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When you think of stress, the last thing you might think of is your lawn.

Summer temperatures can cause a great amount of stress to your lawn. Reducing this stress will promote a healthy lawn and help it grow to its full potential.

Some major stressful situations your lawn might experience come from extreme heat, lack of rain and heavy foot traffic. These factors will make it harder for your grass to grow. Other factors that might become a more serious risk to an already stressed-out lawn include weeds and bugs. Take time to practice the following strategies to ease the stress on your lawn and give yourself a beautiful yard where you can relax after a long day.

MOWING TIPS

The way you mow your grass has a big impact on the overall health of your lawn. Be sure to keep your blades sharp, as dull blades shred grass, making it harder to retain moisture. Also, shredded grass will turn brown, leaving your lawn looking dull if clippings are not cleaned after mowing. Your blade should be kept at a high setting. Keeping your grass taller allows it to grow longer roots, making it easier to reach the rich moisture deeper in the soil.

WHEN TO WATER

During the summer, watering your lawn before 10 a.m. is beneficial. It gives your lawn time to absorb most of the water it needs before evaporation sets in, and it can dry out before nighttime comes. Nighttime watering promotes bacterial and fungus diseases, as they depend on wet areas for reproduction and spreading purposes. Soaking your lawn at night will give these pathogens ample time to overtake your lawn. The United States Environmental Protection Agency reports that Americans waste up to 50% of water used for irrigation due to an improper watering schedule. They encourage testing your lawn by stepping on a patch of grass. If it springs back, it is still holding proper moisture levels.

SEEDING AFTER A STRESSFUL SUMMER

If you noticed your lawn showing signs of stress, you can give it an advantage for next summer by seeding it in the fall. Ask your nursery for a great breed that thrives in heat and drought in your area. Your seeds should be ready to flourish by the time summer comes back around.



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Spring Garden Prep

The work you put in making some basic preparations in the spring can pay off with a garden that performs well all season long.

Spring is the time to sharpen and repair tools, get the shed in order, plant bulbs and start your compost pile. Here are some tips to get you started.

SHED AND TOOLS

You could find some nasty surprises lurking inside your garden shed in spring, especially if it isn't lighted or heated during the winter. Rodents or other animals could have made their home there, or the structure might have suffered a leak or exposure to the elements. Once it's warm enough, venture into the shed to make any necessary repairs.

While you're there, sharpen tools with blades, such as shears, loppers and pruners, with a mill file, and oil those with moving parts. If any tools still have last year's dirt or mud on them, remove it with a garden hose and clean them in warm, soapy water. This will help prevent the spread of disease. Give the wheelbarrow a good cleaning, oil the wheels and tighten any wobbly bearings.

Inventory the shed for supplies you'll need in the coming year. Be sure you have fertilizers and soil amendments on hand for the season. Some supplies such as grass seed might not hold up over time, so dispose of old product and replace it with new.

PLANT AND DIVIDE

Spring is the time not only to plant new bulbs for summer and fall blooms, but to divide any perennials that have gotten overgrown or crowded. Dividing them now will allow them to re-establish themselves in a new location and put down strong roots by the winter. In general, fall-blooming plants are best divided in the spring, but some plants should be divided just after they flower. Be sure to consult with your local extension office for your plants' needs.

This is also the time to put down new mulch. Dyed mulch, even those varieties intended to last for multiple seasons, typically needs to be replaced each spring. Mulching early will help prevent weed growth before they have time to sprout.

Remember that any organic material you remove from your flowerbeds when you clean them out in the spring to prepare for planting, such as leaves, foliage, stems and sticks, can help start your compost pile for the year.





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Inspecting Your HVAC

Make sure your air conditioning unit is in top working condition before testing it with the year's harshest temperatures — and not just because you'll be hot.

Service calls are also much more expensive during the summer months, and you'll experience longer wait times, since older units are subject to breaking down elsewhere in your community. Schedule an inspection of critical components prior to the point where you'll rely on cooled air to live comfortably. Here's what to look for when determining the health of your HVAC system.

CLOGGED FILTERS

Air-conditioning units rely upon air filters to keep debris and dust from damaging internal systems, just like your passenger vehicle. A clogged air filter can slow or completely disrupt airflow, making it harder and harder for the HVAC system to operate. Your home's temperature may rise or, in worst-case scenarios, the unit itself can overheat — potentially leading to very expensive bills to cover parts and repairs.

DAMAGED ELECTRICAL

An experienced HVAC technician will need to evaluate all of your unit's electrical connections, looking for any sign of corrosion or other wear and tear. Shorts in your wiring can damage critical components, potentially causing a unit failure. Issues with wiring can also impact the circuit breaker. Regular maintenance should involve inspections in all of these areas.

BROKEN FAN MOTOR

The fan on your HVAC unit circulates air through the system, pulling out air that hasn't been conditioned and then pushing it back inside after it's been cooled. A technician should make sure the blades haven't been damaged, and that they're still spinning at full speed. If you notice that the fan is moving more slowly than normal, there could be an issue with the capacitor or the motor. You'll want to replace things like that well before the hottest part of the season.

COMPRESSOR ISSUES

The compressor is the heart of your unit, since it moves refrigerant through coils to cool the air before it reaches you. This component can be compromised by a build up of condensation in the coils, or by electrical wiring that has been damaged. Regular maintenance calls should detect signs of compressor issues early enough that you can correct them before this component completely fails — a big money saver.



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Flowers that Can Beat the Heat

Bright blooms are closely associated with the season, but some flowers actually do better than others in the summer sun.

LANTANA AND SALVIA

Scorching heat is no problem for hardy-growing lantana flowers, and they attract butterflies too. Depending on the variety, you'll see bright yellow, pink and purple clusters that cascade beautifully over walls or across a trellis. Salvia are also a butterfly favorite, and their pink, purple and red spikes attract hummingbirds as well. Both lantana and salvia are drought tolerant, and will return every year in warmer climates.

VERBENA AND ZINNIAS

Some of the easiest-to-grow flowers include verbena, which bloom in pretty clusters with lots of colors. They love the sun. Most bloom for a remarkable length of time, lasting from spring until nearly first frost if they're

trimmed a couple of times in mid summer.

Zinnias are also cluster blooms, attractive to butterflies and bees in the garden, and make gorgeous cut-flower arrangements.

MARIGOLDS AND GAILLARDIA

The little gold pompoms associated with marigolds are, of course, very cute. But they also work as a natural pest repellent, warding off hungry wildlife from nearby garden staples. The daisy-like gaillardia, which are yellow and orange, are sometimes referred to as blanket flowers. They bloom early and don't have to be deadheaded in order to prolifically bloom. They'll stick around until the beginning of autumn.

CELOSIA, PORTULACA AND CANNA

Brightly colored celosia can grow very tall, and return perennially in southern zones. Portulaca are a tiny-flowered ground-cover type plant, but they're tough. They love full

sun. But be warned: They seed themselves, so be prepared for portulaca to spread. Canna love hot weather too, but they need consistent watering to produce bright orange, red, pink and yellow blooms.

MANDEVILLA AND PASSIONFLOWER

Mandevillas are fast-growing, lush trailing vines with trumpet-shaped pink, red and white blooms. They'll climb more than 10 feet. Passionflower, another trailing vine, produces big purple blooms. Attach to a sturdy trellis for best results.

PLUMBAGO AND GARDEN PHLOX

Plumbago's sky-blue blooms make a great landing spot for butterflies, while the vines can also climb more than 10 feet. Garden phlox produces round balls of flowers, growing three to five feet tall. There is a mildew-resistant variety that's recommended for more humid areas.

Garage Storage Options

The garage is a great place to store household items when they're not in use. Basic — but sturdy — shelving units can do the job. If you're short on space in your garage, however, consider some creative storage options to maximize your storage space.

SUSPENDED STORAGE

Using the vertical space in your garage helps free up floor space. Anything you don't access on a regular basis can be hoisted up. Look for bicycle storage systems that use rope and a pulley with hooks attached at the end to allow you to safely store your bikes overhead. A similar pulley system can be used to elevate a metal shelf where you can store items in plastic bins overhead. If you have access to a ladder, a fixed overhead storage shelf is also an option.

WALL STORAGE

If you're short on floor space, look for creative options for storing items such as bikes and sports and lawn equipment on the wall. A modular wall-mounted slat storage system allows you to customize your storage for your particular items. Add hooks, wire baskets or shelves to the slats to store items of a variety of shapes and sizes — from a rake to a garden hose to a bicycle.

Even the inside of your garage door can be made into useful storage space. Attach metal brackets to hold light sports equipment such as fishing rods horizontally.



FUNCTION OVER FORM

Of course you could go all out with a brand new customized garage storage system, but you don't have to spend a lot to make your space functional. If you're on a budget, consider hitting the classified ads, yard sales or a resale shop for garage storage options. If you don't mind less-than-perfect aesthetics, look for quality items that might have some cosmetic defects. The key is to focus on being sure the storage units you choose are sturdy enough to hold your items.



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Saving Energy this Summer

Warming temperatures can sometimes also mean much higher utility bills.

Here's how to make the most of summer without breaking the bank.

WATCH THE THERMOSTAT

Every degree of summer-time cooling increases your home's energy usage by 6-8%. Set your thermostat as high as you comfortably can. The recommendation is 78 degrees Fahrenheit or higher.

Turn the thermostat even higher during the day when people are out of the house at work or school, lowering it when everyone returns. Consider purchasing one of today's smart thermostats, since they can be programmed to make these temperature transitions for you.

MANAGE APPLIANCE USE

Heat-producing appliances can turn a hot summer afternoon into a scorcher. Limit your use of the clothes dryer as much as possible, drying only in the morning when it's cooler — and at full capacity, so there are fewer loads. Consider air drying. If possible, cook outside to avoid using the oven.

Those without grills should increase usage of microwaves and stovetops, since they don't leak heat like an oven does.

CLOSE DRAPES AND BLINDS

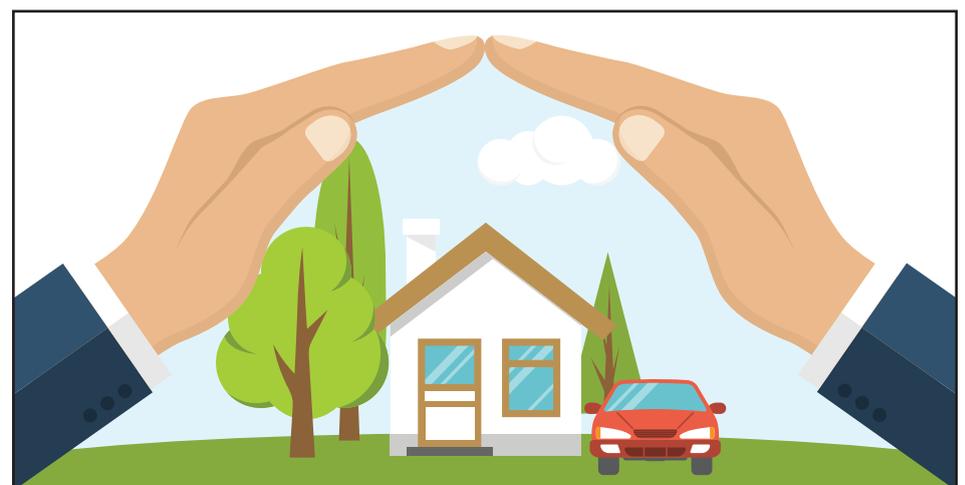
Windows on western- and southern-facing walls should be covered to halt the sun's greenhouse effect. You don't have to close the drapes or blinds in northern-facing windows, since they let in little glare and smaller amounts of heat.

TURN ON A FAN

Maintaining cool temps on the inside can sometimes come down to moving the air around. An efficient ceiling fan allows you to raise your thermostat an average of some four degrees without impacting comfortability, according to the U.S. Department of Energy. Many fans feature a change-of-direction switch; remember to run yours in a counter-clockwise direction during the summer months, so air is blowing straight down. Look for ceiling fans with the Energy Star logo; they're efficient enough to be run at high settings without impacting your electric bill very much.

CHECK YOUR INSULATION

We lose lots of air-conditioned comfort through leaky insulation around windows and doors, and insufficient insulation in the attic. Seal any area where you feel heat entering the home, either with caulk, rubber sealers or weather stripping. Consult a local repairman or contractor about attic insulation, or if new windows or doors are required.



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Keeping Creatures Away

The best-designed garden won't last long if you don't have a protection plan for area wildlife. Here's how to make sure your new plantings don't turn into the neighborhood buffet.

RESEARCH YOUR AREA

The best defense against these hungry creatures requires a comprehensive understanding of which ones live in your specific location



— and what they're most likely to munch on. If you live toward the edge of town, for instance, you might be regularly visited by chomping deer. There are a number of plants that they simply won't eat — and that's typical of many forms of wildlife. Marigolds, for instance, keep rabbits away, and they make great container plants. Mint and lavender work with some pests. Local ag center representatives can help

you learn more. If all else fails, they can also recommend which wildlife experts to bring in to solve stubborn issues.

EMPLOYING REPELLENTS

Poison baits and traps can be harmful to curious children and pets. Instead, consider the myriad of natural sprays, granular agents and repellents that rely on lights or sounds. Scent repellents can be directly applied to your tender greenery, while granular versions are spread on flowerbeds and garden entryways to keep curious animals away. Some repellents, including light- and sound-based versions, can be staked throughout the garden in covered rainproof stands to create a safe perimeter. Keep in mind, however, that some sound repellents can be an annoyance to neighbors, especially smaller children. Animals sometimes become conditioned, too, and their effectiveness diminishes.

FENCING IT OFF

In some cases, building a fence may be required — especially with larger grazing animals. Some are created in an easy-to-disassemble manner that makes them more seasonally convenient. Barriers meant to defend against deer, however, need to be at least 8-10 feet tall, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. They'll need more permanent structure in order to ward off mature deer.

Burrowing animals like moles, gophers or voles are interested in different things. Gophers like to dine on bulbs and roots. Some have had success keeping gophers away by placing wire mesh under the plants. Voles eat grasses and gnaw on stems and shrubs near their holes. Moles only eat earthworms, grubs and other insects — but they leave unsightly volcano-shaped mounds all over your garden.



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Exterior Inspection

After enduring the extreme conditions of winter, your home's exterior could be battered and bruised. Spring is the time to look for signs of damage and make repairs.

Some repairs you can make yourself, while others could require professional services. Start by getting outside and walking around your house to perform a visual inspection.

ROOF

With a pair of binoculars or a camera with a telephoto lens, check for missing shingles, damaged or missing metal pieces or excessive wear. Consult a roofer for any needed repairs.

MASONRY AND FOUNDATION

Check the foundation and masonry for deterioration, cracking and leaks, recommends E&E General Contracting. Check chimney masonry for signs of vegetation growth, water infiltration, cracked or missing bricks or stones, and have a mason make any needed repairs.

You'll likely need a specialist to make any necessary repairs to the foundation, as this kind of work is difficult and critical to your home's structural integrity.

SIDING AND EXTERIOR STRUCTURES

Check for holes or warping in siding. If you have a wood exterior, look for signs of termite or carpenter ant damage, such as holes, or actual insect activity. This is also the time to power wash siding, provided it's in good shape. If a gazebo, deck or other wood structure is looking worse for wear, spring is a good time to stain or seal.

WINDOWS AND DOORS

Look for holes and tears in screen doors and windows. If they need repairs (even small holes should be fixed), pick up a repair kit at your local home improvement store. Check the seals on windows and doors to be sure they are keeping out water and holding air.

LANDSCAPING

Check concrete, asphalt or stone paths for damage. Check your water sprinkler system for broken, damaged or clogged sprinkler heads. If you have landscapers perform seasonal maintenance on your sprinkler system, they will check for damage to the system and make any necessary repairs.

AIR CONDITIONING

Your AC system can suffer damage from the winter elements. You'll want to be sure it's in working order before the warmer summer months arrive, so you aren't stuck without cooling. Schedule maintenance by an HVAC specialist well in advance, as these services book up early.



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