

Getting to know you: Who are those new faces on home improvement jobs?

The Associated Press

So you finally found the ideal general contractor for your major home improvement or repair job. The interviews went well. The background checks checked out. You really trust this person.

But what's with these new faces on the job you haven't seen before?

They're probably subcontractors, specialists hired by the general contractor to perform specific jobs. According to an expert who shepherds home improvement tasks for a living, homeowners should understand their relationship and responsibilities to subcontractors.

"Subcontractors don't work so much for the homeowner as they do for the general contractor," said Michael Turner of the Home Service Store. "Some homeowners assume the general contractor performs all the work and are surprised when other workers show up at the front door."

The role of the general contractor is to coordinate the project. Dozens of tasks, such as dry-wall, plumbing, wiring and roofing are farmed out to specialists who are usually independent contractors. Homeowners usually have no role in the selection of subcontractors. However, homeowners who have heard from friends and neighbors about the good work of a subcontractor can

suggest names to the general contractor.

Turner said that general contractors "should be very clear with homeowners about the jobs and work schedules of subcontractors. Homeowners need to insist upon a work calendar that shows approximate time frames when subcontractors will be on the job. That's the only way everyone stays on the same page and the job stays on track."

Subcontractors, or subs, are paid by the general contractor. The payments often are drawn against an amount of money the homeowner provides to the general contractor to pay for project costs.

"Homeowners would do well not to make the advance payment one large, lump sum," said Turner. "Instead, they should add money to the fund only when certain jobs involving subcontractors are performed."

Although subcontractors are not paid directly by the homeowner, it is the homeowner's responsibility to make certain the general contractor makes payments on time. Turner said payments are due when the subcontractor is at a point when critical materials are needed or when the job is done.

If the general contractor does not make payments, subcontractors can take action against the homeowner. These actions, often filed as liens, place the financial

burden squarely on homeowner shoulders. If liens aren't taken care of quickly, work on the project can stop.

"Worse still," said Turner, "liens may show up years later when the home goes up for sale. No sale can be completed until past liens are resolved."

The working relationship with subcontractors is the general contractor's job. He or she makes sure the quality of workmanship and materials by subcontractors is in line with project plans or homeowner expectations.

The general contractor makes certain subcontractors have the necessary licenses and insurance.

The homeowner can exercise some clout on subcontractor performance. Turner said "a cost of delay clause should be inserted into the contract with the general contractor. If the subcontractor doesn't show for work, the general contractor can be held financially responsible."

If the homeowner believes subcontractor work is shoddy, Turner advises the homeowner to first bring the problem to the attention of the general contractor. If that does not yield results, the homeowner can seek arbitration between the parties. The last resort is litigation.

In extreme cases, subcontractors can be removed from the job for failure to perform, argumentativeness or drug and alcohol abuse.



Photo illustration by Elizabeth Conley/Record-Eagle

By **SALLY D. KETCHUM**
Special to the Record-Eagle

So many transitions are often universal, watching morning turn to noon, day to night and more dramatically, the change of seasons.

We have just made the transition from summer to autumn and winter is on the horizon. If we think about it, instead of just letting it happen, there are ways that we can — somewhat like Thoreau — live deliberately, making the transition more enjoyable and productive.

I like to think that the transition is like the square dancing pattern, "All the men right," where the dancer lets go of one partner (summer) and welcomes another (autumn). The situation is at a point where the dancer holds on a little to each person. Likewise, holding on a bit to both summer and fall leaves us comfortable. So we can still keep a pair of Bermudas in a drawer and a tropical shirt, too. Who knows? We might be invited to a luau in January. We can also pick the last roses while planting the daffodils and tulips of spring.

Being conscious of the seasonal change, even in such simple ways as enjoying the changing colors of foliage or catching a whiff of fall in the air, eases the passage. We

avoid that lurch, the awkward and usually remorseful feelings of "Where did the summer go?" We can replace it with "All those things I didn't do..." and "This is what I can do this fall!"

Happily, there are many things to do in autumn — some are chores and others are pure leisure. Autumn chores are the best of all for two reasons: many can be done outdoors and getting them done leaves a sense of satisfaction that you are readying for the next season — winter. Leisure might be marking the end of summer with a celebratory last boat ride or fishing trip, last picnic, last nine holes of golf, or the last nap in the hammock.

Along with cleaning the gutters, taking inventory of seasonal tools, and checking the winter readiness of snow blowers and vehicles, along with getting the sweaters out of mothballs, and thinking about new boots, we can make small changes like the color of the toss pillows and candles. Changes like moving furniture together in cozy conversation groups instead of in patterns of summer airiness make major impressions of entering the cooler seasons.

Less obvious, but nonetheless meaningful, are changes in our menus, switching from the summer's salads and melons to heartier soups (Try butternut squash soup or other recipes on Epicuri-

ous.com) and the Traverse City area's antique apples.

Whether or not we make conscious changes to get into the spirit of fall, there is always the feeling of the inevitable: It's going to happen, ready or not. Seeing the sheer logic of it all helps us accept it. We might take a reasonable look at our lives, dividing life into areas important to us. Appearance — house and home? Job and career? Family and friends? Music to play and to hear, reading lists to consider? Local wines to try? There are new patterns to explore in all of these.

Each season has its special character. Winter is the holiday season, spring is one of rebirth or renewal. And if summer is the peak of warmth and growth, then fall is the harvest. Autumn is the season of the richest colors, briskest air, the gathering of our personal harvest, not only from the garden, but also of half the year's accomplishments and recollections of leisure.

Autumn is special and like other seasons, its most precious aspect lies in the fact that it is passing, day by day, leaf by falling leaf. And soon, we'll be making the next seasonal transition before we know it.

Sally D. Ketchum is a local freelance writer.

Crown molding corner techniques

Mitering is the quickest and easiest way to cut and join moldings at corners where it is important for the moldings to appear that they have joined without a seam. With mitering, the ends to be joined on each of the two pieces of wood are cut at an angle equal to half that of the corner angle. For example: miter cuts at a 90-degree corner would each be at 45 degrees.

Coping is the other technique some say is better than mitering. However, coping can only be used for inside corners. Here, a coping saw is used to cut the shape of one molding into the one joining it — an end-to-face connection. A coped cut is best made with a slight bevel to ensure a tight joint at the face of the molding. Coping cannot be used for outside corners. Here a miter must be used.

Properly cut, a miter is every bit as good as — if not better than — a coped joint, especially when the molding is large and has an intricate pattern, you would usually miter. Prefabbed corners are available with some crown moldings that eliminate the need for a miter cut and simplify installation. However, most crown moldings are stand-alone items, and must be installed with a miter- and-or a cope-cut.

Installing sheet-vinyl flooring made easy

By The Associated Press

The thought of installing sheet-vinyl flooring can be intimidating, especially when you consider that one or two mistakes could ruin the whole sheet. The problem is compounded by the fact that few rooms are truly square, and they have obstacles and offsets to accommodate.

How do professional installers keep from making costly mistakes? When a room is complicated, a pro will make a paper pattern of the room and transfer that pattern onto the vinyl. As such, the paper becomes a one-of-a-kind template and every wobble and bobble, every offset and obstacle is factored in before cutting. In fact, the Armstrong flooring people have come up with a goof-proof installation kit that allows you to do just that. (You can call them toll-free at 800-233-3823.)

The first thing to decide is whether you'll take up the existing flooring. If your floor has suffered water damage and dry rot, or could simply use a layer of underlayment to make it more uniform, then make those corrections before installing new vinyl. Otherwise, you can lay your new vinyl directly on top of your old.

There are two types of vinyl for this kind of installation. One requires gluing the entire floor, the other just the perimeter. If your existing flooring has an embossed surface pattern, you'll need to fill these depressions with embossing leveler. Without it, the old floor's pattern will show through your new flooring.

And because resilient flooring is designed to repel just about everything, you'll also need to degrade and prep the surface with an etching solution and primer.

Highlights of the installation begin with floor preparation. Remove the baseboard shoe molding with a small prybar. If your room is a bathroom, you'll also need to take up the toilet. Any caulk along a tub or cabinet must be sliced away with a razor blade or blade scraper. Next, cut the surface glaze on the old flooring with etching liquid. Rubber gloves must be used because the liquid is very caustic. Once the etching has dried, apply two coats of primer. The second coat should be at right angles to the first.

To make your paper template, lay the paper sheets around the perimeter of the room, then fill in the middle and tape all the

sheets together. To hold the paper in place, cut 1-inch triangular slots every couple of feet and lay tape across the slots. To scribe the exact perimeter of the floor, insert the ballpoint pen into the roller disc that comes in the Armstrong kit, and trace around the room.

Once the outline is complete, roll up the paper and lay it over the vinyl. Draw a cutline directly onto the vinyl. Install a hook-shaped blade in the kit's transfer tool and then cut the vinyl by drawing the blade along the cutline. Apply vinyl adhesive to the

floor with the kit's notched applicator. Cover only half the room at a time.

Lower the vinyl sheet onto the adhesive, then roll the surface smooth using a flooring roller or kitchen rolling pin. Seal around the entire perimeter of the room — and around any plumbing fixtures — with latex tub-and-tile caulk.

When laying vinyl next to carpet, use a metal tack strip. Nail the strip onto the vinyl and bend it over the carpet. When laying vinyl next to hardwood flooring, buy a hardwood reducing strip



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