. It's worth noting the Porch.com survey was conducted prior to the dramatic increase in materials costs related to inflation in recent years. So it's reasonable to assume that fixing DIY mistakes in 2024 could end up costing considerably more than a few hundred dollars.

Before diving in to DIY, homeowners may want to consider the real costs associated with forgoing professional experience in the potentially misplaced hopes of saving a few dollars.

— Metro Creative

Even experienced contractors make mistakes, so DIYers, particularly novices, can anticipate making a few errors along the way.

Vermont leads the Northeast in zero-emissions heating systems

Some 63,000 heat pumps installed in Green Mountain State

WINOOSKI — More Vermonters have been warming their homes with heat pumps this winter. That's because Vermont leads the Northeast when it comes to installations of the ultra-efficient, all-electric and emissions-free heating systems.

Vermont has installed more heat pumps per capita than any other state in New England, according to Efficiency Vermont installation data through 2023. This heat pump leadership in 2024 also marks a decade of Efficiency Vermont's groundbreaking point-of-sale discount program, offered in partnership with Vermont's electric utilities, which makes heat pumps more affordable and accessible to Vermonters statewide.

"Vermont now has more than 63,000 heat pump systems heating homes and businesses. That includes more than 11,000 installed in 2023,"

said Phil Bickel, the heat pump program manager at Efficiency Vermont. "More and more people are learning just how effective heat pumps are at keeping their homes warm and comfortable. And in most cases, keeping their bills lower than if they were using fossil fuels to heat their homes."

The Green Mountain State leads New England in per capita installations of ducted and ductless "mini split" heat pump systems, with 97 heat pumps for every 1,000 residents (based on the latest U.S. Census estimates). Hot on Vermont's heels is Maine, which boasts more heat pumps overall — more than 131,000 rebates issued — for a per capita rate of 94 heat pumps per 1,000 residents. That's according to Efficiency Maine, which plans and implements energy efficiency programs in the Pine Tree State.

Massachusetts, with its 7 million residents, has fewer than 30,000 heat pumps installed. That's a per capita rate of about 4.

Other notable heat pump landmarks in Vermont include:

- More than 57,000 residential and nearly 6,000 commercial heat pump systems installed. This includes ducted heat pump systems and ductless "mini split" heat pump systems. Rebates from Vermont's electric utilities have been crucial to this success. Discounts and bonuses from Green Mountain Power, Burlington Electric Department, Stowe Electric Department, Vermont Electric Cooperative, Washington Electric Co-op, and 11 municipal utilities in the Vermont Public Power Supply Authority have all helped Vermonters add heat pumps to their home.

(See Zero-emissions, Page 13C)



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WOOD ASHES, WHEN applied according to soil test results, can be used to amend garden and lawn soils for optimal plant growth.

Photo by Bonnie Kirm Donahue

Wood ash can be an asset to gardens

By **BONNIE KIRM DONAHUE**
UVM Extension Master Gardener

Wood ashes are a surprisingly useful byproduct of winter heating. In addition to household uses such as making soap or adding traction to driveways, wood ashes can be used to amend your garden and lawn soils.

Wood ash, like limestone, is high in calcium, and can raise soil pH to provide the most optimal plant growth.

The pH of soil is important because it helps make certain nutrients more available for plants to use in the soil. For example, when soil pH falls outside of optimal ranges, critical nutrients for plant growth, like nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, sulfur, calcium and magnesium, may be less available for plants to take up.

pH is measured on a scale of 0 (acidic) to 14 (alkaline). An optimal soil pH for most vegetable and berry crops is 6.5 to 6.8. Generally, a 6.0 to 7.5 pH should support most crops. Different species have their own pH preferences, however, so be sure to look up the preferred pH

of your plants prior to amending the soil.

Blueberries like acidic soil with a pH of 4.5 to 5.2, so they probably won't appreciate wood ash. Azaleas also prefer acidic soils with a pH between 4.5 and 6.0. Vegetables such as asparagus, kale and beans need basic soils with a pH between 6.0 and 8.0, while many landscape shrubs and trees, such as dogwood, do best in alkaline soil (5.5 to 6.0).

Before adding amendments, first get a soil test to measure the existing pH of your soils. The test will tell you the pH and offer amendment options.

The University of Vermont Extension Agricultural and Environmental Testing Lab offers soil testing. For information, go to go.uvm.edu/ae-testing.

Following your soil test results, you can apply a thin layer of wood ash (remove any large charcoal pieces) on top of your soil. Use an application rate of 15-20 pounds of wood ash (one five-gallon bucket) per 1,000 square feet. One cord of wood will produce approximately 20 pounds of wood ash. For more information, check out: go.uvm.edu/wood-ash.

edu/wood-ash.

Moisten the soil prior to applying the wood ash to help it adhere to the soil and become less airborne. Ash can be irritating, so protect your skin and lungs when spreading it. Lightly water the area to help the ash adhere to the soil.

Make sure that the wood ash you are using contains only untreated, naturally grown wood. Using wood ash that is contaminated by oil, chemicals or plastic can transfer the contamination to your soils. Wood ash from pellet stoves and bonfires also should be avoided.

Wood ash can be added in very small quantities to compost piles, keeping an eye on the pH. Optimal compost pH for microorganism activity is between 5.5 and 8.0. The key is knowing the pH of your compost pile before you add wood ash and spreading a thin layer of ash across the pile (versus dumping it in).

This year, after getting your soil tested, try using leftover wood ashes in your garden and on your lawn. This low-cost soil amendment just might be something you add to your garden to-do list from now on.

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Zero-emissions

(Continued from Page 11C)

• More than 100 air-to-water heat pump systems installed. Vermont was the first state to launch heat pump offers for homes that heat using hot water, usually from a boiler. This first-ever air-to-water heat pump (AWHP) program has been emulated by states like Massachusetts and New York. As a result of this work, Energy Star awarded these products the Emerging Technology Award as they work toward national standards to certify AWHPs with the Energy Star label. Get up to \$6,500 back with rebates on air-to-water heat pump systems.

• More than 180 heat pump installers in Vermont's workforce. These heat pump specialists are at work in all 14 Vermont counties through the Efficiency Excellence Network (EEN). The EEN is Efficiency Vermont's statewide trade group of independent contractors. Several HVAC (heating, ventilation, and air conditioning) businesses have fully pivoted to heat pumps. The EEN has also expanded Vermont's workforce to install and maintain these systems.

"Heat pumps are the not-so-secret weapon to combating climate change in Vermont and beyond — and it's important that Vermonters have the support and guidance they need to figure out if they are the best fit for their homes," said Peter Walke, Efficiency Vermont's managing director. "For those who make that choice, they'll keep your home warm without the greenhouse gas emissions of fossil fuels thanks to clean, renewable electricity in Vermont's grid. They'll also help our state meet mandatory emissions reductions in the decades ahead. And the financial contributions and joint promotion with our utility partners are helping ensure that every Vermonter who wants a heat pump can afford one."

Vermont's heat pump success is no accident. It's the result of years

of work coordinated by Efficiency Vermont. That includes working with manufacturers to ensure heat pumps are vetted for Vermont's cold climate. Working with regional partners to set performance and quality specifications for cold-climate heat pump technology. Working with the supply chain to ensure the types of heat pumps needed for our northern climate are available. Working with local technicians and contractors so they're trained to install and maintain these machines. And working with our utility partners to promote and incentivize heat pumps to customers.

"It's important that Vermonters have the support and guidance they need to figure out if heat pumps are the best fit for their homes."

— Peter Walke, Efficiency Vermont managing director

It also involves working with regional wholesalers to ensure a smooth rebate process that lowers the up-front costs for heat pump buyers.

"At F.W. Webb, we strive to educate contractors about rebates so they can help homeowners save money by upgrading to high-efficiency heat pumps," said Laura Bassett, energy program manager at F.W. Webb, the largest wholesale distributor for HVAC in the Northeast. "Efficiency Vermont's diligence in streamlining the heat pump rebate process has resulted in greater clarity and easier implementation for distributors and contractors using the program."

"The collaboration between Vermont utilities and Efficiency Vermont's innovative program management is a winning model for other states to follow," said Rebecca Foster, CEO of sustainable energy nonprofit VEIC, which operates Efficiency Vermont. "At this critical time for our planet, it's important to not just celebrate these milestones — but share how we achieved them, and make clean energy solutions accessible to as many people as possible."

Alongside utility partners and trade allies, Efficiency Vermont is also advancing:

• Heat pump water heaters, with more than 17,800 installations. The efficiency and energy savings of heat pumps can provide your home with hot water, too. Vermont was among the first states to support retail and distributor programs for heat pump water heaters. Rebates can help you save \$300 (or more) on a new heat pump water heater.

• Bringing heat pump efficiency to your laundry. Heat pump washers and dryers are up to 40% more efficient than standard electric models. But they don't just save energy. Their advanced moisture sensors and lower drying temperatures are gentler on your clothes. They can even dry delicates you wouldn't otherwise put in the dryer. Get up to \$400 cash back on an Energy Star "Most Efficient" dryer with heat pump technology.

• Exploring new heat pump applications and technologies. Efficiency Vermont is testing the versatility and efficiency of heat pumps in new ways. Pilot projects include window-based heat pump units for renters. These are about the same size as a window air conditioning unit, and can both heat and cool rental units. Plus, there's a "thermal battery" project where heat pumps work in tandem with hot water tanks. These "thermal batteries" use a steady supply of hot water to heat your home. All while maximizing efficiency and operating when clean electricity is most abundant.

Heat pumps are up to 300% more efficient at heating than fossil fuels. That's because heat pumps use electricity to move heat, rather than burning fuel to make heat. This allows heat pumps to keep a home at a steady, comfortable temperature with just a fraction of the energy used when fuel is burned to heat a home. In most cases, heating with heat pumps instead of fossil fuels means a big savings on your heating bill—and a big reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. It's one reason why Americans are buying more heat pumps than gas furnaces. And it's why 25 states have pledged to install 20 million heat pumps by 2030.

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Brian Quigley
Kitchen & Bath Designer
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Get to work on woodshop projects

Middlebury College sophomore Talia Trigg used the tools at the Middlebury Makerspace one afternoon earlier this month to cut some wood for a personal project.

The makerspace, which includes a wood shop with table saws, band saws, drill press and hole punches for every project, is located downstairs in the college's Johnson Memorial Building, Room 102.

And the woodshop, as well as the whole makerspace, welcomes members of the community to come use the tools and facilities woodworkers, decorators or just plain do-it-yourselfers, who can get help and advice and use the fancy equipment there. There are 3-D printers, CNC machines, laser cutters, sewing machines and other technical equipment, plus experts who can tell you how to use them.

From absolute beginners to experts; from kids to college students to professionals in need of gear, the makerspace aims to be an accessible home, but it requires an active community of caring people like you to keep it humming. So come see the current curricular, extra-curricular and community projects — and ask lots of questions.

The Middlebury Makerspace is a community that brings together people and ideas with tools and support in a beautiful sun-filled space. From absolute beginners to world-class experts, we come here to learn, to grow, to share and to make cool things.

The space offers training



For open hours, check out the Middlebury Makerspace calendar online at makerspace.middcreate.org.

Addison Independent photos/Steve James



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INCORPORATING HOUSEPLANTS, SUCH as a prayer plant and golden pothos, into an office setting helps create a more pleasant work environment and reduce stress and elevate mood.
Photo by Deborah J. Benoit

Add a home office plant Reduce stress, elevate your mood

By **DEBORAH J. BENOIT**
UVM Extension Master
Gardener

If you're working in an office tucked away in a spare room at home, you know that practicality rules — your office is a place for productivity. That often means a computer, printer and related equipment, along with a lot of paper and hard surfaces. Adding something living and green just might help alleviate the tedium of hours at the keyboard and stress of looming deadlines.

Adding plants to your workspace can provide some of the same benefits as an escape to the garden, all without leaving your desk. Houseplants, or, in this case, office plants, can distract the senses and ease stress, especially during winter months when a visit to the park or garden for some green therapy isn't an option.

To successfully incorporate plants into an office setting, there are several things to consider. How much space can you devote to a plant or plants? What are the growing conditions in your office? What are the sources of light? Does the temperature fluctuate? And finally, how much time do you have to maintain your office plants?

Generally speaking, an office will have limited light sources, either few or no windows and artificial light. The climate may or may not include air conditioning, and conditions may be quite different on weekends if the office is closed.

The peace lily (*Spathiphyllum spp.*) will do well in an office environment. It thrives in low light or bright, indirect light, but avoid direct sunlight. A weekly watering is best, but if you get sidetracked, it will let you know when it's thirsty. One look at its sad, drooping leaves will send you off for the watering can.

Prayer plant (*Maranta leuconeura*) with its patterned leaves adds more than just green to the office color scheme. It adds interest as its leaves fold up at night and relax during the daylight hours.

It prefers bright, indirect light, but avoid placing in a sunny window, which will cause the color to fade. Keep the soil moist (but not wet), and mist to increase humidity.

Rex begonia (*Begonia rex-cultorum*) is a great choice for the desktop. Foliage is the star, with many options for leaf color and texture. Rex begonias do fine in low light. Foliage can burn in

direct sunlight. Allow the top of its soil to dry between waterings, and then water well.

Lucky bamboo (*Dracaena sanderiana*) is an easy-to-care-for plant that's tolerant of low-level and artificial light. It prefers moist soil or can be grown in water alone.

If you're looking for a little drama, include a trailing vine such as golden pothos (*Epipremnum aureum*). Grow it in a hanging basket in bright, indirect light, keeping soil moist, but not soggy. Placed on a shelf, pothos will cascade in a green waterfall and, as it grows, the vines will happily drape along the top of a bookcase.

But what if you have absolutely nowhere to put a plant? Try an air plant (*Tillandsia spp.*). These are unobtrusive plants, requiring no soil, not even a pot. They do need light (bright, indirect) and water (weekly by a thorough misting, more often in a very dry setting).

There are many plant possibilities for the office. For the small amount of time needed to care for them, they can bring a bit of the natural world into the workplace, help reduce stress, elevate mood and simply make the office a more pleasant and attractive place to be.

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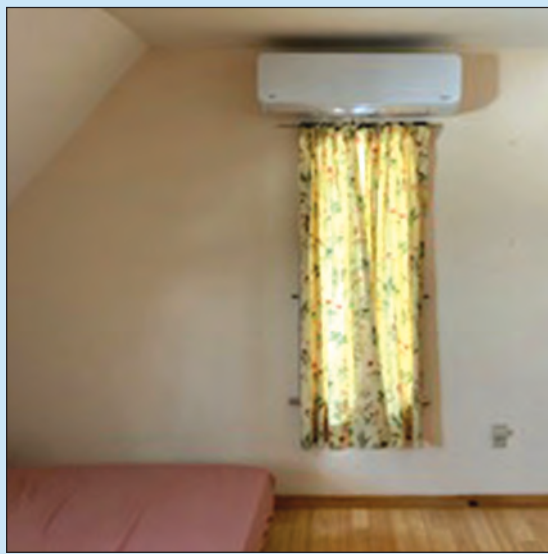
We had a variety of questions which they happily addressed. Their knowledgeable staff was well versed with applicable regulations and requirements, building codes and even wind loading concerns. They truly went out of their way to make sure we were educated on the system and pleased with the installation.

This was a very rewarding experience which began with a goal of wanting to make our home fully renewably powered by working with a local team and culminated with meeting great members of our community, keeping our dollars local while also supporting other American renewable technology manufacturers. We found kindred spirits at BE and we can't recommend them highly enough!

*Megan Nedzinski and Joshua Faulkner –
South Starksboro, VT*



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-Viveka Fox
and
Peter Macfarlane,
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Stephen and his crew encouraged my children's curiosity and made learning fun for them. Little things like making handprints in the cement of our solar system sparked talks about reducing your carbon footprint and how everyone can help, even children. The whole experience could not have been easier or better. Seeing the power meter run backwards is just icing on the cake."

Heather Shepard – Bristol

