

7 landscaping tips

These ideas offer some of the best returns for your renovation dollar. Plus, the payoff increases over time.

By Josh Garskof, Money Magazine contributing writer
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NEW YORK (Money Magazine) -- If prospective buyers looked at your house today, what would they see outside? A giant evergreen that looks as if it might swallow the station wagon, perhaps, scraggly old foundation plants or maybe a kitchen-table view of the neighbors' kids' trampoline? If so, you have a truly inexpensive opportunity to boost your home's curb appeal.

By spending \$500 to \$3,000 on plants and materials and a few hours of time, you can achieve a well-landscaped look without shelling out for professional help.

Besides the personal enjoyment you'll get from a prettier yard, landscaping adds more value than almost any other home renovation.

A recent Michigan State University study found that depending on where the house is located, high-quality landscaping adds 5 percent to 11 percent to its price.

If you have no immediate plans to move, all the better: Landscaping is the one home improvement that actually appreciates over time.

So how do you decide which projects to tackle? That depends on how long you think you'll be around to enjoy the results.

If you're selling in a year or less

Edge the beds Cutting fresh edges where grass meets mulch makes the lawn look well kept. A move as simple as curving the edge of your flower beds could increase the value of your home by 1 percent, says horticulture professor Bridget Behe, the lead researcher on the MSU study.

Also, if your foundation plants are overgrown, widening the beds by two feet will make the shrubs seem smaller.

Nourish the grass For truly lush turf, ideally you should start regular fertilizer treatments a year before listing the house.

But you can green up the lawn with just a single application. Spend \$45 on a broadcast spreader, which quickly distributes fertilizer over a lawn, enabling you to nourish a quarter-acre lot in about 10 minutes.

For a yard that size, expect each monthly application to cost about \$20 (for straight fertilizer) to \$30 (with weed killer). Scatter color throughout For about \$1 a plant, you can blanket your yard with petunias, impatiens and other small annuals that will flower throughout the current growing season. Also invest a few hundred dollars in some larger perennials and in shrubs that stand at least four feet high. "A few good-size plants have more sex appeal than 20 little ones," says Chicago landscape architect Douglas Hoerr.

If you're improving for the long-term



Cut back the jungle Many everyday yard plants, such as azaleas, forsythia, hollies and rhododendrons, will fill out with new growth after a season or so even if you hack them down to stumps, says Christopher Valenti, a landscape contractor in Lewes, Del.

Be careful, though, of yews and junipers, which won't grow new leaves on old wood and may need to be removed altogether if they're severely overgrown.

Add drama with foliage A distinctive yard will make your home more appealing to buyers, says Los Angeles realtor Dana Frank. So replace plants that don't flower, or provide interesting foliage with eye-catching alternatives, like a patch of blackeyed Susans, a flowering crabapple or a cutleaf Japanese maple.

If you're planning to stay put, you don't need to spend hundreds of dollars for big plants. You'll save 50 percent or more by buying small ones and waiting a few seasons to get the full visual impact (when planting, make sure to space them based on the mature size listed on the label, not how they look now). Consider new angles Most yards have almost all the plants along the foundation and the property lines. But if you place yours throughout different parts of the property, you'll create a depth of field that makes your home look farther away from the road, says architect Hoerr.

Try putting some near the house's corners to accentuate its shape, others near the street to define the yard, and some in between, where they can block unfortunate views and be admired from indoors. Many nurseries offer free design help to buyers.

Cover your rear It's nice to wave hello to your neighbors out front, but the backyard should be a private space. If yours feels overexposed, fencing can offer a quick fix.

For each eight-foot section, you'll pay about \$100 (for a plain cedar stockade fence) to \$300 (for an elaborate Victorian model), plus another \$50 to \$150 a section for installation. You can also achieve the same effect at a much lower cost by planting small evergreen shrubs, although you'll have to wait a few seasons for full coverage.

Or, rather than pruning those hulking foundation plants, hire a landscaper to transplant them along the property line. As long as they're healthy and evergreen, it's a great way to maximize the value of the plants you already own.

Take your home outside: An open-air "room" adds inexpensive living space that may come in handy at resale. And it needn't have a price tag as big as the great outdoors.



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Do I Need A Broker to Sell My House?

Many people have heard that you can save money by selling your house by yourself, without using a broker. This is because typically brokers earn about 6% of the selling price and sellers feel that if they do it on their own that money could be saved.

For a select few of us - who really know the ins and outs of real estate - this may be true. However, for the majority of us, hiring a broker is well worth the money you will pay for it. (Furthermore, because the buyer knows you are saving money by not hiring a broker, he or she will incorporate that into their bid as well, meaning you don't end up with the money anyhow!)

A broker has many responsibilities that you may not think about before choosing to do it on your own. A broker will:

- Establish a fair asking price for your home. Brokers are privy to a vast amount of information about sales in your area that you may not be aware of: price per square foot, school rating, potential liabilities, etc.. They have also been educated to evaluate things like the condition a home is in, what items are unique to a home in that area and could, thus, raise the cost, what the market is like at any given time...
- Get it know that your home is for sale. Relying on your own word of mouth when selling your home is difficult to do. Chances are, you will not run into too many people looking to buy a new home on an average day. Your broker already has relationships with other agents that he or she can contact immediately. Also, your broker will be able to publish your house in MLS, or Multiple Listing Service, a listing (almost always computerized) of all the properties for sale by Real Estate Brokerages in a given geographical area.

- Handle all advertising and promotion. Your broker will be responsible for all of the details required when promoting a home and will have the resources to do it well.

- Handle all of the details of showing your home. This is not just a matter of being around to show your home to prospective buyers. You will need to field many calls, handle multiple visits and know how best to present your home to a potential buyer. Also, a broker can save you a lot of time and hassle by weeding out buyers that they know are not interested in your type of home or do not have the financials to actually buy it.

- Refer you to reputable sources for legal counsel, appraisals, inspections, financing, etc. You will find that there are many more people involved in selling a home than just the buyer, seller and broker. It is good to know the people you choose have been recommended by someone you trust and have worked together in the past. This will ensure a seamless process and less stress in the long run.

- Negotiate! This is the most difficult part of the transaction for most people. Determining what a fair price really is hard enough, but convincing the buyer of that is a whole other story. You want to make sure you do not lose a good bid due to lack of knowledge or proper communication skills. You also do not want to settle because you are not comfortable pushing back. This is the real estate agents job - he or she is trained in this topic and practices every day. Leave it to the professional!

So you are convinced you want to use a broker but you don't know where to go to find one. Ask friends. Interview a few. Look for brokers that really know their stuff. Give them a tour of your home and see how they respond. Ask questions about other sales in the area. Ask them what other homes they have sold in the area.

Finally, make sure you are comfortable with and trust the person selling your house. This is a big project and you are a team, your relationship will mean a lot down the winding path on which you are about to embark.

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Strange and Weird on the Coast

There's more to the coast than beachcombing, kites and just lounging around. Some wild, weird and wonderful secrets can be found - even if many are quite rare. It may be a bizarre event that happens so rarely you'll be fortunate to see it once in your lifetime.

Oregon's coastline gets a whole new, unusual side to it in summer, thanks to a wide range of strange natural phenomenon. From sands that glow to sands that sing, the "ghost forest" of Neskowin or the "green flash at sunset" - it's strange summer fun for the whole family.

*Green Flash at Sunset

Under the right conditions, you may see a brief green flash directly above the sun, just before the last sliver dips below the horizon. This can only happen on a day of no clouds, and it's the result of a variety of conditions that block out certain color bands for a few seconds. A little more frequent - but harder to discern - is a slightly longer, green splotch that lingers just above the sunset.

* Singing Sands

The singing sands is also very rare and actually happens only on two spots on the coast: in some areas of the National Dunes Recreation Area south of Florence and just south of Cannon Beach. Sometimes, it sounds like distant voices singing. Others, it's a bit like a violin or an odd, elongated squeaking noise. This, too, only happens under certain conditions, when two different kinds of sands grind together under the right degree of humidity.

* Glowing Sands

During spring and summer, you'll have a better chance of catching the "glowing sands," although it's still much more common in tropical climates. Here, if you find yourself at the tide line on a really dark beach, you may find a strange, green/bluish spark coming from the sand kicked up by your feet. This is caused by tiny, bioluminescent phytoplankton called dinoflagellates, which glow in a manner not too dissimilar from fireflies. Conditions to look for: a sunny day at the end of a few days of rain and rough seas. This increases the chances of bringing the little fellas to shore.

* Frozen Forests of Neskowin

Beyond Proposal Rock, towards Cascade Head, lay the remnants of a forest perhaps as old as 10,000 years. These incredibly preserved, ancient stumps at first glance look like the leftovers of a manmade pier. They are, in fact, the remains of a forest that abruptly fell into the ocean due to an earthquake. Their decay was greatly slowed down because of their sudden drop into ocean water.

This most unusual display of Oregon coast landscape is nicknamed the "ghost forest,"

For more information check out:

http://beachconnection.net/news/strangs060607_1132.php