

Fall Home & Garden

Tips to avoid the buildup of clutter

Clutter has a way of taking over a home. As time goes by, items that are not stored or discarded when they’ve lost their utility can gradually take over a space, creating a claustrophobic, cluttered feeling that can affect how people feel in their homes.

Clutter is not something to be taken lightly. A study published in the journal *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* found that women who characterized their living spaces as cluttered or marked by unfinished projects were more likely to experience fatigue and depression than women who described their homes as restful and restorative. Though clutter is often discussed in terms of removing it, there’s also many ways to prevent it in the first place.

- Schedule weekly cleaning sessions. Cleaning is a chore few look forward to, and that reluctance may be a byproduct of infrequent cleanings. The less a home is cleaned, the longer cleaning sessions take when individuals get around to it. Weekly cleaning sessions can help prevent items from stockpiling and creating a cluttered look.
- Discard items when they’re no longer used. Holding on to items you no longer use will eventually contribute to the buildup of clutter. That’s a lesson parents know well, as kids outgrow toys, which can then pile up and contribute to overcrowded toy chests and play rooms. Adults also have a hard time discarding their own toys, including old devices. As kids outgrow toys, let them choose which ones to discard before they’re replaced with new items. The same goes for adults, who can wipe old devices like tablets, smartphones and laptops clean and discard them once they’ve purchased replacements.
- Make it easy to find stored items. Even the most well-organized person can fall victim to clutter if stored items prove difficult to find. When revamping storage systems, choose clear, stackable drawers so you won’t make a mess as you look for stored items you can’t find. Clear, stackable plastic bins and drawers make it easier to find what you’re looking for, reducing the likelihood that items will end up on the floor or strewn about. If you don’t want to replace existing storage bins, label them if they’re not clear to make it easier to identify what’s inside.
- Donate clothing. Much like kids’ toys and adults devices should be discarded when they’re no longer used, old clothes can be donated to create more storage space and prevent the buildup of clutter. Clutter is often described as something visible to the naked eye, but clutter can also build up in dresser drawers and behind closet doors. Periodically go through closets and dressers and remove items you no longer wear, donating them if they’re still in good shape and discarding them if they’re not.

Clutter can quickly take over a home. A proactive approach that emphasizes clutter prevention can make for a more relaxing and restful home.

Get your home winter-ready

(MS) — If boots, a warm hat and a tuned-up snow blower are the only items on your winter preparation list, your home maintenance plan may need a makeover. These simple home maintenance projects can help lower your energy bills, prevent more costly repairs and/or increase the lifespan of your home.

- 1. Heating & Ventilation** — Examine your fireplace and chimney system to ensure that no soot or creosote has collected. Any cracks or voids could potentially cause a fire. Before you turn the furnace or boiler on, replace the air filter and hire a professional to inspect the unit more thoroughly. These steps will improve the efficiency and life of your furnace and will ensure stable indoor air quality.
- 2. Seal Windows and Doors** — If not properly sealed, windows and doors can be a major culprit for heat loss. To keep the warm air inside, inspect the weather-stripping around your home’s windows and doors for leaks, rot or decay. Repair or replace structural framing, and caulk inside and out, if necessary.
- 3. Insulate well** — One of the easiest and most effective defenses against heat loss is proper insulation. Prevent cold drafts from entering and the loss of heated air through basement headers, which, when left exposed, can make your furnace work harder. Look for a moisture-resistant product offering high thermal performance, such as Roxul Comfortbatt insulation. This type of mineral wool insulation makes installation simple. All that’s needed is a serrated blade or bread knife. Cut the batt to fit the cavity and press into place. The insulation will help improve energy efficiency as soon as it’s in place and provide savings over the lifetime of your home. Comfortbatt can also be used to top or replace old attic insula-



- 4. Backyard Care** — Save your property from potential damage by trimming overgrown trees and shrubs to prevent ice-laden branches from thrashing against electrical wires and your home’s exterior. Drain/shut off any exterior faucets and sprinkler systems to prevent freezing. Ensure rain or snow drains away from the house to avoid foundation problems.
- 5. Roof and Gutters** — Inspect your roof for shingles that are warped, damaged or even missing to prevent a future leak. Use roofing cement and a caulking gun to seal joints where water could penetrate, such as around the chimney, skylights or vent pipes. Make sure that your gutters and downspouts are securely fastened. Downspouts should extend at least five feet away from the home to prevent flooding.

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CLOSET CLEAN-OUT. Donating clothing that is no longer worn is a simple way to avoid the buildup of clutter at home.



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Modern kitchen features to consider

It's well documented that kitchens are the most popular rooms in many homes. Kitchens are where families tend to congregate during holiday celebrations, and many a child has tackled their homework as mom or dad prepares dinner just a few steps away.

With so much time spent in the kitchen, it's no wonder kitchen renovations are popular. In fact, data from the National Association of Home Builders indicates kitchens are the most popular room to remodel. Whether homeowners are planning a full scale remodel or a few tweaks to update the room, the following are three popular features of modern kitchens.

1. Kitchen island

A recent survey from the interior design experts at Houzz found that kitchen islands are popular

for a variety of reasons. Fifty-eight percent of respondents indicated they enjoy eating at kitchen islands, while 49 percent reported they like islands for entertaining. Forty-five percent of respondents like socializing around kitchen islands. Islands provide a versatile functionality that comes in handy when preparing meals on typical weeknights and when hosting friends and family on special occasions like the holidays and birthdays. Islands come in a variety of shapes and sizes and can be customized to fit just about any space. Mobile islands can be utilized in small kitchens when homeowners want the extra prep space but think the kitchen would be too cramped if a permanent island were added.

2. Deep sink

The popularity of farm-

house style sinks is proof that large and deep sinks are sought-after among today's homeowners. Farmhouse sinks may be best suited to a particular aesthetic, but a 2021 study from the National Association of Home Builders found that side-by-side double sinks and walk-in pantries were the most popular of 30 listed kitchen features. That study surveyed more than 3,200 recent and prospective home buyers. Deep sinks are especially useful for people who love to cook, making them a solid addition to any kitchen where home chefs ply their trade most nights of the week.

3. Storage

As the NAHB study indicated, kitchen storage space is sought after among modern homeowners. As home cooks expand their culinary



The island is just one of many popular upgrades to kitchen remodels.

horizons and cook more elaborate meals, they need extra places to store specialty pots and pans, ingredients and other materials. Homeowners looking to add more storage in the kitchen can consult with a local contractor about how to cre-

ate such space. A walk-in pantry can do the trick, but homeowners with kitchens where space is more limited may need to get a little more creative. Sliding-door pantries and roll-out shelving in existing cabinets can add functional space in kitchens

with close quarters.

Modern kitchens are visual marvels and highly functional spaces. A new island, a deep sink and some extra storage space can help homeowners transform their existing kitchens into spaces that cater to their every need.

Alarms don't last forever - remember to replace

(BPT) - Being a homeowner comes with a lot of responsibilities. Seasonal upkeep, roof and gutter maintenance, plumbing repairs and more can add up - both on your to-do list and in your budget. But many home maintenance projects are simple and inexpensive, and they can help provide peace of mind.

Take smoke and carbon monoxide (CO) alarms, for example. Maintaining

these devices is easy - keep them free of dust build-up and test them regularly by simply pressing the test button and waiting for the alarms to sound. On duty 24/7, alarms don't last forever and need to be replaced at least every 10 years depending on your model.

First Alert, the most trusted name in fire safety*, recommends the following "alarm checklist" to help you and your family protect what matters most.

Test and maintain your alarms. In addition to regular alarm testing, the batteries should be replaced every six months. A good rule of thumb is to change batteries when the majority of Americans adjust their clocks.

Install the proper protection - every level, every bedroom. The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) recommends installing alarms on every level of your home, including the basement and inside every bedroom. Because smoke rises, be sure

to install alarms high on the wall or ceiling. Don't install alarms near doors, windows or ducts, where drafts may interfere with their operation.

Alarms don't last forever - remember to replace. It's important to select



When preparing for seasonal changes, don't forget the alarms.

the right alarms for your home. Newer homes are generally wired for hardwired smoke and CO alarms. When they reach the end of their useful life, replace them with new hardwired alarms. In older homes and apartments without hardwired alarms, when your alarms expire, a convenient upgrade option is a 10-year sealed battery alarm, which eliminates battery replacement and late-night battery chirps for a decade. And, if your alarms are more than 10 years old - or you simply don't know how old they are - the safest bet is to replace them.

To learn more fire and CO safety tips, or to find a retailer near you, visit firstalert.com.

*First Alert Brand Trust Survey, March 2023 - Results are based on the responses of 1,043 adult homeowners, ages 25 and older, living in the United States who completed an online survey asking them to choose from six brands in the smoke, fire and carbon monoxide protection space.

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Give yourself a raise with square foot gardening

Does your landscape have drainage problems? Are you limited to a confined space to have a garden or flower bed? If so, you can still be successful growing your plants by creating raised beds. These beds can be useful for growing vegetables, annuals, bulbous plants, herbaceous perennials, or whatever you desire.

A raised bed can be just what it sounds like: a mound of dirt. Generally, to prevent erosion a barrier is built. However, a barrier is not always needed. Barriers are often site dependent. If a barrier is desired there is no need to try to build a fort around the soil. The bed can be as high as you wish or as low to the ground as you wish. The material used to build the bed can be whatever you select.

A simple weekend's work: Select your site and make sure you locate the bed in an area that will suit the plants you intend



Charles Mitchell
Franklin County Cooperative Extension Director

to grow. Next, prepare the soil by loosening/tilling the existing soil to a depth of eight to ten inches. This will aid in drainage, improve aeration, and allow you to remove weeds, rocks, and other debris. Then, choose the materials that you want to build your raised bed with. Finally, determine the filler you will be using to make the raised bed complete. Now, you are ready to build and plant.

The materials you choose to use is up to you. However, some materials may be better suited for certain areas. The following are some examples of materials that can be used.

- Pressure-treated wood (2-by-8s, 2-by-10s, 4-by-4s, or 6-by-6s) and a handful of nails or bolts will be a quick and easy way to make a raised bed.
- Landscape timbers, treated 3-by-5s with curved sides, is another simple material to use. These can be stacked three or four high.
- Railroad ties are large and bulky, but can be used. The old ties do not look as good as new ones; however, they are cheaper and they do not contain the heavy amounts of creosote that the new ones do. Typically, railroad ties are not a good choice to build vegetable gardens with due to the possible creosote leaching into the soil.
- Bricks and cinder blocks may blend in better and are extremely durable. You can stucco the cinder blocks if you wish.
- Stone is extremely easy to use. You can either dry-stack the stone or mortar it.

You might be surprised at how much you enjoy working with the stone because it is similar to putting a puzzle together.

Soil additives for a raised bed garden can vary. Bagged products such as topsoil, potting soil, humus, or soil conditioner are available. These are all excellent materials that have been treated, so there is little chance of an introduction of weeds or diseases. Screened topsoil is a cheaper alternative if you have some available or you can buy it. Compost is an excellent additive. I once heard someone refer to it as "black gold." You can make your own compost by composting your leaves, any grass clippings you might have, and vegetable scraps. Compost will help add nutrients to your soil in the bed. Rocks may also be used as an additive. Pea-gravel or small sized pebbles can be used to improve drainage and aerate



Raised beds continue to grow in popularity

the soil. The small stone can also aid in vole control if you have experienced those small creatures. The voles do not like the sharp rocks.

Raised beds are widely used in many home landscapes and some of the most exquisite landscapes across the country. With a little time and effort, you

can give yourself a raised bed garden that is easy to manage.

For more information about raised beds or square foot gardening, contact your local Franklin County Cooperative Extension Office at 919-496-3344. You can also visit the website at www.franklin.ces.ncsu.edu.

Pesky fire ants are here to stay in NC

By Charles Mitchell
Director, N.C. Cooperative Extension,
Franklin County Center

Have you experienced problems with fire ants this summer and fall? Due to recent rains, we have seen an abundance of mounds showing up everywhere. Fire ants have spread throughout much of the south and eastern parts of NC, and they

are moving west. The main question most have is: How do you control these horrible ants?

Fire ant mounds vary in size due to the size of the colony. For example, a mound that is two feet in diameter and 18 inches high may contain about 100,000 workers, several-hundred winged adults and one queen. The mounds are often located in open areas such as pastures,

fields, large lawns, etc. They can even be found around house foundations or inside houses.

During the spring and summer, winged males and females leave the mound and mate in the air. After mating, females become queens and may fly as far as ten miles from the parent colony. However, most queens descend to the ground within much shorter distances. Only a very

small percentage of queens survive after landing. Most queens are killed by foraging ants, especially other fire ants. If a queen survives, she sheds her wings, burrows into the ground, and lays eggs to begin a new colony. In the fall, many small colonies of fire ants will appear. Many of the colonies will not survive the winter unless the weather is mild.

Fire ants prefer oily and greasy foods. They also feed on many other insects and from that standpoint, could be considered beneficial. To find food, workers forage around their mound often in underground tunnels that radiate from the mound. If the mound is disturbed, ants swarm out and sting the intruder.

Controlling these ants is almost impossible. However, your goal should be to manage the ants with chemical control and non-chemical control tactics. There are two approaches to chemical control. Each mound can be treated with an insecticide, or it can be broadcast over a wide area infested with fire ant colonies. Individual mound treatments are

usually more environmentally friendly and effective. Mounds can be treated with a liquid or dust insecticide or with an insecticidal bait. If a liquid is used the mound must be drenched at a rate of approximately one gallon per six inches of mound diameter. Then thoroughly wet the ground to a distance of about two feet around the mound. The reason for this is that you need to reach the queen in order to kill the colony.

Ant baits are extremely effective. These baits are essentially a mixture of an insecticide and a food that is attractive to fire ants. The worker ants carry particles of the bait back to the mound and feed them to the immature ants and the queen. Keep in mind that even when the bait kills the queen, the workers may be active inside the mound for several weeks before the colony finally disappears.

Broadcast treatments

should only be used in the case of potential human harm or when high mound densities are present over large areas. One disadvantage to broadcast treatments is that they can alter ant communities by killing all the native ants and turning the ant community into a dominated fire ant community.

The key to reducing fire ant infestations indoors is prevention, which means removing exposed food sources that may attract them. Properly labeled indoor insecticides can be used if nests are found inside dwellings or buildings. Baits are not recommended for indoor use due to the chance of attracting more ant species indoors.

For more information about fire ants and their management, contact your local Franklin County Cooperative Extension Office at 919-496-3344. You can also visit the website at www.franklin.ces.ncsu.edu.



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Small renovations that make a big difference

Home renovation projects were high on homeowners' priority lists during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout much of 2020, people across the globe

were forced to spend much of their time at home as leaders and governments across the globe sought to prevent the spread of COVID-19. More time at home com-

pelled millions of homeowners to invest more in their properties, thus sparking a renovation boom.

By early 2023, the renovation boom that marked the initial days of the pandemic appeared to have burst. In May 2023, a popular home improvement retailer reported its sales had fallen by 4.5 percent in the first quarter of the year and that its income had fallen by more than 6 percent from the same period a year earlier. That marked the end of what CEO Ted Decker characterized as "a three-year period of unprecedented growth" in the home improvement sector.

The home improvement chains' decline in sales was attributed to a number of factors, including a pivot among homeowners from large projects to smaller renovations. Inflation and the looming threat of a recession have led many homeowners to emphasize smaller projects. With that in mind, the following are some small



SMALL PROJECTS, BIG IMPACTS. Painting, adding molding and cleaning and polishing floors are just a few home improvements that make a big difference in appearance.

renovations that can have a big impact.

- **Storage addition:** Regardless of where storage is added, be it the kitchen or a home office or a laundry room, extra space to keep items out of view can dramatically alter the look of a home. Unused kitchen walls can be transformed with some inexpensive, easily hanged shelves, while some laundry pedestals with storage drawers can help keep washrooms clear of clutter.

- **Polish floors:** Elbow grease might be the biggest expenditure when cleaning hardwood floors. The wood flooring experts at Bona® advise homeowners to polish their floors once every two to four months depending on how much foot traffic the floors get. A fresh polishing can make floors look brand new and ensures dirt and dust are not hanging around as uninvited houseguests.

- **Paint:** Painting is another inexpensive option for budget-conscious homeowners who want to update their homes. There's no shortage of places in a home, both inside and out, where a fresh coat of paint can make a statement without breaking the bank. Fading paint on bedroom walls and kitchen cabinets can be painted over with a fresh coat of the same color or even something

more vibrant. Outside, apply a fresh coat to a wooden deck or paint over brick siding to create a whole new look.

- **Molding:** Crown molding can add a touch of elegance to any room. Rooms can be transformed in a single weekend with the installation of new or replacement crown molding. A simple molding installation is a task many do-it-yourselfers can

handle on their own, while homeowners with less DIY experience may benefit from hiring a contractor to create a layered molding look.

Homeowners are pivoting away from costly renovations to more budget-conscious projects. Various less expensive undertakings can transform spaces at a fraction of the cost of more extensive renovations.



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