



Fall
HOME IMPROVEMENT

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Recycle your leaves creatively

• **Mulch:** Shredded leaves can make for a great amendment to fertilizer for garden beds and even the lawn. Leaves lying on the grass can be mulched into small pieces with a mulching mower so they don't choke the blades of grass. Leaves also can be broken down with a string trimmer, a leaf blower that has a vacuum function or a commercial shredder/chipper. Add the shredded leaves to a compost pile or use them to fill container plants before adding regular potting soil.

• **Insulation:** Collect leaves to mound over delicate perennial plants and shrubs. The leaves will add more warmth to the soil and may help plants make it through harsh winters. Just remove the leaves slowly when spring arrives so that the soil underneath can get the sunlight and water it needs to thrive. Leave some leaves in the yard so that animals can use them as nesting material and line their dens for the winter.

• **Stuffing:** Create whimsical scarecrows as part of your autumn decoration scheme. Gather older clothes that you no longer use and stuff the sleeves of shirts

and the legs of pants with leaves, which are less expensive and easier to come by than straw. Use a few pieces of straw around the neck and hand areas of the scarecrow for visual effect. Tie off with twine and display your scarecrow.

• **Bedding:** Chicken owners can use fallen leaves as bedding in their chicken coops. Dry leaves also may create more comfortable and drier conditions for goats and other livestock. Goats may look to recently fallen leaves as a nutritious food source. Gather the leaves and let the goats munch before you further rake and compost the leaves.

• **Decorations:** Natural leaves can be used as decorations both inside and outside a home. String freshly fallen leaves together and wrap them around a grapevine wreath for a rustic door decoration. Leaves can be placed in clear vases and put on display for a cheap way to showcase some autumn color. Preserve favorite leaves with a lamination machine or by sealing them between heated sheets of waxed paper. Cut out the leaf shapes and use for hanging window decorations.

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Get your home fall- and winter-ready with 5 simple projects

These simple home maintenance projects can help lower your energy bills, prevent more costly repairs and/or increase the lifespan of your home.

1. 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 thoroughly.

2. 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. One of the easiest and most effective defenses against heat loss is proper insulation. Prevent cold drafts from entering and heated air from leaving 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 a mineral wool insulation. Cut the insulation to fit the cavity and press into place. This will help improve energy efficiency as soon as it's in place and provide savings over the lifetime of your home.

4. 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. 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 house to prevent flooding.

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There's more than one way to peel a pumpkin!

Autumn is the season when pumpkins are ripe for the picking, and thousands of people flock to local farms and roadside vendors to select perfect pumpkins. Many pumpkins are turned into decorative jack-o'-lanterns for Halloween, only to be tossed in the trash come November 1. That could be because many people are unaware of the various ways they can put pumpkins to good use.

Pumpkins are gourds and members of the squash family and have been grown and used for thousands of years. Evidence suggests that pumpkins date back to 7000 B.C., possibly originating in Mexico. Today they are widely used for decorating around Halloween, but there are many other things that can be done with pumpkins.

• **Create a food vessel.** Pumpkins can be transformed into bowls to hold soup, punch, fruit, or even dips. Make sure the pumpkin has been cleaned well of its pulp and seeds, as well as the stringy flesh that is inside. Rub the inside walls of the pumpkin with oil to keep them from drying out and caving in, then fill with your food of choice.

• **Make pumpkin puree.** Puree from a pumpkin can be used in all types of recipes, from soups to baked goods. The puree



also can replace the oil in cake recipes. Cut the pumpkin and scoop out the seeds and stringy membranes. Then place it cut-side-down in a pan with a little water in the bottom. Bake at 350 F for around 90 minutes. The flesh will become tender and easily removable. Blend the resulting puree in a food processor and reserve flesh for recipes. Some pumpkins are sweeter or better to use as part of recipes. Check the variety you're purchasing.

• **Whip up a facial.** Use some pumpkin puree with a little brown sugar and a dash of milk to create a vitamin-rich facial mask.

• **Get illuminated.** Turn hollowed-out

mini pumpkins into candles. Melt soy wax, beeswax or the gel type of candle wax that can be found at most craft stores. Add your favorite scent and place a wick into the bottom of the pumpkin. Then pour the wax into hollowed-out space and allow it to harden. Try the same thing with bumpy and multi-colored gourds.

• **Turn it into a flower pot.** Fill a hollow pumpkin with soil. Don't worry about scraping the pulp completely clean - it can be used to help fertilize the soil. Plant your favorite fall flowers into the festive and earth-friendly flower pot. When the pump-

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kin shows signs of rotting, simply put the whole thing into a traditional flower pot or bury it directly in the ground.

• **Make pumpkin stock.** While vegetable or meat-based stocks may be the standards, pumpkin can be used to make stock as well. Clean out the seeds from the stringy guts of the pumpkin and put the guts into a pot filled with water. Add celery, carrots or any other aromatic vegetables for extra flavor. Allow to boil for at least 30 minutes. The stock is ready when it begins to change color. Strain and reserve the stock for use in a variety of

recipes.

• **Add to compost bins.** Pumpkins are rich in zinc, vitamin A and vitamin C, among other nutrients. You can add the discarded pumpkins to your backyard compost bins to further replenish the soil.

• **Turn into a billowing cauldron.** Instead of a standard jack-o'-lantern, put a glass jar into the carved pumpkin, add dish soap and hot water to the jar and then put in a piece of dry ice. Bubbles and smoke will pour out of the pumpkin to create a spooktacular effect.

Don't wait to clean those gutters

Homeowners know that gutter cleaning is an important part of fall home maintenance, but they may not completely understand why. Gutter cleaning can be a messy and time-consuming project, making it a project many homeowners are apt to put off. Waiting to clean gutters can lead to considerable problems, so it's best to tackle the job well in advance of the winter.

Gutters guide rainwater and runoff from the roof so it drains properly away from homes. When gutters are clogged with leaves, a number of problems can occur.

• **Leaks:** Water will take the path of least resistance. When clogged gutters do not allow the water to drain away properly, water will find other ways to the ground. It may work itself right into the walls and ceilings of the home. In addition to damaging walls and ceilings, moisture inside the home can promote mold growth. It also makes interior spaces more appealing to pests.

• **Excess weight:** Gutters are meant to hold the weight of traveling water and not much more. Gutters filled with leaves

and other debris can quickly become heavy. This stresses the entire gutter system and can cause the gutters to fall off of the home entirely.

• **Nesting areas:** Clogged gutters can serve as nesting areas for insects and birds. Mosquitoes and other insects lay eggs in pooling water. Gutters can quickly become breeding spots for harmful pests. Furthermore, birds may nest in gutters, creating unsightly messes and more damage. Seeds that sprout in clogged gutters can grow unchecked.

• **Ice-damming:** Left untreated, pooled water and leaves in gutters can freeze over. Blocked water can back up and push against the roof, lifting shingles and destroying the roof in the process.

• **Foundation trouble:** Clogged gutters also may contribute to flooded basements and cracked foundations. Leaking water will pool around the foundation, expanding when frozen and causing cracks in basement and crawlspace walls. It also can cause driveways and other cement areas around the home to sag and crack.

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Converting garages spaces

Expanding a living space can be expensive, and a more affordable option may be converting existing basement or garage space into something more livable. Garages already are built on a foundation, have four walls and a roof overhead, so a garage-conversion project is merely a matter of turning this utilitarian area into a living space.

Before beginning the renovation, homeowners should consider the benefits versus the cost of converting the garage. Those who intend to sell their homes rather than retire there may learn that a con-

verted garage can affect the resale value.

Always apply for the proper permits and learn the zoning laws to see if a garage conversion is acceptable in your town or city. It's best to go by the book so that work can be inspected for safety.

To make garages seem like a seamless part of the rest of the house you will need to remove all garage evidence. Slab floors need to be raised and insulated. Walls also need to be insulated and finished to improve comfort and soundproofing and windows may need to be added.

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come by way of modifying the garage door entry. Some prefer to leave the existing door to keep the appearance of a garage from the curb, while others remove the garage door and rebuild the exterior wall so that it has a window or another architectural element. An architect can help

suggest design elements that will make the space seem like it was always part of the main living area of the home.

Landscaping can minimize the appearance of a garage as well. Shrubbery, pavers and other techniques can blend the garage renovation into the rest of the yard.



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