

Spring forward: Getting a jump on warm weather projects during winter months

By SALLY D. KETCHUM
Special to the Record-Eagle

During winter, snow isn't the only thing that accumulates. Life's stuff piles up, too. Mid-winter seems to be the worst time for the overload of clutter and projects that need to be done.

However, these housebound winter months can be the perfect time to get a jump on spring by seeing the home at its potential best, envisioning what needs to go, what needs to be added and what needs change.

While it may be early for spring cleaning, it's not too early to think spring by surveying rooms for what one decorator calls "room dandruff" — unwelcome clutter, unread magazines, ubiquitous knickknacks and small, abandoned projects.

January is white sale month and the month to be proactive about spring. Actually "white sale" is a misnomer, for the sales are colorful. Think spring color, one-color, one hue in various shades, or one family of colors like pastels. Paint is also on sale this month, another factor in planning color.

Traverse City interior artist Joan Bonney has strategies to lighten up rooms for spring. For one, she suggested, change the

color of candles.

"Candles are still a warm and welcoming part of any room," she said, "but holiday colors can be replaced with spring colors, perhaps the colors of primroses."

Bring pretty branches inside and stick them in pots or even with foliage houseplants or bouquets of fresh flowers. Twigs are airy and do not add heaviness or clutter. In a few weeks, blooms may be forced from branches to bring spring inside. Bonney also suggested rearranging furniture to focus on an outside birdfeeder.

Of course, the jump on spring applies to the yard, gardens and grounds, too. A two-fronted attack works well: taking notes and taking pictures of the winter yard. A garden diary to record, under each dated entry, what each plant or tree is doing, how it looks now and the weather conditions on that date will be a boon when choosing planting sites.

Along with individual consideration, note how everything in the yard works together, not only tree to shrub, but snow drifts to the drive and hedges to the gate. Where is the snow heaped? What perennials are covered? Has wildlife nibbled or worse, eaten young trees to the ground?

Where would color, a red bud tree, orange rose hips, or bright red berries on an ornamental crabapple tree, improve the scene on a January day?

Envisioning the year midsummer helps to find areas to shade. Now is the time to order a red or sugar maple, a red leaf white birch or a cold-weather resistant quaking aspen that is a wonderful lush green summer. Thinking spring is thinking dogwoods, flowering crabs, redbud and hardy crape myrtle.

Another ploy is getting outside now and feeling the yard's windchill. Does it inspire a windbreak? Fragrant and rugged red cedar, cottonless cottonwood, Russian olive or even old fashioned lilacs work as windbreaks.

January is seed catalog month and the new catalogs are more comprehensive, easier to read, more informative and usually offer both seeds and plants.

They also give gardening tips. Helping spring planners, the catalogs include newest and best varieties — those that are relatively disease-free, that produce fruits by themselves, and are best for starting indoors.

Envisioning the home and yard without its deep winter trappings and snow, and creating the vision of them in spring gives us a jump on the season.

Getting the jump on yard work

Besides trees, consider shrubs, hedges, small gardens for roses or herbs and groundcovers for the yard.

Tips:
■ When choosing tree and shrub variety, check growth rate. Slow and fast growing plants serve different purposes.

■ Envision the summer yard for light, morning and evening light and longer days. Such things as a silver garden for evening, morning and evening-opening flowers are possibilities.

■ In planning, remember Michigan springs are wet. Integrate yard and home, with considerations of storage for garden tools, potting materials and outdoor sports equipment.

■ Include placement of garden furniture and grills in planning. Consider the differences between winter and summer light in garden.

■ Think about possibilities to enhance parking spaces with vines, hedges or arbors.



Record-Eagle/John L. Russell

Seed catalogs and gardening books are hot items during the winter months as gardeners plan now for the upcoming warm weather.

Plastering is a tricky do-it-yourself project

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Copley News Service

To handle a trowel and a hawk is like a fine painter using a brush and palette. Except this artistry is done with plaster.

Robert Rue, 60, has been a plasterer since age 10, and a union plasterer since 1955. Steve Clement, 41, is business agent with Operative Plasterers and Cement Masons Local 18 of Central Illinois and a plasterer for 23 years. Both men are skilled at ornamental plaster work. "Ornamental plastering is a dying art," Rue said. "You probably couldn't fill three Greyhound buses with plasterers who can do it."

"Conventional plastering requires years of apprenticeship to be qualified," Rue said.

For the do-it-yourselfer, plaster repair jobs of any great size are probably best left to a union plasterer, Clement said. Patching ceilings and corners can be tricky, and may also be too challenging for the novice. Repair jobs with sand finishes or heavy texture are probably also best left to the experts.

For small holes or hairline cracks in walls, the homeowner, with a little mechanical skill, can repair the problem. But, first learn what kind of wall you have.

Plaster is more expensive than drywall, Clement said.

"I would say on average 20 to 30 percent more costly than drywall," he added. "But plaster walls are definitely better in my opinion. Plaster is harder and takes everyday wear and tear better than drywall. And plaster walls are better soundproofers. It's also safer in fires. It's a fireproofing agent."

Doorknob dings, water damage from leaky plumbing or roofs and fine cracks from a house settling are common wall problems.

"The first thing you need to do is determine what caused the damage," Clement said. "Structural cracks usually appear at door openings or around windows. The wider the crack the

more chance it is a serious structural problem. Structural problems and things such as roof leaks or plumbing problems need to be addressed before you repair the walls."

REPAIRING DRYWALL

To patch small holes in drywall, apply joint compound or speckling to the hole with a putty knife. After drying, sand and smooth. Then prime and paint.

Fine cracks can be repaired by placing drywall tape over the area and applying a joint compound over the tape. After it dries, cover the area again with a thin smooth layer of joint compound. After it dries, sand and paint.

For larger holes, cut damaged area to the centers of the adjoining studs. Cut a scrap piece of plasterboard or gypsum board to fill the hole in the wall, making sure the replacement board is the same thickness as that in the wall. Screw in the patch with drywall screws, tape the edges with drywall tape and cover the edges with joint compound, and smooth. After it dries, then sand and paint.

PLASTER JOBS

If your home has plaster walls, tiny hairline cracks are common and easily repairable. Loose or crumbling plaster or signs of bulges may indicate more serious problems.

Drywall compound or a good grade of caulking can be used to fill fine cracks and small holes. It's a simple matter of smoothing the compound into a fine crack and wiping the excess material from the surface. Then priming and painting the area.

Plaster patch is stronger than joint compound and a better material for medium-size holes and cracks. For cracks that are visible, dig out all loose plaster to where it is solid. Our experts recommend sealing the damaged area with a plastering bonding agent similar to Plaster Weld. This keeps the new plaster material from drying out too fast. It also acts as an adhesive.

After the bonding agent has dried, fill small holes with a plaster patch such as molding

plaster let dry, trowel smooth, prime and paint. Apply no more than 'a inch of plaster at a time. Two or three layers of plaster may be required to patch a hole or crack.

A large hole in plaster with wood lath may require replacing the damaged lath. Chicken wire or metal lath can be nailed over the wood lath to provide a better gripping surface for plaster. But this may go beyond the skill level of the average homeowner.

All plaster patches should be sealed with an oil-based primer before painting.

"The biggest mistake people make is putting the plaster patch on too thick," Rue said. "This causes the plaster to blister. It should be applied in several coats. And let it dry between the coats."

And, Clement warns that any job larger than a 2-foot square should probably be left to qualified plasterers.

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Robert Rue, union plasterer

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