



Winter HOME & GARDEN

Decor on a Budget

The winter season is one of the busiest times in terms of entertaining in your home. Your home turns into a hotspot for guests this time of year with holiday get-togethers, family gatherings and winter parties.

Given the cold weather outside, guests will likely be spending the majority of their visits indoors. That's why winter interior decorating can be one of the most fun parts of the season.

Impress guests with your creativity. Inspire friends and family members to design their own homes in innovative ways. And do so on a budget to really show off your craftiness.

ARTS & CRAFTS

Your local arts and crafts store can be the best place to find winter decorations at affordable prices. You can find materials for building your own wreaths, snow globes or ornaments. You can even take classes on home decorating.

Candles serve as a great design point for various arts and crafts designs. You can wrap cylindrical candles with ribbons in the style and colors of your choice.

Decorative accents such as candle toppers and votive holders are complementary pieces that can make your home design look and smell great.

RESEARCH THE PROS

Between your local interior designers and craft shops,



© FOTOLIA

there are many sources available for tracking down information and advice on wintertime decorating. Have an idea of what design you're hoping to achieve within your home before seeking professional guidance.

You also can take your

research online to find design ideas on popular social media sharing sites and home improvement video resources. Watching the professionals work their magic can help give you the knowledge and confidence to pull off your design goals.

TABLE CENTERPIECES

The key to any beautiful table design is the centerpiece. The materials you use can make all the difference. Wintertime offers options aplenty for nature- and holiday-inspired design.

For a big impact on a bud-

get, incorporate sparkling fabric or brightly colored paper to complement your centerpiece of natural materials such as pine cones, cranberries or winter plants. Choose either live or fake plants, depending on how much effort you want to put into caring for the pieces.

Caring for Plants in Winter

Winter is a crucial time for the health of your plants.

Depending on the area where you live, there are many plants you'll want to actually bring inside during the cold months.

Snow, frost and windy conditions can wreck havoc on your plants when the weather turns.

On the other hand, cool-season flowers bring a vibrancy to your garden during an otherwise colorless time of year. Pansies, snapdragons and English daisies are great options in geographic areas where freezes are infrequent.

That's why it's important to take preventive steps today for maximum protection.

PREPARING PLANTS FOR SURVIVAL

If you want your plants to survive the winter, preparation is key. This means protecting plants from frost and excessive dryness. Too much moisture from heavy snows or rains also can have a negative impact on your plants.

Take steps to prepare your plants by removing dead leaves and buds, which prevents the exertion of extra energy on the part of the plant. Energy conservation helps winter-hardy plants stand up to the elements

during the cold weather.

COVER THE ROOTS

You also can use straw, bark or autumn leaves to cover the root areas of your plants. This offers your plants critical protection against winter conditions.

Wrap any pots holding plants to help protect the roots of your plants from the cold air. Use bubble-wrap or fleece as wrapping material.

The roots are the most sensitive parts of the plant, and keeping them safe — especially in harsh wintry weather — will help make sure they make it to see the springtime season.

PRUNING IN THE WINTER

Winter pruning can result in a beautiful blossom of new growth by the time spring comes around. The Arbor Day Foundation recommends that you wait until the coldest part of the winter has passed. This will set your plants and trees up for maximum springtime health.

Shrubs that flower in the middle or latter parts of summer should be pruned in the winter, as well. This will enhance flowering and lead to a stunning springtime display.



Carbon Monoxide

It's called the silent killer because the odorless, colorless and toxic gas can literally take your life before you even are aware it's in your home.

Even at lower levels, carbon monoxide poses a serious threat to your family and is one you need to work hard to eliminate within your home. That's because poisoning can set in when enough inhalation of carbon monoxide occurs.

At lower levels of exposure, carbon monoxide also can cause mild effects that are often mistaken for the flu. Symptoms can include headaches, dizziness, disorientation, nausea and fatigue.

HOW TO PREVENT CARBON MONOXIDE EXPOSURE

For the most part, carbon monoxide exposure can be prevented or lessened through the use of common sense. It also is critical to have a few carbon monoxide detectors in your home to alert you if levels have become dangerous

Never use a generator inside a home or other closed off spaces such as a garage, crawlspace or shed, as deadly levels of carbon monoxide can quickly build up within these areas.

Carbon monoxide also can leak from unvented kerosene and gas space heaters, which many families use as extra heating sources during the cold winter months. Watch for



© FOTOLIA

excessive back-drafting from furnaces, gas water heaters, wood stoves and fireplaces, as well.

EPA TIPS

The following tips from the

Environmental Protection Agency will help create quality indoor air that is free of carbon monoxide:

- Keep gas appliances properly adjusted;
- Consider purchasing a

vented space heater when replacing an unvented one;

- Use proper fuel in kerosene space heaters;
- Install and use an exhaust fan vented to outdoors over gas stoves;

- Open flues when fireplaces are in use;

- Have a trained professional inspect, clean and tune up central heating systems; and
- Do not idle your vehicle inside the garage.

Winterizing Garden Gear

The key to maintaining your garden throughout the spring doesn't start and stop with preparing your ground and buying seeds. Having high-quality, fully functioning tools and equipment at your disposal also is critical.

To achieve this, there are steps you can take now to make sure you're ready to prune, trim and weed around your garden when the warmer months get here.

SIMPLE CLEANING

If you stored away your tools before cleaning them in the fall, now is the perfect time to remove all dried or caked-on dirt. Use a strong wire brush to clean off your rakes, shovels, trowels and hoes. Soak tools in water first to help with the removal process.

Wooden handles can be preserved with a light coating of paste wax or oil. This will lengthen the lifespan of your tools by preventing cracking or splitting of the wood.

SHARPEN YOUR TOOLS

Tools that have blades are easy to maintain if you put in the proper preventive maintenance. Sharpen dull tools using a whetstone or file according to the sharpener's specifications. Generally, working at a 45-degree angle is your best bet. Start at the outer edge of the blade and move toward the center in an even fashion.

For your lawn mower, be sure to clean and sharpen the blades to help prevent rust



© FOTOLIA

from building up. Follow all safety precautions in your owner's manual when removing and sharpening blades. Make sure you purchase the type of blades that are recom-

mended for your mower.

BATTERY CARE

For equipment such as riding mowers that have an on-board battery, it's always a

good idea to remove it for the winter and store it in a cool, dry place. Keep it away from any gas cans or gas water heaters to prevent accidents.

Don't forget to clean the

battery terminal with a metal brush or specialized cleaner. Removing and cleaning the battery will help position your mower for a quick start-up in the spring.

Preventing Ice Dams

Homeowners tend to think about spring rain or strong summer winds as the biggest threats to their roofs. But ice dams — thick ridges of ice on the roof — can signal a pool of melted water ready to wreak havoc on your home.

These winter hazards are called ice dams — the sheer weight of which can cause gutters and downspouts to pull away from the house.

Doing what you can to prevent ice dams can help you keep your pocketbook — and sanity — in tact this winter season.

ICE DAMS: THE FACTS

Water damage and freezing accounts for the second largest share of homeowner insurance claims, according to the Insurance Information Institute. Ice dams are so costly because of the comprehensive impact they can have on your home.

Cracked plaster ceilings and walls, peeling paint, soaked carpets and warped wood floors are just a few examples of what kind of damage ice dams can cause. Wet insulation and the formation of mold are additional causes for concern, underscoring the importance of identifying and mitigating any ice dams that are accumulating on your home.

THE CAUSE OF ICE DAMS

Ice dams form when melted snow travels down the roof in liquid form and refreezes at the eave line and gutter. This ridge can rapidly expand and block the flow of melting



© FOTOLIA

snow. This leads to a potentially dangerous water buildup that forms a puddle on the roof.

Usually, ice dams form in the presence of one or more of the following factors:

- Roof snow buildup
- Home heat loss

• Subfreezing temperatures. The duration and severity of these conditions plays a big role in determining how susceptible the home is to ice dam damage. The more snow and longer the subfreezing temperatures remain, for example, the more likely the

ice dam is to materialize.

So what prevents ice dams from taking over your roof space? Proper insulation and ventilation of the attic space can be the best protection for homeowners. According to the U.S. Department of Energy, adding insulation to

an unheated attic will have a greater impact on energy consumption than placing it anywhere else in the house. This also will help your home handle subfreezing temperatures more effectively — an important tool in the fight against ice dams.

Winter Organization

Has cabin fever set in for you yet this winter? Are you feeling all cooped up and ready for that first springtime walk around your neighborhood? Put that energy to use organizing your home.

Winter is a great time for cutting through the clutter and setting yourself up for a smooth transition into spring.

START SMALL

The first step to organizing the items in your home is taking inventory of what you have lying around. Go through all your closets and clothes with three separate bags — keepers, donations and recyclables. Donate shirts, pants and shoes that are still in good shape but don't regularly make it into your wardrobe choices.

Recycle old shoe boxes and other paper or plastic items that are simply taking up space. For items that you're too attached to for donations or recycling, make sure to re-organize them once you have cleared out space.



© FOTOLIA

Documents and supplies can build up, leaving your office space a central point of clutter in your home.

IN THE KITCHEN

The kitchen can quickly turn into a disorganized mess depending on how often you use it and how much time you devote to keeping its contents streamlined. Filter through your spices and throw away any expired items.

Pull out the cans and boxes from your pantry and reorganize them in a way that makes sense both visually and functionally for your daily usage.

Donate any non-expired canned goods that you don't anticipate using soon to your local food bank.

Consider an updated storage system for pots, pans and cooking utensils. These items are best stored on hanging racks or drawers that are conveniently within your reach. Donate any items you haven't used in more than a year, or store them in another room to give you more space.

THE HOME OFFICE

More Americans than ever are choosing to work from home or start home-based businesses. If you fall into this category, you know that documents and supplies can build up, leaving your office space a central point of clutter in your home.

Take a half day off of work to systematically go through all your home office papers, to-do-lists, contracts and files. Organize them in a way that makes it easy for you to access them when necessary. This wintertime home office cleanup will leave you refreshed and ready for your spring workload.

Late Winter Gardening

By the time late winter comes around, the gardener in all of us is chomping at the bit.

Sure, it's difficult to envision our bright, bountiful garden through the snow and bone-rattling temperatures.

But as spring approaches, we are closer than ever to lacing up the gardening shoes and getting busy at our favorite pastime.

Late winter is the perfect time to start looking forward to spring weather and all that comes with it. Your two main focuses of concentration this time of year when it comes to your garden is readying the ground and readying your wallet. Read on for ways to achieve both.

READYING THE GROUND

Winter yard chores are vital for preparing your ground for plants, flowers and landscaping. Taking care of any leftover outdoor activities like raking or leveling ground can lead to great results when it's time to put shovel to dirt.

And while this time of year may not be ideal for spending

too much time outdoors, take advantage of any sunny days to get a head start on your gardening area.

Here are the areas you should focus on:

- Remove storm remnants like leaves or branches from your garden area
- Raking and fixing up flower beds where weeds have built up

- Fixing any outbuildings or storage sheds that you use for gardening storage

- Winter pruning while plants are dormant

- Starting your early spring crops like garlic

Any prep work you can take care of now will mean more time enjoyed in the garden when the weather turns more favorable.

READYING YOUR WALLET

Gardening can be an expensive hobby. There is the equipment and seeds as well as the water and mulch.

That's why it's important to start saving some cash for your springtime splurge.

Try to either stow away a few bucks during the winter or find deals on seeds, mulch or spring equipment while

it's cold outside.

This is the perfect time for great deals on these types of materials at your local gardening center.

Don't forget to allocate some of your budget for any extra expenses like re-painting your window boxes or replacing your lawn furniture. These types of purchases can add up in a hurry.



© FOTOLIA