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Preparing garden beds for spring and beyond

Gardening enthusiasts may have been thinking about their landscape plans throughout the winter, eager to once again get their hands dirty with soil. Whether a home gardener is making preparations for edible crops or beautiful flowers, he or she must take time to make the soil amenable to planting. To establish hearty, durable plants, gardeners can focus on three main areas: addressing soil composition, cultivating and adding nutrients.

Soil composition

Many gardeners prefer growing a variety of plants in their gardens. Such an approach requires taking inventory of the type of soil in one's garden and making the necessary modifications so that the types of vegetables, herbs, shrubs, or flowers that will be planted can grow in strongly. In fact, according to the plant company Proven Winners, the most important step to developing good roots is preparing the soil.

Take a sample of the soil and examine it to see what is present. If the soil is too full of clay, too sandy, too dense, or too loose, that can lead to problems where plants cannot grow in strong. Work with a garden center to add the right soil amendments to make a rich soil. This may include organic compost or manure, which will also add nutrients to the soil.

Cultivation

Cultivating the soil can involve different steps. Removal of weeds, errant rocks, roots, and other items will help prepare the soil. Mother Earth News suggests working on garden soil when the soil is damp but never wet; otherwise, garden soil can become messy and clumpy. Use a digging fork or shovel to lightly turn the soil when it's mostly dry. Gentle tillings also can open up the soil to incorporate the nutritional amendments and relieve compaction that likely occurred from freezing temps and snow pressure. Tilling also helps with drainage and oxygen delivery to roots. The DIY Network suggests turning over soil at a depth of 12 inches to work the soil - about the length of a shovel spade. However, the resource Earth Easy says that existing garden beds have a complex soil ecosystem and simply top-dressing with compost or manure can be enough preparation for planting. Gardeners can experiment with the methods that work best for their gardens.

Nutrition

Testing the pH and the levels of certain nutrients in the soil, namely nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium, will give gardeners an idea of other soil additions that may be needed. Soils with a pH below 6.2 often can benefit from the addition of lime several weeks before planting. Soil tests will determine just how much fertilizer to add to the soil. Complete fertilizers will have equal amounts of nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium. Individual fertilizers can amend the soil with only these nutritional elements that are needed.

Top-dressing empty beds with a layer of mulch or compost can prevent weed growth and preserve moisture until it is time to plant. If existing shrubs or plants are in garden beds, use more care so as not to disturb roots or dig too deeply.

Preparing garden beds takes some effort initially, but can be well worth the work when plants flourish throughout the growing season.

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Building your dream deck: what materials should you use?

As the days get longer and temperatures rise you may find yourself daydreaming at work about relaxing on your deck reading a book or enjoying a cookout with family and friends. If you don't have a deck now is the time to build one to make your dreams a reality! At Hammond Lumber Company we are here to guide you through the journey of building your dream deck.

With so many options out there to choose from it can be hard to know where to start. Let's start by looking at the advantages of using different materials when building your deck.

Wood Decking

People choose to build their decks with natural wood products because of the low material costs and the traditional beauty they offer. There are a variety of woods to choose from such as pressure treated lumber, cedar, and other hardwoods. It is important to choose the right material for your decking needs just make sure whichever wood you choose is splinter resistant!

Kebony wood products provide maximum benefits when building your deck. All their wood is organic and goes through a permanent strengthening process to ensure the longevity of your deck. The wood is non-toxic and so eco-friendly it can be recycled as untreated wood. It also has a high resistance to decay, fungi and insects. Wood decks do require some maintenance such as normal cleaning with a brush and water, as well as restaining and sanding over the years to keep your deck looking new.

Wood Composite Decking

More and more often people are choosing composite decking because of the long list of benefits. First of all, what is composite decking and is it all the same? Composite decking is composed of wood particles similar to sawdust and plastics such as PVC, Polyethylene, or polypropylene. Each brand has their own unique ratios of wood, plastic, pigments, and fungicides to ensure a high-quality product. All wood and plastic materials used can be new or recycled making composite decking an eco-friendly choice!

The composite material has a high resistance to water and moisture which can cause rotting as well as shrinking and swelling that can compromise the integrity of your deck's design. Forget about having to seal or stain your deck there is no need with composite decking! The wood grain design is deeply embossed maintaining a natural look always, simply use a soft brush and mild detergent to keep it clean. Many composite producers such as Trex, TimberTech, and Duralife offer a variety of colorings to match whatever style you are looking for.

Capped vs Uncapped Composite Decking

If you have decided to use composite decking boards should you go with capped or uncapped? A cap is an extra layer of protection that can prevent moisture from reaching the core of the board. Some

Continued on Page 15

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The benefits of water features in garden landscapes

Many homeowners aspire to make their homes appear as beautiful and welcoming as possible. Exterior renovations may be high on homeowners' to-do lists, and landscaping is oftentimes a key component of those projects.

When planning gardens, homeowners may benefit by considering more than just flowers and shrubs while giving thought to other elements that can breathe vitality into their landscape designs. Water features can do just that, as such features provide more than just visual appeal.

- **Aesthetic appeal:** Water elements stand out against the greenery and foliage and can be used to create focal points around the garden or yard. A single fountain can draw the eye, while a trickling stream or waterfall can deliver water to various spots in the landscape.

- **Soothing sound:** Rain drops on a rooftop or waves lapping on a shoreline elicit feelings of harmony and relaxation. Water features can bring that gentle sound close to home, further enhancing the ambience.

- **Brings texture:** Water has its own unique and fluid texture that can provide stark contrast to blades of grass or the hard lines of architectural elements, such as pergolas or retaining walls. A pond or fountain can soften lines.

- **Enhance the natural ecosystem:** Water features can attract wildlife to a property. Birds may visit to take a quick sip, and dragonflies are sure to dart and hover over the shimmering ripples. Inviting natural wildlife to the yard can add hours of entertainment by enjoying the animals and insects.

- **Remedy problem areas:** Rather than fighting with the landscape, homeowners can adapt it. An area of the yard prone to soggy conditions or flooding can be transformed into a pond or waterfall to work with natural surroundings.

- **Foster a passion:** Many people turn to water features so they can explore the hobby of nurturing an outdoor aquarium. Koi ponds are relatively easy to install and maintain, and the vibrant fish add visual appeal.

- **Add a personal touch:** Water features are as unique as the homeowners who create them. To set landscaping apart from neighbors' homes, homeowners can add fountains, ponds or flowing water elements to their properties. Decorative water features also can be melded with pools and spas to help these manmade recreational areas seem like they were carved right out of the natural landscape.

Water features can take landscapes to the next level with sounds, texture, movement, and beauty

Building from Page 12

caps can also provide extra UV protection, stain resistance, and mold and mildew protection. It is important to know that not all composite boards are capped the same, boards can be capped on just two sides or on all four. A four-sided cap like that offered by TimberTech provides the most protection from moisture reaching the core of the board from all sides.

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Safety tips for grilling season

People have been cooking meals over open flames since the discovery of fire. Even today, when there are so many ways to cook a meal, many still insist there's nothing better than the taste of food cooked on the grill.

The Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Association, which tracks industry trends, points out that one-third of consumers plan to use their grill or smoker more often this year. Even though grilling is widely associated with summer, a growing number of people are embracing year-round grilling. HPBA's CEO Jack Goldman has said, "Barbecuing is no longer just a pastime, but an integral part of the North American lifestyle."

Seven in 10 adults in the United States and eight out of 10 in Canada own a grill or smoker. With so many people firing up their grills, it's important to recognize the importance of grilling safety. Each year an average of 8,900 home fires are caused by grilling, and close to half of all injuries involving grills are due to charcoal burns, advises the National Fire Protection Association. Here's how to stay safe.

• Only grill outside. Propane and charcoal barbecue grills should only be used outdoors. Grills should be placed well away from the home. Keep grills away from deck railings, eaves, overhangs, and tree branches.

• Keep the grill clean. Thoroughly clean the grill prior to first use, and keep it tidy all year long. Grease or fat buildup can ignite and cause a fire.

• Always attend the grill. Grill distraction-free and keep an eye on the food being cooked. Simply stepping away for a few moments can lead to a fire or accident.

• Start fires safely. Charcoal grills and gas grills may be lit using electronic starters that do not require fire. If using starter fluid, only do so on charcoal, and do not add more fluid or other flammable liquids after the fire has ignited.

• Check for gas leaks. Whether the gas grill is hooked up to a propane tank or the natural gas supply of a home, ensure that the hoses or tanks are not leaking. Apply a light soap-and-water solution to hoses to see if they bubble from leaking gas.

• Keep baking soda nearby. Baking soda can control grease fires, but it's also helpful to have a fire extinguisher or a bucket of sand on hand for other types of fires.

• Watch children and pets. Keep children and pets at least three feet away from grilling areas.

• Wait for the grill and coals to cool. Practice safety around the grill until all coals are cool and the grill is no longer hot to the touch. Only then should the grill be moved or relocated.

Grilling is a passion that is enjoyed throughout much of the year. Safely cook outdoors by heeding safety guidelines.

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Three ways to use your lawn to improve curb appeal

Returns on home improvement projects vary. In its annual Cost vs. Value Report, Remodeling magazine notes the projects that yield the best returns on investment in a given year. But a host of factors, including the type of market (buyers' or sellers') and the region where the home is being sold, ultimately combine to determine if homeowners' investments in home improvement projects will provide the returns they were hoping for.

Though there's no way of guaranteeing a home improvement project will yield a great return, real estate professionals often cite improving curb appeal as an excellent way to attract prospective buyers and potentially get the asking price or more when selling the home. Improving curb appeal makes even more sense in today's real estate market, when many people do their own searching via real estate websites such as Trulia or Zillow. When using such sites, buyers will likely be less inclined to click on a listing if exterior photos of the property are not eye-catching.

Various projects, including tending to lawns and gardens, can improve curb appeal. An added benefit to focusing on landscaping to improve curb appeal is it promotes spending time outdoors in spring and summer. In addition, many lawn- and garden-related home improvement projects need not require professional expertise.

1. Maintain a lush green lawn.

Lawns that fall into disrepair may not give buyers a correct impression about how homeowners maintained their homes. Lawns with multiple dead spots and grass that appears more brown than green may lead many buyers to assume that the home's interior was equally ill-cared for. Maintaining lush green lawns is not as difficult as it may seem. Applying fertilizer and aerating at the appropriate times of year (this varies by region) can promote strong roots and healthy soil, making it easier for grass to survive harsh conditions like drought. When watering in summer, do so in early morning or evening so as little water is lost to evaporation as possible.

2. Address brown patch.

Even well-maintained lawns can fall victims to brown spots. According to the lawn care professionals at TruGreen, lawns in regions with hot temperatures and high humidity can be infected with brown patch, a common lawn disease that is caused by fungus, which can produce circular areas of brown, dead grass surrounded by narrow, dark rings. Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences notes that removing dew that collects on grass leaves each morning, which can be accomplished by mowing or dragging a water hose across affected areas, can be an effective way to reduce brown patch. Homeowners without much lawn care experience can consult professional landscapers to address the issue. But those looking to sell their properties should note that buyers often walk the grounds of homes they are considering buying. So addressing any issues on the lawn should be a priority for sellers.

3. Confine dogs to certain areas.

Dog owners may want to let their pets roam free in their yards. But homeowners about to put their properties up for sale may want to confine their four-legged friends to certain areas. That's because dog urine can be high in nitrogen. Nitrogen itself is not harmful to lawns, but in high concentrations it can contribute to yellow or brown spots. Also, highly acidic dog urine may even adversely affect pH levels in the soil.

How to banish mosquitoes from your yard

Time spent in the backyard on spring and summer afternoons and evenings contributes heavily to the popularity of these times of year. Many homeowners go to great lengths to make their outdoor living spaces as luxurious as possible, only to be bothered by unwanted and bothersome guests: mosquitoes.

Mosquitoes are not just pesky nuisances, but they're also harmful. According to the American Mosquito Control Association, more than one million people across the globe die from mosquito-borne diseases every year. Such diseases include malaria, dengue, yellow fever, West Nile virus, and the Zika virus.

The A.M.C.A. notes that many of the diseases transmitted by mosquitoes can be linked to travel to endemic areas. But mosquitoes in North America can still be harmful, and bites may result in severe skin irritation through an allergic reaction to mosquito saliva.

Homeowners can employ several measures to prevent mosquitoes from invading their backyards this spring and summer.

• Remove standing water: Stagnant water is an ideal breeding ground for mosquitoes, so homeowners must be diligent in their efforts to remove standing water around their properties. Mosquitoes can breed in bird baths, pets' water bowls and empty plant pots that collect rain water. Routinely tipping these items and refilling them with fresh water can prevent mosquito infestations, protecting both humans and pets alike.

• Inspect property for hidden pockets of water: While bird baths, pet bowls and kiddie pools are easy to find, homeowners may be unknowingly hosting mosquito breeding grounds elsewhere on their properties. For example, tarps used to cover pools, automobiles or grills that are not tightly secured can fold up, creating pockets where rain water can collect and give mosquitoes somewhere to breed. Mosquitoes also may use gutters to breed, so homeowners should routinely inspect and clean their gutters during spring and summer.

• Keep a well-maintained lawn: Well-manicured lawns are less likely to be breeding grounds for mosquitoes. Because water plays such a crucial role in the mosquito breeding process, it's necessary that all potential water sources in a yard be removed. Fallen leaves that are not removed and pockets of soil beneath trees and plants can collect rain water or water from lawn sprinklers, which can be just enough for mosquitoes to breed.

• Use fans: Consumer Reports tested the efficacy of oscillating pedestal fans to keep mosquitoes from invading decks and patios and found that such fans cut mosquito landings by 45 to 65 percent for those sitting closest to the fans. When hosting backyard barbecues, homeowners can set up several such fans on their decks and patios to keep mosquitoes at bay.

Mosquitoes are unwelcome guests come spring and summer. But homeowners can take steps to increase the likelihood that their properties stay mosquito-free.

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