

# Spring HOME IMPROVEMENT

## Improve soil quality for a better lawn

A lush, green lawn can vastly improve a home's curb appeal. Thick, healthy grass indicates that homeowners care enough about their properties to invest the time, effort and money to make them beautiful.

According to the landscaping tool company Troy-Bilt, soil fertility is the foundation of healthy lawns. In fact, the quality of the soil is essential whether one is growing acres of grass, potted plants or vegetable garden beds. No matter which type of soil a homeowner is working with, there are various ways to make it better.

### Remove thatch

Thatch is a tightly knotted layer of leaves, grass roots, stems, and other debris that accumulates between the grass blades and the soil. Too much thatch can hinder the movement of water, air and nutrients into the soil. According to organic fertilizer company Organo-Lawn, thatch often occurs if the production of dead organic material in the lawn exceeds the ability of the microorganisms in the soil to break down that organic matter. A half-inch of thatch is normal. If thatch gets too thick, it will need to be removed. The home improvement resource DIY Network says dethatching can take place in the summer, fall and winter using a thatching rake.

### Aerate

A lawn aerator will create holes in the soil. This can improve drainage and encourage worms and helpful microorganisms that re-

quire oxygen to thrive in the soil. The Briggs & Stratton Company says the best time to aerate a lawn is during the growing season when the grass can heal and fill in any holes, such as spring and fall. Aeration can help develop deeper grass roots for a healthier lawn.

### Test and amend soil

A great lawn has loamy soil, which has a key ratio of clay, silt and sand. Silt is a granular material of a size between sand and clay that originates from quartz and feldspar. It is the most fertile of the three types of soil components. Sand does not retain water, but it helps to create spaces in the soil that permit air to circulate. Clay particles are small and bind together tightly, but clay is naturally nutrient-rich. The home improvement site Bob-Vila.com says loamy soil should have equal parts sand and silt and half as much clay.

If the lawn is not yet established, loamy soil can be created and then the grass seeds planted. For established soil, after removing thatch and aerating, top-dressing the lawn can help. This involves adding a thin layer of soil over the lawn. It can improve the soil without killing the existing turf. Ideally, it should be done in early fall or spring, as this gives the grass time to grow through three to four more mowings before severe heat or cold sets in.

Healthy soil is vital to a lush lawn. It takes a little work, but improving soil can create vibrant, healthy, green grass.



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# Mulching mistakes to avoid

Landscape features vary significantly from house to house. Some homeowners may prefer water features on their properties, while others focus on flowers that would be the envy of a botanical garden. Regardless of those preferences, lawn and garden enthusiasts who want to make their properties as idyllic as possible may eventually look to mulch to help them accomplish that goal.

Mulch helps soil retain moisture, which promotes strong, healthy flowers, plants, trees, and shrubs. And because soil beneath mulch retains more moisture than soil that's not protected by mulch, homeowners won't have to spend as much time watering mulched landscapes. That saves time and conserves water, which can be a big benefit in areas prone to drought and/or especially hot summers. Mulch also helps to suppress weed growth, which can ensure all that hard work needed to create an eye-catching garden won't be compromised by the presence of unsightly, thirsty weeds.

Mulching seems like a simple task, and it can be. But that does not mean homeowners cannot make mistakes when mulching. The following are some common mulching mistakes to avoid as lawn and garden season hits full swing.

- Not enough mulch: Mulch is ineffective



# Why weeds can be found everywhere

The ubiquitous nature of weeds can make them seem like they can grow anywhere, and that's because they can. Weeds can grow anywhere there's room for them to sprout, including gardens, sidewalks, driveways, and parking lots. One of the things that helps weeds spread so much is how productive they can be at producing seeds. An actively growing weed plant will produce thousands of seeds and disperse those seeds throughout the season. One of the more recognizable weeds is the dandelion. During its growing season, a dandelion can effectively spread its seeds thanks in large part to the wind, which can blow seeds all over, thereby allowing a single dandelion to spread its seeds far and wide. Penn

State Extension notes that successful weed plants share many characteristics, including an ability to reproduce both sexually and asexually. Successful weed plants also are clever in terms of getting around, as their seeds can attach to people and animals and even float on water. Weeds also put up a fight when they're confronted by humans. Humans who try to pull weeds may instead break them. The broken weeds can then resprout, ultimately spreading their seeds again. The resiliency of weeds also is evident in their ability to stay dormant for long periods of time. For example, weeds can stay in the soil for years before germinating, proving that these unwelcome guests aren't just pesky, but also patient.

when spread too thin. The Virginia Cooperative Extension at Virginia Tech and Virginia State University recommends applying mulch no less than two inches in depth. Anything less than that will prove ineffective at preventing weed growth and helping the soil retain moisture, and that means you will need to water more often.

- Poorly located mulch: Mulch should not be placed too close to plant stems or tree trunks. When it is, tissue is so wet that it makes for a perfect environment for disease and insect infestation.

- Failing to mulch to the drip line: The drip line of a tree refers to the outermost circumference of the tree's canopy from which water drips onto the ground. The VCE recommends mulching to the drip line of a plant or tree, which ensures the plant or tree will get the most out of the mulch. Mulching to the drip line also minimizes competition from the grass, leading to stronger plants and trees.

- Failing to weed before mulching: Weeds should be removed prior to mulching. If they're not, the mulch can provide the same growing environment for weeds that you're trying to create for your plants and trees.

Mulching benefits a landscape in myriad ways, especially when homeowners avoid some common mulching mistakes.

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# 3 common DIY mistakes to avoid

Pride tends to swell when homeowners successfully complete do-it-yourself projects on their homes. In addition to saving homeowners money, DIY projects provide a unique way for men and women to personally connect with their homes. The ability to look at a finished project and say it's a result of your own handiwork can make a home feel more your own.

As fun and fulfilling as DIY projects can be, they also can be nerve-racking and induce anxiety. When DIY projects falter, fixing them can prove costly, as homeowners typically must call in contractors to correct their mistakes and get a project back on track. That results in additional labor and material costs that might have been avoidable, especially for homeowners who make an effort to avoid some common DIY mistakes.

1. Failure to secure permits

Even though homeowners own their homes, that does not mean they have carte blanche to do what they want with them. Many renovation projects require homeowners to secure permits before projects can commence. Some may even require additional permits as the projects advance. If proper permits are not secured, homeowners may be fined and projects may be nixed, regardless of how much money homeowners have spent up to that

point. Before beginning a home renovation project, homeowners should always contact their local permit office to determine if any permits are required. Bankrate.com notes that permits are often required for any project larger than painting or wallpapering.

2. Overestimating your abilities

DIY television shows make home renovation projects look easy, but reality suggests otherwise. Homeowners with little or no experience renovating a home may want to take classes before they think about starting a project on their own. Even online tutorials tend to make jobs appear easier than they are. Roofing and plumbing projects tend to be best left to the professionals, as these projects can be either dangerous or vulnerable to disaster if not addressed by trained professionals.

3. Incorrect materials

Whether it's to save mon-

ey or a byproduct of inexperience, DIYers do not always choose the correct materials for a job. Experienced contractors have ample experience working with all sorts of materials and are therefore in a unique position to recommend the best materials for any given job. That resource is not available for DIYers, who must perform ample research before beginning a job so the project involves the most appropriate materials. Incorrect materials can be a sunken cost that derails a project, but even jobs completed using incorrect materials may need to be redone a lot more quickly than those that employed the right materials the first time.

Many home renovation projects can be completed without the help of professional contractors., especially when homeowners take steps to avoid some of the more common mistakes made by DIYers.

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## What to do about an overfertilized lawn

Lush lawns are not achieved without a lot of hard work. That hard work often involves some trial and error, and one of the simplest errors a person can make is overfertilizing a lawn.

Overfertilization is an easy mistake to make, but it's a mistake that can have long-lasting consequences. According to the lawn care experts at Scotts®, overfertilizing a lawn can damage grass. Overfertilized lawns are subject to excessive leaf growth, which may require more maintenance, like extra mowing, in the interim. Over time, an overfertilized lawn can develop a sponge-like feel and may be increasingly vulnerable to fungal disease.

Of course, homeowners can only address an overfertilized lawn after they learn to spot signs that the lawn has been fed too much fertilizer. Brown and patchy grass is one of the telltale signs that a lawn has been overfertilized. This can occur because too much nitrogen has made its way onto the lawn. Scotts® notes that nitrogen greens up grass and helps it grow, but too much nitrogen can scorch the lawn, making it brown and patchy.

Minimal growth after fertilization is another indicator of overfertilization. Some lawns that have been overfertilized may not

grow at all afterward.

Blackened or limp grass and crusting of fertilizer on the top of the soil are other symptoms of overfertilization.

When fertilizing a lawn, it's important that homeowners recognize that many products are now slow-release fertilizers. Packaging will indicate if your fertilizer fits this mold, and if it does, don't be surprised if results are not immediate. Slow-release fertilizers can help with lawns where the soil does not drain especially well. Give these fertilizers time to do their job and resist the temptation to apply more fertilizer.

If a lawn has indeed been overfertilized, homeowners can remove any fertilizer they see on top on the soil. Once the fertilizer has been removed, water the lawn heavily, which can wash any remaining residue away. Watering daily in the ensuing days can remove any lingering fertilizer and reduce the likelihood that a lawn will develop issues with fungus.

Fertilizing a lawn involves carefully adhering to manufacturer instructions. If a lawn is overfertilized, removing fertilizer on the soil and heavily watering the lawn can help restore it to health and reduce the risk for disease.

## Exterior renovations that can improve home value

Renovating a home to improve its value can be a smart investment. Interior improvements, such as updating kitchens and baths, offer good return on investment, but there are plenty of exterior renovations that can add value to a home and give it that coveted "wow" factor.

### Landscaping

Abundant and well-planned landscaping can instantly boost curb appeal. According to the landscaping company Lawn Starter, 71 percent of prospective home buyers say a home's curb appeal is an important factor in their buying decisions. As buyers use the internet to look for their dream homes, there's no denying a beautifully landscaped, nicely photographed property can entice buyers to click and read more about a house.

### Address insects and minor repairs

Improving home value may come down to fixing areas of the home that can negatively affect its appeal to buyers. Hire an inspector to look at key components of the house and recommend what needs to be fixed. This way it is discovered before home buyers come in and do their own inspections. Termite infestations, deteriorating roofs and hidden water leaks are some things that might need fixing.

### Improve the entryway

The front door is the focal



point of a home's exterior. Invest in a new door or paint it a striking color to add appeal.

Remodeling magazine's "Cost vs. Value Report 2019" indicates changing an entry door to a steel replacement can offer 74.9 percent ROI. Such a door provides visual appeal and added security — things buyers look for. In addition to the front door, make sure that the entryway has a level walkway, steps that are in good repair, accents that are free from rust or tarnish, and decorative plants.

### Outdoor lighting

Outdoor lighting can add to the ambiance of a property and serve as a security feature. Utilize different lights, such as a bright light by the entry, uplighting in trees and shrubs for drama, a light-lined path to the door to improve visibility, and motion-

detection lights to improve the security of the property.

### Repaint (or reside) the exterior

A fresh coat of paint or new (or cleaned) siding can instantly give homes a facelift. Neutral, warm and inviting colors tend to have the widest appeal. Adding manufactured stone veneer to the home can offer a 94.9 percent ROI, says Remodeling. And after doing the front door and siding, investing in a garage door replacement offers the highest ROI of all exterior projects listed on the "Cost vs. Value Report 2019." This improvement returns 97.5 percent when selling.

Knowing which improvements add value to a home can help homeowners tailor their efforts to those that are most financially beneficial.

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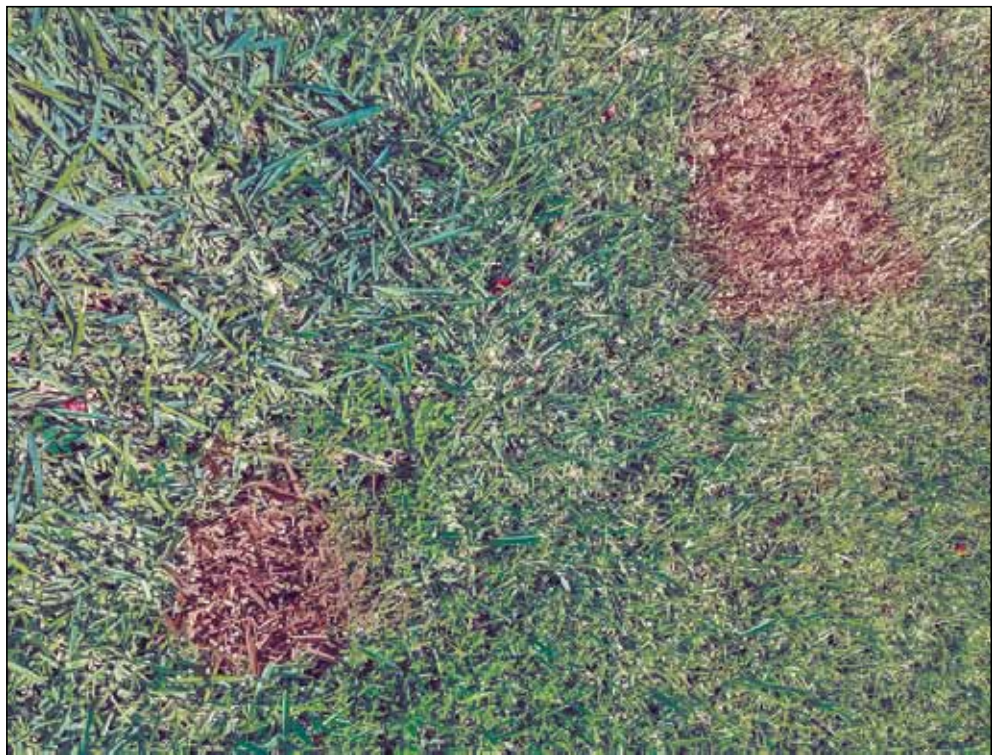






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# Repair bare spots in the lawn

Caring for a lawn to keep it lush and green can require equal measures of patience and hard work. Various invaders can attack grass or contribute to its demise. One problem many homeowners face is bare spots.

Bare spots can occur for various reasons. Heavy foot traffic, grubs or other pests, fungi, pet urine, or too much or too little water can contribute to bare spots. The how-to resource The Spruce says that correcting the source of bare spots can prevent new issues, particularly if grubs or other pests are damaging the grass. Then homeowners can address existing bare areas.

It is unlikely that bare spots will just fill back in on their own. Reseeding spots or using sod to fill in bare areas can help lawns look lush.

- Begin by raking and removing any dead grass and other debris from the lawn. Check to make sure that grubs or insects are not attacking the lawn. If they are, use targeted treatment options for those pests.
- Break up and aerate any soil that is compacted in the bare spot.
- Amend the soil in the bare area with loamy soil or compost to improve on the nutritional makeup and texture so that it is

amenable to grass-growing. If you notice that the entire lawn is looking a little sparse, top-dressing the rest of the lawn at this point also can help improve its vitality.

- Sprinkle seeds in the bare spot (disperse seeds over the rest of the lawn if you want to over-seed and improve the thickness of the lawn). If you prefer sod, cut a portion of the sod to fit the bare area and place on the amended soil.
- The Scotts company says to lightly water newly seeded or sodded areas daily for at least two weeks to keep the top inch of soil consistently moist but not soggy. Gradually water more as the seedlings develop and the grass begins to fill in. Deep water at least once or twice a week after the new grass reaches mowing height.
- The grass should grow slightly longer than the rest of the lawn, and wait until the color of the patched area begins to blend in with the rest of the lawn before mowing. This could take a few weeks, and the area should be avoided until then.

Eventually, and with treatment, bare spots can be remedied and become indistinguishable from other areas of the lawn.

# Did you know?

Many lawns contain a mixture of the roughly one dozen types of different grasses. According to the lawn care experts at Scotts®, knowing which type of grass they have in their yard can help homeowners more effectively manage and care for their lawns. But with so many lawns containing a mixture of grasses, how can homeowners know exactly what's making up that green carpet in their yards? Scotts® notes that lawns typically fall into one of two categories: warm-season grasses and cool-season grasses. Warm-season grasses are those that thrive in regions where the climate tends to be especially warm, such as the southern United States. Cool-season grasses are those that are at their best in climates that experience extreme temperature fluctuations. For example, cool-season grasses are most likely to be found in the northern United States, as much of this area of the country experiences cold winters and warm, and in some places very hot, summers. Homeowners who are uncertain about which type of grass they have can consult a lawn care professional for advice. Homeowners who learn which type of grass is in their yard can use

that information to determine how frequently they should mow and water their lawns and which type of fertilizer is best-suited to their lawns.

# DIY projects that can conserve energy around the house

Home renovation projects can pay numerous dividends. Renovations can have a positive effect on resale value, make homes more livable for residents and, in some ways, make homes more affordable.

Renovation projects that aim to conserve energy can save homeowners substantial amounts of money. Such projects don't often require considerable effort or even sizable financial investments, which can make homeowners skeptical as to just how much they can save after completing the project. But the scale of a project may have little to do with how much homeowners will save. For example, the U.S. Department of Energy notes that a relatively effortless task like turning back a thermostat between 7° and 10° F for eight hours per day can save homeowners as much as \$83 per year. A more labor-intensive task like planting shade trees saves homeowners an average of between \$35 and \$119 per year.

When looking for ways to conserve energy around the house and save money, homeowners need not necessarily commit to expensive projects. The DOE notes that the following are some energy-saving projects and details what homeowners can expect to save after completing them. While each individual project may not result in jaw-dropping savings, homeowners who follow many of these recommendations may end up saving more than \$1,000 per year.

**Project: Install exterior low-e storm windows.**

What is it? Low-e windows reflect infrared heat back into a home. Such windows are coated with an ultra-thin layer of metal that improves the window's insulation ability.

How much can I save?



Homeowners who install low-e windows can save between 12 and 33 percent on their annual heating and cooling costs.

**Project: Seal uncontrolled air leaks.**

What is it? Air leaks let cool air in during winter and warm air in during summer. Caulking, sealing and weather stripping all cracks and large openings can cut back on air leaks that are costing you money. The DOE recommends hiring a contractor to seal any leaks on heating and cooling ducts.

How much can I save? Homeowners who seal uncontrolled air leaks can save between 10 and 20 percent on their annual heating and cooling bills.

**Project: Plant shade trees.**

What is it? If you plant a deciduous tree between six and eight feet tall near your home, it will begin to shade your windows within a year of being planted. Depending on the species of the tree

and the home, the shade tree will begin shading the roof within five to 10 years. The DOE notes that shading is the most cost-effective way to reduce air conditioning costs.

How much can I save? Properly planted shade trees can reduce air conditioning costs by anywhere from 15 to 50 percent.

**Project: Insulate the water heater tank.**

What is it? New water tanks are likely already insulated. But homeowners with older hot water tanks can insulate their tanks with a water heater insulating blanket kit.

How much can I save? Insulating a water heater tank can save homeowners as much as 16 percent on their annual water heating bills.

Even the smallest DIY projects can produce big savings. More information about energy-saving home improvement projects can be found at [www.energy.gov](http://www.energy.gov).



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