



Fall home improvement 2014

- Winter soil erosion
- Emergency preparedness
- Family home projects
- Indoor air quality
- Apple and pumpkin picking tips



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Prevent winter soil erosion

Acres upon acres of landscape may be under siege this winter. Soil erosion is a significant problem when the temperatures dip, as snowstorms and wind can blow unprotected soil away. What's more, when warmer weather returns, even more soil may erode from spring melt and runoff.

Unprotected soil that is exposed to wet and windy weather can quickly deteriorate. Especially harsh winter weather can cause soil to break down, subjecting the soil to erosive forces. Soil loss is wasteful and can compromise landscapes, leaving lawns and gardens susceptible to further damage.

Rather than reacting to the problem of soil erosion, homeowners can take proactive steps to protect soil before winter weather has a chance to wreak havoc. Composting can protect and improve soil conditions throughout the winter season.

Some people see gardening as a spring and summer activity. However, by making gardening a year-round effort - and choosing plants for all seasons - homeowners can protect landscapes and provide hardy habitats for wildlife.

Speak with a landscaping professional about which plants are hardy enough

to survive through the fall and winter seasons. Certain ornamental bushes and shrubs can thrive in colder temperatures. Root vegetables, such as carrots and potatoes, are viable in the winter months. Many people plant flower bulbs in early winter to protect the soil and to enjoy vibrant color upon the arrival of spring.

If your goal is to plant a placeholder for spring crops or plants, cover plants, such as rye, are an ideal winter protection crop. Rye will remain rooted into spring and then can be mulched into a soil amendment.

Another solution is to use leaves and other compost matter to cover naked soil until planting resumes. The compost will be heavy enough to stay in place and will add healthy soil nutrients, including potassium, phosphorous and nitrogen, as it decomposes. Place a breathable soil fabric on the compost to help slow decomposition. Soil fabric also can be used elsewhere to protect soil and plants where thick layers of compost may not be practical.

Don't overlook the importance of preventing soil erosion during the winter. Protect resources and guarantee a landscape that is ready to thrive when spring planting season returns.

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Apple and pumpkin-picking tips

Cool breezes and crisp air seem tailor-made for afternoons spent enjoying the great outdoors. The pleasant autumn weather and awe-inspiring foliage may be the reason so many festivals and outdoor events are scheduled this time of year.

Apple and pumpkin picking are popular as neighborhood orchards open their doors to the public, allowing us to scour their fields and trees for the perfect finds. Heed these picking tips to make the experience even more of a success.

Apples

Ripe apples will be crisp and firm. Keep in mind that apples ripen from the outside of the tree inward. Those are the ones usually picked first, anyway.

Try to get to an orchard earlier in the season. If you wait too long, the trees may be picked of most of the best fruit. Depending on where you live, apple-picking season may begin in mid-September and continue into mid-October.

Apples can bruise, so don't toss them into baskets when picking. Also, wait to wash apples until right before eating to prevent moisture-related spoilage. Apples keep best in a cool location.

Pumpkins

When visiting a pumpkin patch, dress accordingly. That means wearing shoes that you don't mind getting dirty, as the patch may be muddy. Layer clothing in case it is a chilly day. Breezes are more pronounced in open fields.

Pumpkins are "long-keepers," which means if they are uncut or not damaged, they can last for several weeks.



This means you can pick pumpkins at the same time as apples. When selecting a pumpkin, look for one that is completely orange. After picking, a green or yellow pumpkin may never ripen to orange.

Bring along a small wagon and knife so that you can cut the vine, if necessary. Pumpkins are heavy, and a wagon will come in handy, especially with youngsters in tow.

Ripe pumpkins should not dent easily. Examine your pumpkin for holes or insects, which could indicate internal rot that greatly reduces the shelf life of the pumpkin. Remember, carving the pumpkin reduces its life expectancy, so be sure to reserve that task until close to Halloween.

If you want a pumpkin for a baked treat or other dish, you will need a small, sweet cooking pumpkin known as a "sugar pumpkin." The meat of this pumpkin is less stringy and smoother than decorative pumpkin varieties.

Home apps and tips

Smartphones can make the home improvement process that much easier. Various smartphone apps now exist, and many were designed with the intention of making it easier to plan and execute home improvement projects. Some apps allow smartphone users to more easily match the colors of their furnishings with certain accents and accessories, saving homeowners the time spent wondering if certain items will match or clash with their existing furnishings. Homeowners can even make use of apps that make it easier for them to see how new furniture will fit in their existing spaces. Of course, homeowners also can take photos of their furnishings on their smartphones as well, and then compare those photos to shades of paint or carpet to save themselves from making a second trip to the store.

Many home improvement projects involve hanging decorative items, such as photo frames or shelving. Homeowners frequently wrestle with nails, screws and hanging hardware, perhaps creating more holes in their walls than is necessary to get items level and in the right spots. Instead of playing a guessing game of figuring out where the hanging holes or hooks are located on the back of items, use your office equipment to make life easier. Make a copy of the back of the item you're trying to hang with a printer/scanner or a copy machine, making sure to copy the item to full scale. Print the copy at full size and use it to drill the hanging holes. If you don't have access to a copy machine or scanner, use a piece of tape to measure the distance between the hanging holes on the back of the frame. Stick the tape to the wall and then put your nails or screws at the ends of the tape.

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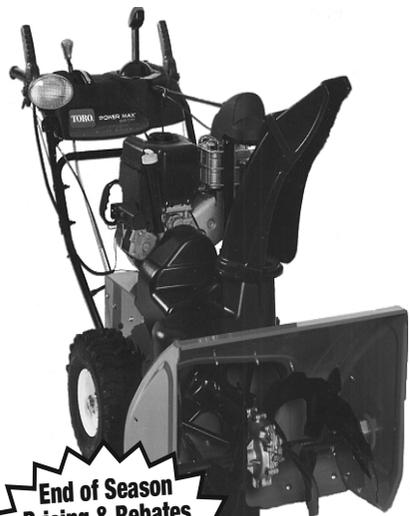
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Home projects can be a family affair

With the right instruction, children of all ages can get involved with fix-up projects and learn new skills in the process.

- Make kids a part of the design and planning process, welcoming the input of younger members of the family, especially if renovations will impact spaces they use directly. Draft a list of supplies and ask what supplies they think will have to go into completing the project.

- Take children along to the home improvement store and let youngsters help you choose materials for the project. This way they can see how the raw materials will turn into the finished renovation.

- Identify and explain the dangerous pieces of equipment and instruct children that they should not touch or turn on tools without an adult nearby. Make sure everyone is wearing safety equipment, including eye protection, gloves and ear protection, while handling the tools.

- Older kids can hammer some nails, mix paint or even cut wood with supervision. Assign tasks based on the child's age. A preteen may be able to saw wood, while a kindergartener can hand over nails and tools. Illustrate the correct way to get things done and then have children mirror your actions.

- Attempt an easy project first. Painting

a room, building a planter box, or another less complicated project can help parents gauge their kids' abilities.

Caution: Lead paint!

Homeowners about to embark on home improvement projects should prioritize dust removal to avoid the potentially negative side effects of exposure to lead dust. When undergoing a renovation, homes built before 1978, the year the use of lead paint was banned, are likely to produce lead dust, which occurs when lead paint is sanded or chipped. That dust can be especially harmful to children, pregnant women and pets. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, lead dust that is as small as a grain of sand is enough to poison children, who may suffer brain damage, hearing loss, nervous system and kidney damage, and decreased muscle and bone growth after exposure to lead dust. When pregnant women are exposed to lead dust, that exposure may affect the baby's cognitive development while increasing the mother's blood pressure. Household pets exposed to lead dust may suffer from a series of side effects, including vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pain and possibly death. When making renovations to their homes, homeowners can open windows and wear protective gear such as masks and safety goggles to avoid direct exposure to lead dust.

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Are you prepared?

To be prepared in any situation, planning ahead is critical. Engine-driven portable generators are intended for multiple uses and designed for portability. When utility power is unavailable due to extreme weather, portable generators become a useful source of temporary or remote electric power.



While generators can power multiple appliances at one time, they may not be able to power your entire home. Know what items you'll want to keep running during power outages. Refer to the operator's manual in order to calculate the wattage needed to assess what size of generator will work for your needs. The safest way to restore power to your home is by using a professionally-installed transfer switch available at many home improve-

ment stores. If an extension cord must be used temporarily, be sure that it is heavy duty and protected from damage where entering a home. Damaged cords could result in a fire or electrical shock hazard. Leaving openings for cords to pass through also increases the risk of carbon monoxide entering the home. Plan ahead and have a transfer switch installed before the next power outage.

Here are additional steps to consider in order to be prepared in an emergency:

- Have fuel available. Portable generators may require gasoline, diesel fuel or liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), with refueling necessary possibly several times per day.

- Regularly check your portable generator to ensure that it operates properly.

- Only operate a portable generator outside, far away from windows, doors and vents to reduce the risk of carbon monoxide gas being drawn inside.

- Install battery-operated carbon monoxide alarms or plug-in alarms with battery backup according to the manufacturer's instructions. Smoke alarms cannot detect carbon monoxide gas.

The more you are prepared for emergency situations, the better off you and your family will be when the power goes out.

Use houseplants to improve indoor air quality

Once temperatures begin to dip and windows start to close, indoor air quality can suffer. Musty air is not only uncomfortable, it's also unhealthy. Indoor plants can counter such stale air, in some cases filtering out VOCs to make the air inside a home more breathable and healthy. The following are a handful of houseplants that can improve indoor air quality.

- Aloe: Many of us know aloe for its restorative properties with regard to treating burns and cuts, but aloe also improves indoor air quality by helping to clear a home of the byproducts, including formaldehyde, of chemical-based household cleaners. Aloe loves the sun, be sure to place the plant in a window that gets lots of sun exposure throughout the day.

- Gerber daisy: Like aloe, a gerber daisy needs ample sunlight. These colorful, low-maintenance flowers can remove trichloroethylene, a chemical that clothes may be exposed to during dry cleaning.

- Golden pothos: The golden pothos should not dry out, which can happen if they are directly exposed to sunlight. A golden pothos vine will grow quickly, so a

hanging basket is a great way to keep one inside a home, where the plant can help fight formaldehyde.

- Ficus benjamina: Also known as a weeping fig, can filter pollutants such as benzene, formaldehyde and trichloroeth-



ylene from a home. You will need to figure out the right watering and light conditions for the plant. Such conditions can be discussed with a gardening professional.

- Warneck dracaena: The warneck dracaena, or dracaena deremensis, fights pollutants created by varnishes and oils. The warneck dracaena is a sturdy houseplant that is difficult to kill and thrives in temperatures that are between 70 F and 80 F.

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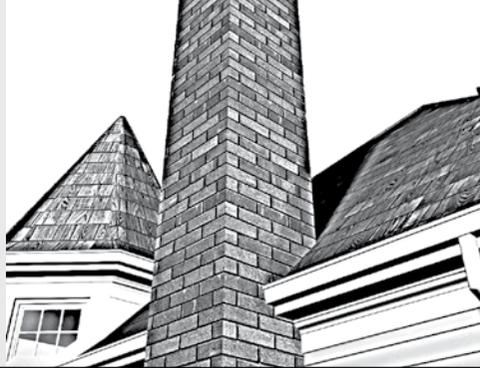
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