

Spring Home

and Garden

Spring garden prep

Lawns and gardens can bear the brunt of winter weather and are often in need of tender loving care by the time spring arrives.

As temperatures climb, gardeners can heed the following post-winter garden preparation tips in an effort to ensure some successful gardening in the months ahead.

Assess the damage Even if winter was mild, gardens might still have suffered some damage. Inspect garden beds and any fencing or barriers designed to keep wildlife from getting into the garden. Before planting anew, fix any damage that Mother Nature or local wildlife might have caused over the past several months.

Clear debris Garden beds and surrounding landscapes that survived winter without being damaged might still be littered with debris. Remove fallen leaves, branches and even litter that blew about on windy winter days before planting season. Make sure to discard any debris effectively so it does not find its way back into the garden.

Turn the greenhouse into a clean house Spring cleaning is not just for the interior of a home. Cleaning a greenhouse in advance of spring can help gardeners evict any overwintering pests that can threaten plant life once spring gardening season arrives. A thorough cleaning, which should include cleaning the inside of greenhouse glass and washing flower pots and plant trays, also can prevent plant diseases from surviving into spring.

Check for pests Speak with a local gardening professional to determine if there are any local pests to look out for and how to recognize and remove these pests from gardens. Pests may hibernate in the soil over the winter, and such unwelcome visitors can make it difficult for gardens to thrive come spring and summer.

Assess plant location If plants, flowers or gardens have struggled in recent years or never grew especially vibrant, then gardeners may want to assess the location of their plant life before spring gardening season begins. Some plants may not be getting enough sunlight in certain locations on a property, while others might be overexposed to the sun during spring and summer. Moving plants that are not thriving prior to the start of spring gardening season may be just what gardens need to flourish in the coming weeks.

Salmonella is 'no yolk'

Raising backyard chickens

A growing interest in raising chickens has enabled coops and nesting birds to spring up in all types of neighborhoods these days.

Sometimes dubbed "urban homesteading" or "urban farming," these homegrown operations enable people to enjoy fresh eggs from the comfort of home. Henhouses are just another extension of methods to reap the benefits of fresh, local and nonfactory-produced foods.

Although advocates insist that raising chickens on a small scale makes the birds less likely to carry disease than factory-farmed chickens, anyone raising chickens needs to be aware of the potential for disease - particularly salmonella. Also, it's important to care for chickens in a manner that is humane and in line with local laws.

What is salmonella?

Salmonella is a common bacteria that lives in the intestinal tract of humans, other mammals and some birds, including chickens. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that approximately 1.2 million illnesses and 450 deaths are attributed to salmonella annually in the United States. The illness causes diarrhea, fever and abdominal cramps between 12 and 72 hours after infection and can last between four and seven days. Salmonella can cause death when not properly treated with antibiotics.

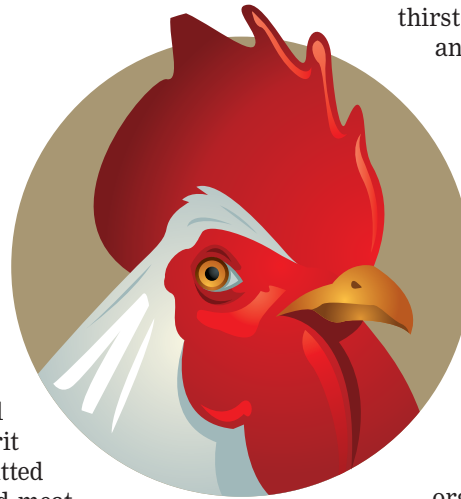
Spreading salmonella

Although humans cannot catch salmonella from chickens the way one would contract a cold, they can catch it through handling or consuming eggs of infected birds. The rural newsletter and farming resource Grit says salmonella can then be transmitted to humans who eat improperly cooked meat or eggs from infected birds or from putting their hands in your mouths after touching chickens or eggs that have come in contact with contaminated rodent or chicken feces.

The elderly, people with weakened immune systems and young children are at the highest risk for salmonella infection than others. Children who help gather eggs and do not thoroughly wash their hands afterward can be at increased risk.

Reducing risk

Maintaining clean conditions and routinely inspecting chickens for good health can help lower the risk of salmonella infection. Chicks and adult chickens that have salmonella may produce loose yellow or green droppings; have a drop in egg production, increased



thirst and decreased feed consumption; and show signs of weight loss. Look for rodents in the henhouse, as infected mice or other small rodents may transmit salmonella as well.

Chickens also need safe, roomy clean conditions to remain healthy and content. According to the resource MyPetChicken, a diet of whole grains and seeds also may be associated with decreased salmonella colonies.

Some experts warn against washing eggs as a preventative method. According to a report written by Diane Schivera, an organic livestock specialist for the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners

Association, thoroughly cleaning egg shells can remove a protective "bloom" that prevents bacteria from entering eggs. Eggs shouldn't be scrubbed, but some suggest a warm water rinse that will push dirt away from the shell's pores.

Old eggs are more susceptible to bacteria penetration. Storing eggs at room temperature may cause them to degrade faster. Once eggs are gathered, individuals should wash their hands and make sure the eggs are chilled.

Salmonella can be prevented in backyard chicken coops. Plus, it's important to note that risk of infection is very small. The American Egg Board's Egg Safety reference says an average consumer might encounter a contaminated egg once every 84 years.



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How burrowing wildlife cause damage

Soft, spongy lawns may be indicative of various problems underfoot that occur relatively sight unseen. Barring a septic system backup or considerable flooding, insects or animals may be to blame.

Moles will spend much of their lives underground, digging long tunnels from their dens in search of grubs, earthworms and tuber plants all year long. Moles can be gray, black, brown, or gold and will be between six and eight inches long. Their wide front feet are designed for excavating, and moles have very small eyes and angular snouts.

The tunnels are only about 1.5 inches in diameter and typically dug five to eight inches below the surface of the soil. Mole tunnels can be followed through the yard thanks to the appearance of elevated ridges on the soil surface.

Voles, also known by the name meadow mice, look more like mice than they do moles or gophers. Voles are small as well and primarily feed on foliage and plant roots. It can take a trained eye to differentiate between holes created by moles and voles, but foliage eaten around an entry or exit hole suggests the presence of voles. Unlike moles, voles don't create soil masses on the landscapes.



Groundhogs, are burrowing rodents. These rodents are larger than moles and voles. Groundhogs, also known as woodchucks, are the largest of the group. Groundhogs often stretch their subterranean tunnels to dens, which they may like to set up under backyard sheds or other protected areas. Groundhogs' size and desire to forage and eat their fill above-ground often make them easy to spot.

Once the animal doing the burrowing has been identified, homeowners can begin removing food sources and altering conditions to make their yards less critter-friendly. In the instance of moles, using a grub-killer can diminish their numbers. Wire mesh fences buried underground can deter digging into garden beds. Homeowners who are vigilant about disrupting burrows and tunnels may encourage rodents to relocate.

Weekend warrior projects

These weekend or one-day projects can satisfy your desires to fix up your home in a hurry.

- Painting a focal wall in a home can create a serious impact. The bonus is it will not take as long or require as many materials as painting an entire room.
- Dress up hardwood stairs with decorative carpet runners. If carpeting doesn't fit with the home's design, painting individual stair treads also can create visual appeal.
- Many entryways can use a minor overhaul, both inside and outside. Paint the front door, install a new mailbox or decorative house numbers. A new welcome mat can change the look as well. Inside, consider laying a new floor, a new floor can take a day or two.
- Instantly improve a kitchen or a bathroom with new fixtures. New faucets can provide aesthetic appeal and low-flow faucets can help conserve water.
- Gather and arrange framed photos, artwork or wall accents so that they ascend the wall of a staircase. Improve drab spaces with a little illumination. If hanging a new fixture is not within one's skill set, free-standing table or floor lamps also can cast a new glow on a space.
- Molding can add instant aesthetic appeal to a room. Molding is appropriate near the floor, at the top of walls where they meet the ceiling, or even mid-wall as a chair rail. Some homeowners like to create framed molding on walls in formal living spaces.
- Replacing hardware is a fast and easy project, but one that can have immediate impact. Swap out tired or outdated hardware for newer brushed metals and more impactful shapes and designs.



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Keep mold from growing in your home

The consequences of mold growth inside a home can be so dire, it's important to take steps to prevent mold growth. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency notes that controlling moisture levels in a home or apartment is the key to controlling mold as well.

Many instances of mold infestations can be traced to leaks or spills that were not quickly or properly addressed. The EPA advises that wet or damp materials or areas should be dried within 24 to 48 hours to prevent the growth of mold. Make sure spills are thoroughly cleaned as opposed to a cursory cleanup of only the areas visible to the naked eye. Inspect nearby crevices when spills occur to ensure the area where the spill happened and all surrounding areas vulnerable to mold growth are dry. In addition, fix leaky plumbing fixtures immediately.

Factors outside a home can sometimes contribute to mold growth within a home. Make sure the ground outside your home slopes away from the foundation. If the ground slopes toward your home, rainwater or runoff from sprinkler systems may direct

water into your home, creating conditions favorable to mold growth inside. Gutters and downspouts also should be inspected to ensure they are working optimally. If not, they can contribute to water damage on the roof that can ultimately lead to mold growth.

The EPA advises that homeowners keep indoor humidity below 60 percent relative humidity, which can be measured with humidity meters available at many hardware stores. Homeowners who can keep indoor humidity at levels 30 to 50 percent below relative humidity might be even more successful at keeping indoor mold growth at bay.

Surfaces can become wet even if a home has no leaky fixtures and no spills have occurred. For example, the surfaces of bathroom walls, ceilings and floors get wet when a home's inhabitants take hot baths or showers. That condensation is natural, but such surfaces are also susceptible to mold growth. Make sure to dry wet surfaces immediately, and keep exhaust fans on or windows open when bathing to decrease the likelihood of mold growth.

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Debris from home improvement projects can often be recycled. According to Waste Management, the largest residential recycler and renewable energy provider in North America, common construction materials such as concrete, porcelain, tile, lumber, metals, masonry, plastic, carpet, and insulation can potentially be recycled. When recycled, debris from construction projects may ultimately be used in various ways to benefit the planet. For example, such debris may be used as inerts that become road base, while clear wood may be transformed into mulch or biomass fuel. Crushed concrete can go on to live a second life as gravel or become dry aggregate for new concrete. Homeowners who want to recycle as much of their home improvement project debris as possible can work with Waste Management and/or their contractors to ensure the materials they no longer need continue to be put to good use.



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Grow beautiful (and edible) flowers in the garden for the dinner table

Did you know that marigolds are just one of the many flowers that can be consumed?

Cultivating beautiful blooms is a popular pastime for gardeners near and far. While gazing at a yard full of vibrant colors or enjoying the aroma of freshly cut blooms is enough for many gardeners, others may want to embrace a long-enduring tradition - growing edible flowers.

Cooking with edible flowers is a trend that has endured for centuries. According to Fleurs Gourmandes, the first recorded history of edible flowers occurred in 140 BC. Use of calendula in salads dates back to the ancient Greeks and Romans. Victorian-era candied flowers and flower-encrusted sweets took edible flowers to new heights. Today, nothing may make a meal seem more gourmet than the inclusion of flower petals in the recipe.

Of course, before delving into the expanded world of cooking using edible blooms, some notes of caution should first be mentioned. Avoid flowers that may have been sprayed with fungicides, herbicides or insecticides. To verify safety, only use edible flowers grown specifically for this purpose, not flowers picked from roadsides or from landscapes. Secondly, remember that not all flowers are edible. Some can be poisonous or cause severe gastrointestinal upset when consumed. That means all flowers should be carefully researched prior to experimenting with them in the kitchen.

To begin growing - and eating - edible flowers, refer to this list of varieties deemed safe and be careful to double-check against allergies and any interactions with medications prior to use.

- **Allium:** These are blossoms from the allium family, which include garlic, chives and leeks. These flowers can be used to add flavor to foods.

- **Basil blossoms:** It may be customary to pinch off the blossoms of basil, which come in colors from white to lavender in order to stimulate growth of the leaves of the plant. However, the blossoms, which are more mild than the leaves, can be tasty as well.

- **Calendula:** Sometimes known as "poor man's saffron," this yellow flower in the marigold family can taste like saffron when it's sautéed. Uncooked, calendula can have spicy notes that add variety to salads and garnishes.

- **Chamomile:** This plant features small, daisy-type flowers that can be used in treats and teas.

- **Cilantro:** The flowers from the cilantro plant can be eaten, just as the leaves and the seeds that form the spice coriander.

- **Fennel:** Just like the plant itself, the flowers of fennel have a subtle licorice flavor.

- **Hibiscus:** Hibiscus blooms are famously used in hibiscus tea, which is tart and cranberry-like.

- **Lavender:** The sweet, perfumed taste of lavender works in cocktails and desserts.

- **Marigolds:** These tiny flowers may be used in vegetable gardens to repel animal and insect pests. Blossoms have a fresh citrus taste that can be used in cooking.

- **Pansies:** These vibrant early

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bloomers can take on a wintergreen flavor and look beautiful when glazed on cakes and other desserts.

• **Roses:** Beautiful to behold, rose petals can lend a subtle, fruity flavor to many different foods as well.

• **Zucchini:** The blossoms from this squash, which have a slightly sweet taste, can be enjoyed in many different ways. Some people batter and fry the blossoms, while others may stuff them with herbs and cheeses.



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How to read a nursery plant tag

Nurseries and garden centers offer dozens of plants that come in various colors, leaf variations and sizes. Understanding how to read plant tags is key to making good choices. Once you know how to decode that data, you're on the way to choosing the right plants.

Common name

The common name of the plant tends to be the most noticeable word or words on the tag. This is the name the plant is referred to outside of scientific circles. Most plants have one or more common names in addition to their botanical name.

Scientific (botanical) name

Scientific names are also known as the Latin names of the plant. Such names will be written in italics on the tag and are usually one or two words. The scientific name includes the genus (group) and the species of the plant.

Perennial or annual

The tag should designate the plant as an annual or perennial. Annuals are not expected to last through the winter and

will need to be replanted the following year. Perennials can over-winter and will regenerate year after year.

Cultivar

A cultivar is the variation on the species. It may describe a size or color variation. The cultivar is listed in single quotations by the scientific name.

Sun requirements

The tag should list how much sun exposure the plant requires to thrive. It may be anywhere from full sun to full shade.

Height and spread

The label frequently includes the maximum growing height and width the plant should reach when mature. This tells you just how much room the plant will take up and how to space plants in the garden.

Water needs

How much water the plant requires may be featured on the tag as well. This helps gardeners know if they need soil to be damp or relatively dry.



Hardiness or zone

Tags that list zones will describe the coldest zone in which the plant can exist. Otherwise, it will give a range. Many annuals don't list a hardiness zone because they don't last beyond one season.

Tags also may list information such as special care needs, drought tolerance, uses for the plant, and when the plant blooms. When noted, tags help gardeners make the right selections to keep plants healthy.

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Reducing and reusing your household trash

Homeowners can feel like they're always taking out the trash. Active families tend to generate a lot of garbage, and it's not uncommon to find the kitchen trash pail overflowing each day.

A report from SaveOnEnergy found that garbage production numbers are staggering. The average American produces 4.4 pounds of trash each day. That means the average family of four can generate 17.6 pounds of trash a day. Every year, Americans produce 254 million tons of trash. The Conference Board of Canada found Canadians produce more garbage per capita than any other country.

Thanks to modern sanitation systems, which remove garbage in a timely manner, it's difficult to get a good handle on just how much trash families generate. But one look at the statistics - and the size of landfills - clearly illustrates that garbage is a concern. Thankfully, there are ways to cut down on personal waste.

• **Recycle as much as you can.** Post a list of all items that can be recycled where you live. Make sure to separate these items from the regular trash. Seek out facilities that will recycle items that are not collected in curbside pickup.

• **Avoid buying disposable products.**

Reusing items over and over saves money and resources. Many disposable products are packaged in plastic, which may be produced with toxic substances that can leach into the environment.

• **Use old rags for cleaning.** When scouring the house, opt for old rags made from towels and T-shirts that are past their prime. These rags can be washed and reused again and again.

• **Mend broken items if possible.** Before tossing something into the trash, figure out if it can be repaired. A simple fix may breathe a few more years of utility into the product.

• **Cook only what you can eat.** The UN Environmental Program estimates that one-third of the food produced for human consumption across the globe is wasted. Store and use leftovers efficiently. Stick to portion sizes when cooking, and find uses for foods (farms may take food



scraps for pigs) before tossing them in the trash.

• **Compost usable items.** Another way to repurpose certain food items is to turn them into fertilizer. Egg shells, fruit rinds, coffee grounds, and more can be placed in a compost heap instead of the garbage.

• **Donate used items.** Books, magazines, toys, clothing, household items - all of these things can be donated

or traded.

• **Use reusable tote bags when shopping.** Keep plastic shopping bags out of landfills by recycling them or bringing along your own cloth bags to the stores.

• **Stop junk mail.** Contact companies to remove your name from lists of junk mail. Invest in a shredder and turn junk mail into packing materials or bedding for pet cages.

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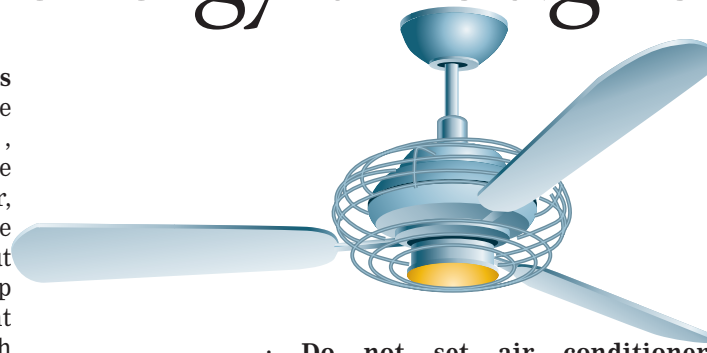
Energy bills tend to be high in summertime, when many people crank up their air conditioners in an attempt to combat the heat. For some households, higher energy bills might be stretching their budgets, while others might be looking for ways to reduce their carbon footprints.

Conserving energy can help homeowners save money and help the planet at the same time. And reducing energy consumption in the summer does not require men and women to sacrifice comfort in the name of conservation. In fact, various strategies can help homeowners and apartment dwellers reduce their summertime energy consumption.

· **Stop cooling an empty home.** A cool home might be the ultimate necessity during summer heat waves, but there's no reason to cool a residence when no one is home. According to the U.S. Department of Energy, operating thermostats more efficiently can help homeowners trim their cooling costs by as much as 10 percent. One way to be more efficient with thermostats is to keep the house warmer than normal when no one is home. Programmable thermostats can be set so air conditioning units turn on shortly before residents arrive home, ensuring the house is comfortable and no energy is wasted.

· **Narrow the gap between indoor and outdoor temperatures.** The DOE notes that the smaller the difference between the temperature indoors and outside the lower cooling costs will be. While it may be tempting to set thermostats to room temperature (68 degrees F) on days when temperatures reach 90 degrees F or above, that's an enormous temperature gap that will result in a high energy bill. Instead, the DOE recommends setting thermostats to 78 degrees F whenever possible.

· **Open the windows at night.** Daytime temperatures, particularly during the dog days of summer, may necessitate the use of air conditioners. But when temperatures drop considerably at night - you can sleep with the windows open. This reduces energy consumption and saves money, and can be a great way to introduce fresh air into a home during a time of year when air can become stagnant.



· **Do not set air conditioner thermostats at lower than normal temperatures when turning them on.** The DOE notes that setting thermostats at lower than normal temperatures when turning air conditioners on will not cool

homes any faster than setting them at typical temperatures. Such a strategy will only lead to excessive energy consumption and higher energy bills.

· **Install ceiling fans.** Ceiling fans can improve cooling efficiency in a home. According to the DOE, ceiling fans allow people who use air conditioners to raise the thermostats on their AC units about 4 degrees without adversely affecting comfort levels. Many people find that ceiling fans keep rooms cool enough without the need for air conditioners, thus saving themselves money throughout the summer months.

Watch the savings add up by replacing those energy-hungry appliances

The United States Department of Energy says the average American family spends about \$2,200 each year for energy costs, and large, inefficient appliances no doubt contribute heavily. Appliances that are several years old, including refrigerators, washing machines, dryers, and even ovens, may no longer meet the stringent energy-saving specifications required of new items. That means such appliances are negatively affecting the environment and their owners' bottom lines.

According to the Energy Star program, a refrigerator that is at least 15 years old may be consuming twice as much energy as a newer Energy Star-rated refrigerator. Even though purchasing new appliances will require a financial commitment, such items can save money while benefitting the environment.

Read the label

Familiarize yourself with the "EnergyGuide" label that appears on most appliances. This label gives consumers an idea as to how much it will cost to run the appliance, as well as how much energy the unit uses on average. Use this label to compare the different models you are considering.

Choose appliances that are part of the Energy Star program, for products that reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Downgrade to a small model

Large appliances tend to consume more energy than small appliances. Scaling down the size of the appliance can reduce energy consumption. Empty nesters may no longer need a refrigerator capable of holding food for a family of four, while those who routinely dine out may find they don't get much use out of their larger refrigerator.

Look for rebate programs

Rebate and recycling programs can help reduce the initial cost of purchasing new appliances. The government may offer tax incentives to those people who purchase a new, energy-efficient models.

Think about future salability

Homeowners who do not intend to stay in their homes much longer may find energy efficient appliances make their homes more attractive to prospective buyers.

Energy efficient appliances can reduce homeowners' carbon footprints while also saving them considerable amounts of money over the life of the products.

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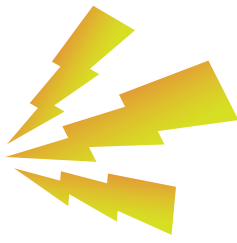
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