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Inexpensive home maintenance projects to do this weekend

BPT - Home maintenance. The very words might evoke thoughts of an entire weekend spent laboring at home instead of relaxing in it, but that doesn't always have to be the case.

"Not every home maintenance project has to be a large undertaking or one that takes up all of your free time," said Christopher O'Rourke, Mercury Insurance vice president of property claims. "There are small weekend projects that can save you time, worry and money in the long run."

Here are six home maintenance projects you can do this weekend that will save you the headache of costly repairs later on.

Clean refrigerator coils

To keep your refrigerator properly working, it's best to clean the coolant coils every six months. Coolant coils, which can be located on the back or bottom of the refrigerator, keep warm air out. When the coils are covered with dust, dirt or hair they aren't able to release heat efficiently. In turn, the coils work harder and longer, using more energy and shortening the life of the appliance. This might end up costing you more in the form of a higher energy bill or purchase of a new refrigerator. Clean your refrigerator coils with a vacuum and coil cleaning brush. Coil cleaning brushes can be found at appliance stores or online for \$10 or less.

Check caulking

Caulking is customary around wet areas like bathtubs and sinks to keep water



Courtesy BPT

Programmable thermostats are both a money and energy saver. They allow you to set a comfortable temperature when you're home and can be scheduled to lower the temperature while you're away, helping you save money by cutting down energy usage.

from seeping into the wall, but it is also used around windows and doors to prevent air from escaping. Check for significant air temperature differences near windows and walls and use a digital thermometer to verify air leaks. Make sure to also check areas where vents and plumbing fixtures meet the outside wall.

Old caulking can dry out and crack, making it vulnerable to air and water leaks. If you notice dry or cracked caulking, remove as much of it as possible and reseal. Caulking gun sets that include the sealant, scraping and smoothing tool can begin at \$35 and be found online or at your local hardware store.

Examine the roof

The first step of roof inspection is to check the inside of your home. Look for damp spots or water stains on the

ceiling or for cracked plaster along the wall. These can be signs of water damage.

At ground level do a visual examination of your roof's exterior for any cracked or missing shingles. Notice if you have to trim back tree branches that may make contact as they can damage your roof's exterior. If you suspect any type of damage, contact an experienced roofer who can perform a thorough inspection.

Clean the gutters

Gutters are necessary to direct water away from your home's foundation. Their exposure to the elements means that they need to be cleaned and inspected regularly. While cleaning out dirt and leaves, make sure the gutters are securely attached to your house. The weight of heavy snowfall, rain and dirt can cause gutters to loosen and pull away from

the home.

"Gutters that are free of dirt and debris will keep rain from running down the sides of your home and coming in through the foundation," said O'Rourke. "Routine maintenance means lower homeowner costs by addressing small issues before they become problematic."

Clean chimney

Chimneys should be cleaned once a year, especially before the first fire of the season. Check the inside of the chimney to make sure it is clear of any debris or small animals nesting as these types of blockages could cause a fire. Thoroughly clear away ash or soot around the chimney before the cold weather starts.

Install a programmable thermostat

Programmable thermostats are both a money and energy saver. They allow you to set a comfortable temperature when you're home and can be scheduled to lower the temperature while you're away, helping you save money by cutting down energy usage.

"Programmable thermostats allow homeowners to set the heating and cooling of their home to their schedule," said O'Rourke. "It's one less thing for homeowners to worry about and they are fairly easy to install."

Your home is not only your sanctuary, it's your commitment. Assessing your homeowners' coverage and understanding your policy is a simple household task you can accomplish this weekend and one that can save you money.

3 weekend DIY project ideas to breathe new life into your home

BPT - Virtual birthday parties. Online family game nights. Digital dinners with friends. You've done your part to stay connected yet socially distanced, however, as fall arrives, you're preparing to host friends and family in your home again.

"The problem is after working, studying and playing at home, many people's houses are looking a bit drab," says Jennifer Meska, director of merchandising and design at LL Flooring. "If you want to refresh spaces for future entertaining, start with the floor and work your way up to add fashion and function to



Courtesy BPT

Consider updating flooring with modern options that add style, but are also durable enough to handle guests and everyday demands.

your home."

Meska shares some top DIY projects that can be completed in as little as a weekend so you're ready to welcome back guests:

1) Update flooring

When you think about visual real estate in a home, the flooring is the foundation of the aesthetic. Consider updating flooring with modern options that add style, but are also durable enough to handle guests and everyday demands.

A good option is Rigid Vinyl Plank (RVP) that provides

SEE DIY PROJECTS ON PAGE A6

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5 ways to boost your home's curb appeal

BPT - It's no secret that the U.S. housing market is booming right now. According to realtor.com, "Strong demand and insufficient supply pushed home prices up at a record-breaking 16.6% pace. The combination of historically low mortgage rates, businesses reopening and the lifting of pandemic restrictions fueled a buying frenzy with multiple bids," creating a seller's market, while making the path to home ownership difficult for some buyers.

Whether you're purchasing a fixer-upper as an attainable option to home ownership or selling your home and want to create a positive first impression, licensed landscape contractor, author, TV personality and STIHL spokesperson Sara Bendrick suggests five ways to boost your home's curb appeal.

1) Create a welcoming front walk

The entrance of your home should be your first point of focus. A great way to work with what you already have is to add color to your concrete walkway and steps. Concrete can wear over time and become somewhat of an eyesore and dull in nature. Staining is an easy and perfect way to soften up the look of concrete in any landscape and many colors of stain are available to complement your outdoor spaces. Always remember to pressure wash your concrete



Courtesy BPT

Bushes, hedges and shrubs possess a natural beauty that can boost the curb appeal of your home, while providing an attractive complement to lawns, trees, gardens and hardscapes. Well-trimmed plants also prevent your outdoor spaces from looking overgrown and open up walkways and sightlines.

before staining it to remove dirt. This is important as you need a clean surface so that the stain can absorb easily and evenly. A clean surface will also help the stain soak entirely through.

2) Trim hedges and shrubs for definition

Bushes, hedges and shrubs possess a natural beauty that can boost the curb appeal of your home, while providing an attractive complement to lawns, trees, gardens and hardscapes. Well-trimmed plants also prevent your out-

door spaces from looking overgrown and open up walkways and sightlines. Consider pruning low-hanging branches that obscure the view of your home from the road and reduce the aesthetic impact of your landscaping features.

3) Don't forget to mulch

After trimming your hedges and shrubs for definition and planting flowers, add two to four inches of mulch to your beds. Mulch keeps weeds down and helps dissipate heat from the sun to protect the soil from drying out, and it

also provides a refined look to your landscape. As an alternative to mulch, you can purchase wood chips made of bark.

4) Make a statement in your yard with flowers and blooms

Pick flowers with colors that complement the house colors, which will bring softness to the front yard. Be sure to choose plants that are climate appropriate and thrive in your area; local nurseries are great resources for this. Consider using an auger instead of a shovel to help get through the planting process quickly. Also, be sure to spread your new plants out so that they have enough room to grow and thrive.

5) Add a finishing touch

To draw the eye toward the entryway of your home, hang a wreath on the front door, place a potted plant near the steps and add a water feature such as a self-circulating fountain. Water features such as ponds and fountains can add an architectural element to soften your landscape design and may also attract natural wildlife to your yard.

Whether you're a seller trying to create an unforgettable memory for a prospective buyer, or a new homeowner trying to make your home more inviting, these landscaping improvements are easy ways to boost your home's curb appeal.

Pet owner? How to be prepared for fire or carbon monoxide danger

(BPT) - Pets nationwide are considered beloved members of the family. Pet ownership throughout the U.S. has skyrocketed, with approximately 12.6 million Americans opening their home to a new pet since March 2020, according to a study by the American Pet Products Association.

Whether you're a first-time pet owner or a pet pro, it's important to consider your furry family members when preparing for the unexpected. First Alert offers the following tips to help families be prepared in case of a fire or carbon monoxide (CO) incident.

1) **Prevent a fire.** While candles add ambiance, it's important to never burn them unattended. Wagging tails and pawing kitties can haphazardly knock over candles, which can potentially cause a fire. Additionally, avoid electrical fires by securing loose wires and running long cords behind couches or other out-of-reach locations to prevent them from being chewed.

2) **Protect against the silent killer.** Due to their smaller size, your pet may be affected by CO poisoning before you. Signs of CO poisoning can include weakness, sudden vomiting, difficulty breathing, seizures and even loss of consciousness. The only way to detect CO poisoning is by equipping your home with working CO alarms. For premium protection against fire and CO, install combination alarms with 2-in-1 protection, such as the First Alert 10-Year Battery Smoke & Carbon Monoxide Alarm, which eliminates battery replacements for a decade. Once installed, maintenance is key. Remember to test your alarms regularly and replace smoke alarms every 10 years and CO alarms every five to 10 years, depending



Courtesy BPT

Due to their smaller size, your pet may be affected by CO poisoning before you. Signs of CO poisoning can include weakness, sudden vomiting, difficulty breathing, seizures and even loss of consciousness.

on the model.

3) Improve their safety

when home alone. To help ensure your pet is safe even

while you're not home, use a pet gate to keep your animals in the main living area for easy rescue in case of an emergency. Place pet alert stickers on windows near each entrance to inform firefighters of the presence of pets in your house.

4) **Have an emergency escape plan.** When planning your emergency escape route, don't forget to include your pets. Know which family members will be responsible for each pet and note their hiding spots for a faster evacuation. Have leashes and collars stored near the main entrance of your home and, if possible, near other potential exits during an emergency, so you can grab them on your way out the door. Practice your escape plan at least twice a year, including crating your pets. And, remind your family to never delay escape or go back inside to rescue your pet. If a pet is missing, inform the fire department dispatcher when you call and the responders when they arrive. Learn more home safety tips at www.firstalert.com.

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Your electric vehicle charging questions, answered

BPT - Have you been wondering if an electric vehicle is right for you, especially as more models are rolling out from automakers? Living the electric vehicle lifestyle is fun and exciting, good for the environment, and even your wallet - but there are some key things to know, like understanding how and where to charge. While charging at home is always an option, the prevalence of electric vehicle charging options is widespread and growing, so there are a few things to know about maximizing an electric car's battery power when charging while out and about.

Here are answers to some commonly asked questions about electric vehicle charging:

What's the easiest way to locate a public charger?

There are various resources to help drivers identify where they can easily stop for a charge. For example, the U.S. Department of Energy Alterna-

tive Fuels Data Center offers a station locator map, and various apps such as Open Charge Map and ChargeHub can help locate chargers on the road. Additionally, many automakers' new electric vehicles include in-vehicle tech features - like connected infotainment systems - to make planning routes based on charging stations even more simple for your journey.

Individual charging companies also offer their apps for locating stations. For example, Electrify America - the largest open ultra-fast-charging network in the U.S. - recently redesigned its mobile app so drivers can more easily navigate station information. Users can download the app via the App Store and Google Play - and now, drivers can locate a charger, start and stop a charging session, and view charging plan details via Apple CarPlay and Android Auto.

What does fast-charging mean?

"These floors deliver quality, beauty, waterproof functionality and are easy to install," says Meska. "What's great about these floors is they work well in any room."

2) Rethink furniture

Once the floor is updated, think about how you use your furniture and how it might best serve you when entertaining. Consider rearranging furniture to breathe fresh life into a space and encourage guests to min-

Not all electric vehicle charging is the same, and charging time depends on how much electricity your EV's battery can handle and how much energy the charger can dispense. Charger power is measured in kilowatts and charging time is measured in kilowatt-hours, a unit of which is the amount of energy a charger can deliver in one hour.

For example, some public chargers only dispense 6kW - such as Level 2 chargers, an option most commonly found in settings like work offices, apartment complexes and hotels. But other chargers, like direct current (DC) fast-charging, uses technology that can dispense 150kW or even 350kW to capable vehicles - allowing for quicker charge times. DC fast-charging is especially great for drivers taking road trips or who don't have access to overnight charging, who will need chargers that can deliver the maximum amount of energy in

gle comfortably. Prioritize grouping furniture to facilitate conversation and interaction while keeping common traffic areas open for ease of movement.

In addition to rearranging furniture, now is the time to address functionality of pieces and swap in multiuse options when appropriate. For example, an ottoman is great for kicking up your feet or as additional seating for guests, especially young children. Select an ottoman

the shortest amount of time.

Companies like Electrify America offer the fastest charging rates available - with speeds up to 350 kilowatts (kW) - that can charge a capable vehicle in as little as 20 minutes. Visit ElectrifyAmerica.com or check out their social media pages to learn more about fast charging and find nearby locations.

How do you know which charging connector to use?

You can check your vehicle's specific settings, but most electric vehicles use a connector called the Combined Charging System (CCS). CCS got its "combined" name by incorporating two types of plugs within the same larger plug: the connector for DC fast-charging, and the connector for Level 2 charging. Level 2 is a form of electric vehicle charging with slower charging speeds than DC fast.

CCS is now the most common connector used by electric vehicle manufacturers.

designed with a top that opens, providing storage space for blankets, toys or other clutter. You can even add a serving tray to the top when closed and you have a coffee table or small buffet space for snacks.

3) Create a statement wall

Once you decide on an arrangement of furniture, try transforming a focal wall to give the space an elevated interior design. One easy way to do this is to paint one

How can hot or cold weather affect charging?

While you can charge during very cold or hot weather, you will probably need to allow more charging time. Electric vehicle batteries are designed to deliver maximum charging power at temperatures between 60-80 degrees Fahrenheit. Temperatures below 40 degrees or above 115 degrees Fahrenheit dramatically reduce the battery's charging power. The chemical process inside the battery slows down outside of these temperatures - often to less than half of its peak charging power.

Should an electric vehicle battery be charged to a 100% state of charge (SOC)?

Different electric vehicles have different battery sizes, affecting both the charging speed and how much total energy the battery can accept. Check the vehicle manual for the maximum charging power

provided by your electric vehicle.

On a public fast charger, the speed at which energy enters the car battery slows after the battery reaches an 80% SOC. This may help prevent wearing out the battery too quickly, therefore extending the battery life. The battery can still charge to a 100% SOC, although getting from an 80 to 100% SOC may take a little longer. So while it's counterintuitive, it's best to minimize the time spent charging to 100% battery SOC to reduce wear and tear.

While embracing electric vehicle technology has many benefits and is quickly becoming more mainstream, adopting this lifestyle requires some basic education. By understanding how charging works, new electric vehicle drivers can make the transition to electric much smoother - and perhaps convince others to make the switch as well.

conversation starter when guests arrive. In addition to photographs, you can add other framed items such as typography, children's artwork, travel keepsakes, mirrors and more.

"Now is the ideal time to prepare for the revival of entertaining at home," says Meska. "Start with the floor, think beyond the conventional and make updates that you'll enjoy whether you're hosting guests or spending time at home with family."

DIY PROJECTS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE A4

the look of hardwood but is waterproof and scratch-resistant. Lake Geneva Oak CoreLuxe RVP is a good option, with its innovative rigid core that clicks together with ease for a simple DIY project. CoreLuxe stands up to heavy traffic, busy families and plentiful entertaining, making it ideal for bathrooms, kitchens and living rooms.



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