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How to find the right contractor for your next home renovation

Home renovations are significant undertakings. Though some projects require more sizable investments of time and money than others, all merit homeowners' attention and inspire some excitement when pondering the finished product. A finished product tends to offer more appeal when the project is overseen and undertaken by a professional contractor. Small projects may be in the wheelhouse of skilled do-it-yourselfers, but most homeowners are best served leaving home renovations to the professionals.

Finding the right contractor for a given job is of the utmost importance, and the following are some tips to help homeowners do just that.

◆ Seek word-of-mouth recommendations. Word-of-mouth advertising has long been recognized as an invaluable tool to attract customers, and for good reason. A 2025 report on the state of the roofing industry provided by Roofing Contractor, the official publication for the International Roofing Expo™, found that 79 percent of homeowners identify word-of-mouth as the top way to find a roofing professional. Word-of-mouth is so valued because homeowners can ask friends or neighbors about their experiences with a given professional in a pressure-free setting. Word-of-mouth also can help homeowners cut down on the pool of potential contractor candidates, which is no small benefit in markets flooded with renovation professionals.

◆ Secure multiple written estimates. It can be time-consuming to speak to multiple contractors and secure written estimates from each one, but such legwork is well worth the effort if the

end result is finding the right contractor. Secure multiple estimates even if the first one provided to you is below budget. Multiple estimates allow homeowners to compare what's included, and not included, in each one. Some contractors offering

Tips from the Experts:

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Tim Melendez
Business Development Manager
Home Pros Remodeling LLC

low estimates may not include materials costs or additional factors that will increase the price. Others may seem more expensive initially but may prove more affordable than competitors if their estimates include all of the costs associated with

the project. Only a direct comparison of multiple estimates, which should include details specific to the project and an itemized list of what will be provided and performed by the contractor, can give homeowners an idea of what they're paying for.

◆ Stay local when possible. Hiring local contractors is beneficial for a number of reasons. Hiring locals keeps money in the community and thus supports the local economy. And working with local contractors can make it easier for homeowners to keep lines of communication

open. Many projects also require a little post-completion upkeep or even some tweaks, which is more easily accomplished when working with contractors based nearby. And finally, local contractors will be familiar with building codes and other details specific to a given town. That familiarity can ensure a project is done in adherence to codes and not stalled by permit- or inspection-related delays.

◆ Confirm their insurance. Travelers Insurance urges homeowners to confirm a contractor is properly insured and bonded prior to signing a contract. Contractors should be willing to provide a certificate of insurance (COI) that indicates their provider, policy number and coverage limits. Travelers also notes homeowners can contact insurers directly to verify coverage and ensure the policy is current. Never hire a contractor who is uninsured or unwilling to provide proof of insurance. Hiring a contractor to perform a home renovation may be a leap of faith, but homeowners can take steps to ensure they find the right professional for the job.



The benefits of lighting up your landscape

Homeowners know there's no shortage of ways to tweak a property. Some homeowners may lament that the work associated with home ownership is never done, but owning a house also provide endless opportunities to upgrade the spaces people call home.

Landscape lighting has become increasingly popular in recent years. That popularity is undoubtedly due to a number of variables, and each highlights a benefit of installing landscape lighting around a property.

◆ **Affordability:** Some may think of big budget projects like kitchen remodels or room additions when pondering home renovations. Such projects can have a dramatic impact on the look and feel of a home, but landscape lighting can be equally transformative at a fraction of the cost of larger undertakings. The home renovation experts at Angi.com estimate the average landscape lighting project costs around \$4,000, making affordability a notable benefit of the project.

◆ **Appearance:** There's no denying the aesthetic appeal of a well-lit landscape at night. Landscape lighting can be utilized to draw attention to awe-inspiring components of a landscape, whether it's natural features like gardens and foliage or manmade components like architectural features. Improved appearance can increase curb appeal, which is often associated with how a home looks during daylight hours. But photographs of a well-lit nighttime landscape can impress buyers as well.

◆ **Cost savings:** Landscape lighting might help homeowners reduce the cost of their homeowners insurance. Researchers at PolicyGenius.com found that insurance companies typically offer a discount of 2 to 5 percent to homeowners who install a home security system. Insurance providers may offer additional savings to homeowners who pair such systems with landscape lighting, which can be a deterrent to burglars who prefer to operate under a cloak of darkness.

◆ **Safety:** Insurance firms may discount premiums because of landscape lighting because they view it as a deterrent to potential criminals. But landscape lighting also makes moving around a property at night safer for residents and guests. Lighting can be used to illuminate walkways, outdoor living rooms, patios around pools, and other areas where residents and guests will be walking at night, which can reduce the risk of falls and injuries that may result from such spills.

◆ **ROI:** Savvy homeowners consider a renovation's return on investment before deciding to go forward with a project. Studies vary, but the National Association of Realtors indicates landscape lighting can recoup as much as 70 percent of homeowners' investment in the project at resale. When viewed through the lens of ROI, the cost of installing landscape lighting is even less.

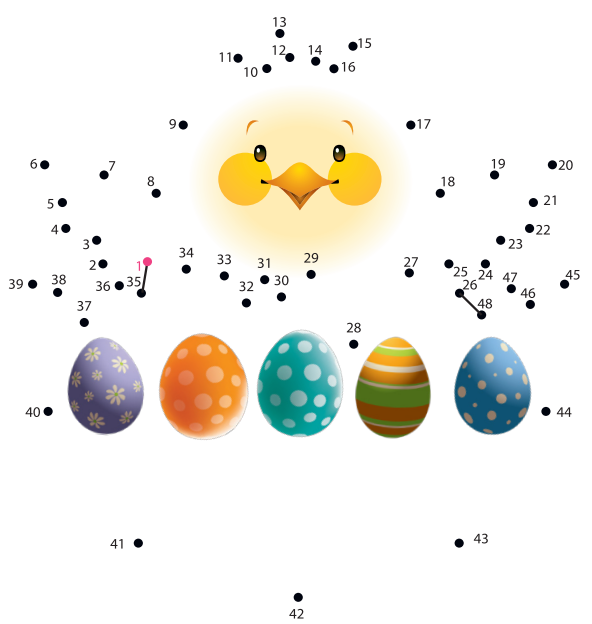
Landscape lighting adds notable aesthetic appeal to a home at a fraction of the cost of other renovation projects. The benefits such lighting provides make the project one every homeowner can consider.



SPRING FUN



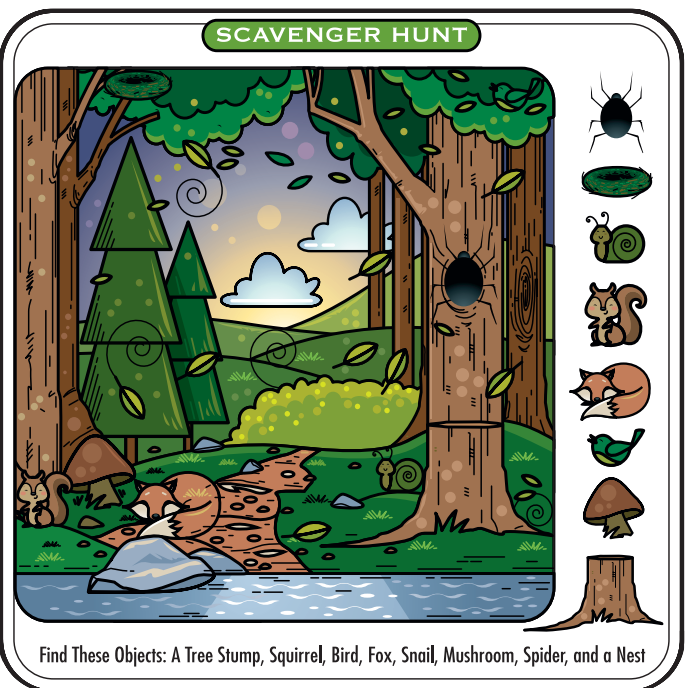
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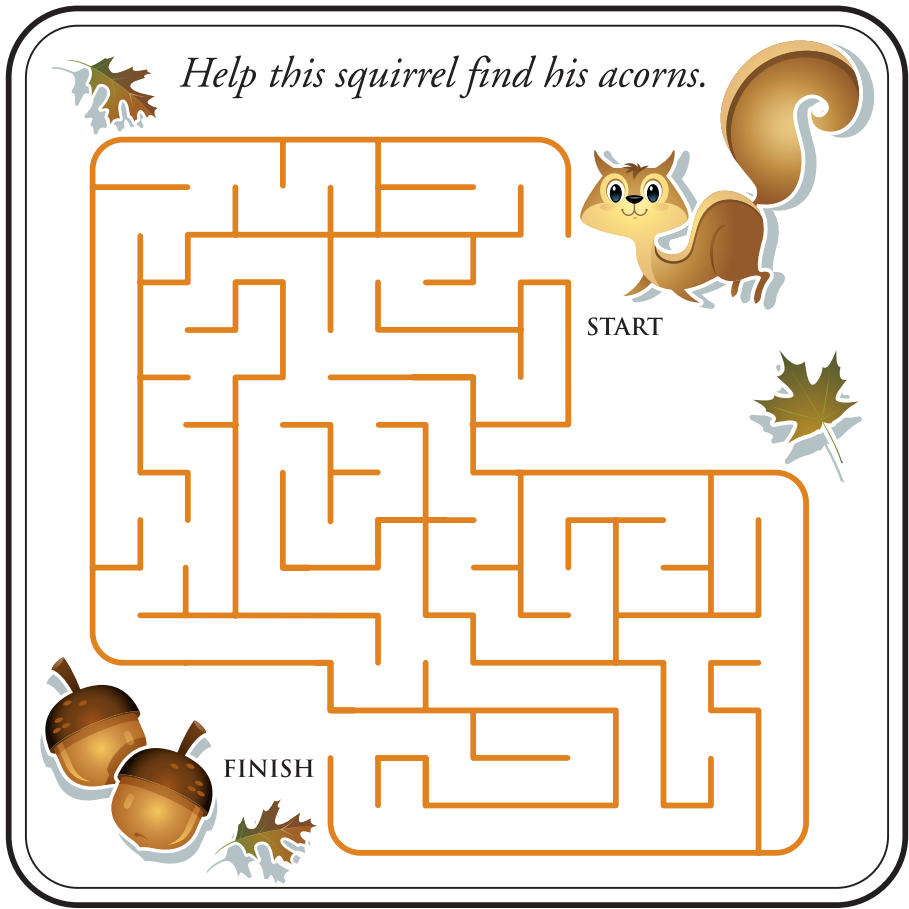
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Answer key: flowers, sunshine, robin, tulip, robin, kite, butterfly



Attract winged friends with these bird feeders

Birds are beautiful creatures that can make a lawn and garden feel even more serene. Providing snacks to supplement what birds naturally find in the wild guarantees up close and personal interactions with the scores of species that call neighborhoods home.

Bird feeders are particularly important in colder climates and during wintertime when food may be scarce. Keeping birds well fed helps them survive over winter and continue to repopulate in the spring. Bird feeding isn't all for the birds, either. Ashley Dayer, an associate professor in the Department of Fish and Wildlife Conservation at Virginia Tech, argues that feeding birds also is a benefit to humans because it stimulates compassion for the animals.

The type of bird feeder a person places in the yard determines which species may be drawn to the property. The following are various types of feeders to consider.

Suet feeders

Suet cakes are high-energy food sources that attract birds like woodpeckers and nuthatches. They are particularly beneficial

in colder months or regions where birds need extra fat for energy.

These cage-like feeders snap around the rectangular suet cake and hang from a pole or tree.

Ground feeder

Ground feeders are simple screen-bottomed trays that sit several inches off of the ground or on a deck to help keep seeds and grain from coming in contact with droppings. Ground feeders are a favorite of juncos, sparrows, goldfinches, and cardinals, among others.

Sugar water feeder

These feeders come in different

shapes, from tubes to round dishes, and are magnets to hummingbirds. They typically have red coloring to be more attractive to those high-speed flyers.

Nyer bird feeder

Small birds like goldfinches love to dine on nyjer seeds, which are tiny, black thistle seeds. These feeders are tube-shaped mesh socks designed to hold this specific seed. The small feeding ports



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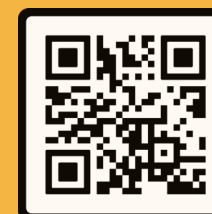


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prevent seed waste and cater to the small beaks of finches.

Hopper bird feeder

These are the feeders many people think of when they envision bird feeders. Hopper bird feeders hold a large amount of seed and often have a roof or a design that mimics a house or barn. The covered design helps to keep seeds dry and might be the best hanging feeder for people who live in areas with a lot of rain. Hoppers will attract blue jays, grackles, cardinals, and blackbirds.

Tube feeders

Tube feeders will attract an array of birds. They are cylindrical in shape with various ports to enable birds to perch and feed.

Window and smart bird feeders

These types of bird feeders attach to windows to allow homeowners to view the birds up close. Smart varieties have cameras on the feeders that will send a feed via an app to a smart phone or computer. Some even may identify the bird species on the feeder at any given point in time.

Bird feeders provide enjoyment for bird watchers and nutritious food various species.



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How to establish a peaceful backyard retreat

Backyards have undergone quite a transformation over the last decade-plus. The days when patios and decks were all a backyard living space had to offer are largely a thing of the past, as homeowners have realized just how valuable it can be to commit to a stunning backyard.

The real estate experts at Zillow estimate that homes with backyard features such as outdoor televisions, outdoor showers and outdoor kitchens command 3.1 percent more than expected upon reaching the market. If 3.1 percent doesn't sound like a lot, it actually equates to nearly \$11,000 on a typical home. But there's more to gain than money when converting a backyard space into a relaxing respite. Such spaces can provide a welcoming escape from the hustle and bustle of daily life, all the while giving homeowners and residents a comfortable space to soak in the great outdoors. With that in mind, homeowners can take the following steps to establish a peaceful backyard retreat.

◆ Refresh the landscape. Even if your vision is centered on outdoor furniture and a space that accommodates movie nights under the stars, it's still best to refresh the existing landscape if it needs a little upkeep. Overgrown trees, hedges and bushes can create the same cluttered vibe that dominates interior spaces overrun with items. If necessary, work with a local tree service or landscape architect to trim, or even remove, trees and hedges that are crowding the backyard and making it feel claustrophobic or giving it an unkempt look.

Aim for a landscape that affords a balance of sun and shade so the space is as comfortable as possible throughout the day.

garden ponds to koi ponds to fountains to hot tubs. Homeowners can identify which feature best aligns with their idea of relaxation and then work with a landscape architect to ensure it's installed in their backyard oasis.

◆ Don't forget shade. Temperatures are rising in many areas of the globe, and that's worth noting when planning a backyard retreat. Even the most ardent sun worshippers likely won't want to be exposed to the sun at all times when relaxing in their backyards. Strategically chosen means of providing shade can make spaces enjoyable all day long. Consider umbrellas, gazebos, pergolas, and even retractable awnings to cover patios and decks when the sun is at its highest each

afternoon. If you plan to spend ample time in the grass, make that more enjoyable by planting shade trees, which also can protect the grass from drought and make it more comfortable underfoot.

A relaxing backyard retreat can make for an ideal space to escape the hustle and bustle of daily life.

◆ Set up multiple gathering spaces, if possible. Once a backyard retreat is established, everyone who calls the property home might find the space hard to resist. Keep this in mind when planning the space and aim to set up multiple gathering spaces. An outdoor kitchen with a nearby dinner table can be a great space to enjoy al fresco dining, but a separate area to read a book or watch a movie or ballgame can make the space more versatile. Some may want to relax away from the noise of the grill area, and multiple gathering spaces ensures there's always a peaceful spot to unwind out back.

◆ Add a water feature. Running water has a way of calming the nerves, and that's good to keep in mind when planning a backyard retreat. Water features run the gamut from





Small renovations that make a big impact

Homeowners may think they have to tear down walls or build room extensions to transform their homes with renovation projects. But small projects can yield impressive results, and that's something homeowners working with

limited budgets can keep in mind.

There's no shortage of small projects that can change the look and feel of a home. Many of these undertakings can be achieved with a modest investment.

◆ **Front door replacement:** A new front door instantly improves curb appeal and can make a home more secure and energy-efficient. Painting the existing front door is an even smaller project that still offers appeal.

◆ **Lighting addition:** Whether a homeowner enlarges a window or adds skylights, natural light can produce incredible results. Investing in new lighting can feel like expanding a space without pushing out walls.

◆ **Kitchen and bath fixture upgrades:** Faucets and door pulls are used every day. Swapping existing fixtures for something a little more modern can unify spaces and provide subtle changes that enhance these popular spaces.

◆ **Wood floor restoration:** Scuffing and scratches can adversely affect the pristine look of a natural wood floor. Homeowners can polish a floor to restore its shine. A professional service will sand down and refinish older floors at a fraction of the cost of a new floor installation.

◆ **Exterior lighting:** Lighting isn't just important inside. A welcoming glow in the yard is awe-inspiring. There are many energy-efficient lighting options, including ones that do not need to be hard-wired to the circuitry inside the home.

◆ **Staircase renovation:** Coordinate the

staircase to the style in the home with a decorative carpet runner. A secure runner is attractive and can help reduce slipping down the stairs. Tighten shaky railings or replace them while upgrading the stair treads.

◆ **Interior paint:** Change the color of walls, doors, cabinets, or even furniture with paint. All homeowners need is a paint color that inspires them and a little bit of time.

◆ **Replace outlet covers:** Upgrade outlet covers with screwless options. Screwless plates for outlets and light switches can make walls look more sleek.

◆ **Entry organizer installation:** Banish clutter from the home by catching it at the door. An entry organizer with spaces for shoes, coats, backpacks, and shopping bags can be eye-catching and functional.

◆ **Carpets cleaning:** Soiled carpets can look drab and dingy. Homeowners can rent carpet-cleaning machines or hire services to revitalize carpets with a deep cleaning.

Small changes around a home can create a big impact without breaking the bank.



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Outdoor plants toxic to household pets

Pets bring many positive changes to households. Pets can make homes more lively, and the companionship of animals can reduce feelings of loneliness while offering additional health benefits to pet owners.

Individuals who are preparing to adopt or purchase pets need to be mindful that they may need to make changes at home to ensure residences are safe places for pets to reside. Much in the way new parents must assess the environs for potential hazards to babies, pet owners should conduct similar inspections. These safety checks should occur both inside and in the yard if pets will be spending time outdoors. Poisonous plants are a potentially hidden hazard prospective pet owners must address before bringing a new pet home.

People generally do not give much thought to the plants they include in their homes and yards beyond the care instructions and how they can add to the aesthetic appeal. Homeowners may know if a plant likes the sun or shade, but they may not realize its potential for toxicity. That's because adults in particular are not prone to ingesting the plants in their yard that are inedible, unlike curious pets that may sniff and nibble plants when exploring their environments. For those with dogs and cats that will spend time outdoors, it's best to be aware of these potentially toxic plants, courtesy of the ASPCA, Dr. Buzby's and Garden Design.

◆ **Autumn crocus:** There are various types of crocus plants, but the one most toxic to dogs is autumn crocus. The entire plant is toxic, but the highest concentration of toxic agent is found in the bulbs.



◆ **Sago palm:** People in warm climates may enjoy the look of palm trees on their properties. Despite its tropical and relaxing appearance, the Sago palm is extremely poisonous if ingested by pets, with the seeds being the most toxic part.

◆ **Lily:** Lilies are highly toxic to cats in particular. Even grooming pollen off of their fur or drinking water out of a vase where lilies are kept may cause kidney failure.

◆ **Tulips and hyacinth:** These early bloomers are beautiful flowers, but each contains a similar alkaloid toxin that is mild to moderately toxic to pets. Again, the highest concentration is found in the bulbs, which dogs or cats may dig up while exploring.

◆ **Aloe vera:** This soothing succulent may be part of an arid climate landscape. Aloe contains saponin, a toxin with foaming properties that can harm pets if ingested and cause severe dehydration.

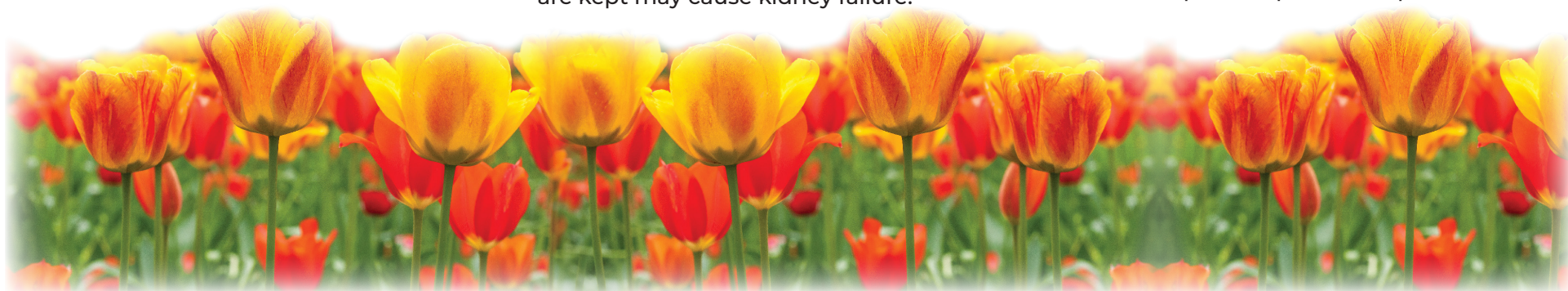
◆ **Begonia:** A popular outdoor and houseplant, begonia has decorative flowers and attractive leaves. However, the plant can be toxic to cats and dogs if ingested, particularly the underground tubers.

◆ **Azalea:** This flowering shrub produces flowers in many colors, so it's often present in household landscapes. It's important to note that azaleas can be toxic to dogs and cats.

◆ **Yew:** American, Canadian and Japanese yew may be found around properties. These shrubs produce small red berries with green centers (almost looking like the reverse of a Spanish olive with pimento). Yew is toxic to cats and dogs.

◆ **Dahlia:** Dahlia produce flowers in different colors, so they are common in flower beds. However, these plants also are mildly toxic to pets.

Many toxic plants can irritate the gastrointestinal system in pets, potentially resulting in vomiting, diarrhea or lethargy. Those who suspect a pet has ingested a poisonous plant should contact the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center at 888-426-4435 or their local veterinarian to learn about how to respond to possible exposure.





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