Top 10 Home Improvement Tips Every Homeowner Should Know

It doesn't matter if you've bought a newly built home, a condo in a maintained community, or a fixer-upper—owning your own place brings out the home improvement itch in us all (or at least requires us to do necessary repairs and maintenance tasks). Here are ten pieces of advice to help turn your dwelling place into a better home.



10. Choose the Improvements That Add the Most Value to Your Home

- [ ] If you were offered $100,000, no strings attached, what home improvements would you do? Chances are, a long laundry list of changes come to mind, from refinishing the hardwood floors to adding a new bathroom. Some home improvements, however, are more likely to increase your home's value than others. Although you shouldn't think of your home as an investment, with limited home improvement funds, it's good to consider whether a project has a decent return on investment.

9. Tackle the Quick Projects That Are Most Timely

- [ ] Whether winter is coming or you're considering projects in another season, some home improvements are more urgent than others—saving you money immediately or preventing devastating damage. Sometimes it only takes ten minutes or less to make simple changes around the house that boost your living space.

8. Decide to DIY or Not

- [ ] Even if you're a weekend warrior with a well-stocked workshop, not all home improvement projects are suitable to do yourself (or at least, without the help of a professional). Know your limits, start small if you're a beginner, and then keep calm and DIY on (if you so wish).

7. Hone Your Home Improvement Skills

- [ ] Big projects or small, probably all of us could stand to learn some decent home repair or home improvement skills. (All around the home, there are things we should never have to pay others to fix for us.) Learn Bob Villa-worthy skills and help others at the same time by volunteering or through free clinics and other resources. Turn to great reading resources and try starter projects too. If you get stuck on a project, iOS app Fountain will connect you to a home improvement expert to answer your question for $5. (Also, did you know we have a home improvement subblog here at Lifehacker called Workshop?)

6. Find Inspiration for Your Next Home Project

- [ ] Pinterest is your friend, homeowners. As is Houzz, This Old House, and BHG. Zillow Diggs is pretty neat because it not only shows you project photos, but cost estimates and contractors as well. You can also binge watch HGTV on Netflix, but I'm warning you, you may never leave the house again.

5. Get the Right Tools

- [ ] You can't really improve your home much with just your bare hands (you'll need a multi-tool at least!). Equip your toolbox with the essential tools for any minor repair or major project, such as basic plumbing tools. Don't forget your smartphone might be the best DIY tool in your kit, though, and, when all else fails, there's duct tape.

4. Find Money for Your Home Improvement

- [ ] Unfortunately, most home improvements do not pay for themselves. If you can't afford to finance the project in full with cash, know the different ways you can finance your home improvement without putting your home at risk. Also, if you know the difference between tax breaks you get for home repairs or home improvements, you can make the proper deductions at tax time and get some money back from your project. Similarly, if you're paying private mortgage insurance, home improvements that increase the value of your home could help you eliminate that cost, which, although it doesn't raise funds for your project, can reduce your housing expenses overall.

3. Choose the Right Contractor

- [ ] About as important as finding a good dentist and finding a good therapist: Finding a responsible handyman or contractor. Horror stories of homeowners being scammed by contractors or having work done so shoddily that it cost thousands of dollars to redo (not to mention the money already spent) give me the shivers. Vet your contractors carefully:
- [ ] Get recommendations from friends, neighbors, and supply houses.
- [ ] Check for complaints against the contractor.
- [ ] Find out what licenses and permits they need.
- [ ] Check out the contractor's insurance. Don't skip this step!
- [ ] Meet with the contractor.
- [ ] Get quotes. Track the quote variables with a spreadsheet or other list.
- [ ] Ask for references and check them out.

- [ ] The FTC offers advice on questions you should ask a contractor, during which you might want to slyly take a look at their trucks and tools for telling signs.

2. Save Money on Your Home Improvement Projects

- [ ] The more money we save on one home improvement project, the more we have left for all the other ones we want to do. In addition to knowing the remodeling projects that offer the most bang for your buck, know which elements of a project you can splurge or skimp on—spend more on items that are hard to replace, such as the bathtub, but skimp on the faucet, for example, or spend more on a professional range if you're a gourmet cook and save on the decorative tiles and flooring that look like premium materials.

- [ ] Shop at reuse centers (including architectural salvage stores) to save big bucks on materials, appliances, and furnishings. And after your project, pay it forward by donating your home improvement leftovers to Habitat for Humanity.

1. Have a Plan

- [ ] Last but not least, one of the worst things you can do when it comes to home improvements is to start a project without the major details—cost, time, materials, and design—as realistic as possible from the start. Nothing costs more than having to "change horses in midstream" (e.g., you want to move the fridge somewhere else now or want to change your tile choice). Use design tools to conceptualize your project and add a healthy buffer (10-15% more) to your time and financial budget to account for the inevitable surprises.

- [ ] Even if you don't do major projects like remodeling the kitchen or building a deck, it's wise to set aside some money each year for repair costs and use an essential maintenance calendar to keep your home sweet home in tip-top shape all year round.

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