

YOUR HOME

TIPS AND TRENDS TO HELP MAXIMIZE HOME BUYING AND SELLING

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Do It Yourself?

When it comes to home improvement projects, many homeowners face a common dilemma: Should I do the work myself or should I hire a contractor? If you have the know-how, tackling a home improvement project yourself can be satisfying, and it is usually less expensive than hiring a professional. Hiring a contractor is often a better option for larger, more complex projects, especially those that involve plumbing, electrical or carpentry work. Crunched for time? A contractor can usually complete the improvements in less time than if you did it yourself.

Several online resources can help homeowners assess potential costs of home improvement projects. For example, ImproveNet's (www.improvenet.com) project estimator determines a project's approximate cost based on the type of work, the room dimensions, and the user's zip code. Home Inspector Locator (www.homeinspectorlocator.com) lists approximate costs for the most common home improvement projects. Both sites provide tips and links for finding and working with contractors.

If you decide to work with a contractor, experts suggest that you collect at least three estimates, interview each contractor thoroughly, and examine their references before selecting one. Also keep a checklist of tasks that need to be done before the project is considered completed. Don't make a final payment or sign off on the project until all work is done to your satisfaction.

FLIP the SWITCH

Rising energy prices are hurting everyone these days. But experts suggest that a few simple, inexpensive changes can lower your energy bills and help the environment.

- Create your own custom lighting with dimmer switches. Dim a room by 50 percent and you'll use 40 percent less electricity and extend the bulb's life by as much as 20 percent.
- Replace old light switches with occupancy sensors, which turn the lights on automatically when someone enters the room and shuts them off when the room is vacated. Occupancy sensors are especially beneficial in garages, laundry rooms or other areas where a light may be left on accidentally.
- Outdoor motion detectors, which activate floodlights when someone approaches, provide additional security at night.
- When you don't want to leave lights on longer than you need to, timers and night lights are convenient, inexpensive alternatives. Timers also are useful for shutting down heat lamps, exhaust fans and pool filters when they are not being used.

But experts agree that the single most important energy-saving change you can make is one your father reminded you to do: turn off the lights when you leave a room.





Some creative homeowners are bringing the amenities of their favorite spa into the comfort of their own homes. But before you decide to convert your master bathroom into the spa getaway of your dreams, consider the amount of space you have, the amenities you want and how many people will be using it. Then work with an expert to create a layout that works best for you.

Large home spas often have one area for grooming and hygiene, and another for exercise and relaxation. To accommodate these amenities, some homebuilders are devoting more space to the master bathroom, paired with a smaller master bedroom.

Common spa amenities include steam showers, soaking tubs, fireplaces and heated floors. Showers often feature multiple heads or body jets that spray water to all areas of the body.

Add a touch of nature by installing sliding glass doors or window walls that open up to a small private outdoor garden. Or use plants, fountains or statues to create the same look and feel as an outdoor garden.

Paint your spa in subtle blues, greens or warmer tones, and select neutral tones for floors and countertops. Skylights or glass blocks filter in natural light, while recessed light fixtures create a softer glow. Dimmer switches control the amount of light – brighter for dressing, softer for bathing.

A favorite painting or sculpture, a built-in music system, heated towels and aromatherapy candles can complete the home-spa experience.



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