

# Demolition: Think before swinging sledgehammer

BY TOM TRACEY  
Special to the Record-Eagle

During renovation projects, homeowners may be faced with the challenge of removing ceilings, countertops, flooring or even entire walls in order to open up available space. While it may seem like fun to swing a hefty sledgehammer against a doomed wall, those in the know say planning for demolition is as critical as planning for construction.

Sales consultant Craig Schwabe of Brown Lumber in Traverse City has some advice for would-be demolition artists. "The key factor is knowing whether or not it is a load-bearing wall that you plan on removing," said Schwabe. "If you take one of those down, so goes your house."

For that reason, he recommends homeowners seek an engineer's opinion before removing or altering walls. Something else Schwabe recommends is "thinking before acting."

"What's hidden in the wall? Air vents? Plumbing?

Electrical? For example, your electrical plugs. Does the electrical path run up and down, or does the path run sideways from the plug?" he said.

Another situation Schwabe has witnessed is the inadvertent damage done to materials when people attempt to restore a historic home.

"If you need your trim pieces to match the rest of the house, be very careful about removing them. They can be brittle. Some older pieces may cost hundreds of dollars to re-create if they are damaged during removal," he said.

Also keep in mind that older homes may harbor asbestos insulation, lead paint and other harmful substances that become exposed during removal. These need to be contained and properly disposed of by experts.

"If you run into insulation, check for asbestos," said Schwabe.

Speaking of insulation, he recalls a televised account of a homeowner who discov-

ered vintage movie posters stuffed behind the walls of his home — evidently for insulation. The homeowner removed the posters and had them appraised. The posters were worth thousands of dollars to collectors.

"You never know what you may find inside a wall," said Schwabe.

Despite the pitfalls, some handier homeowners prefer to do the dirty work themselves. Gunter Feistammel of Lake Ann has done demolition in the past to make his homes more spacious and to update their appearance.

What has he encountered while doing his own demolition?

"I've had some horrible experiences removing old materials," he said. "In our last demolition, I wanted to replace the ceiling in our daughter's bedroom because it was sagging. The house was in such poor repair that when I removed the old ceiling tiles, I discovered a layer of old dry-

wall and firing strips underneath. After I removed that, I found another layer of dry-wall and firing strips, and more after that. Before I could replace the ceiling tiles, I had to remove all the old layers underneath."

Sometimes, a demolition project can result in a more serious surprise.

"On another project, I had been pulling off some crown molding," said Feistammel "when all of the sudden the whole ceiling came crashing down around me. I was okay, but it turns out that the house was so shoddily built that the only thing supporting the ceilings were the crown molding. That was scary."

At other times, a demolition project can result in a lighter moment.

"The funniest thing I remember about a demolition project," said Feistammel, "was when I had removed all the non-supporting inner walls from my house, leaving the toilet. Here was this vast expanse of empty space, and right in the middle sat a fully-functional toilet, surrounded by

curtains."

Rather than tear-down a structure, some homeowners take the removal of walls to the ultimate step, and actually have the entire structure moved elsewhere. Mike McMasters of McMasters Construction in Traverse City has done several local relocations of complete houses.

"One of the more costly things of the whole project is paying utility company crews to raise overhead electrical and telephone lines as the house passes through," he said. "That can cost thousands of dollars."

If demolition is still on your mind, experienced contractors recommend the following top 10 demolition tips:

1. Seek the advice of an expert first.
2. Wear eye protection, gloves and a dust mask.
3. Turn off electric, water and gas utilities in affected areas.
4. Know what's hiding underneath floors, behind walls and under counters before proceeding.

5. Use cordless tools and battery-operated lighting or run an extension cord to supply power to the area you are working on.

6. Use adequate supports to brace the center and opposing ends of a load-bearing wall.

7. Be aware of the possibility of disturbing asbestos insulation, lead paint and other potentially hazardous materials.

8. Be ready with dust pan, broom and plastic bags to contain the inevitable dust and debris raised during demolition.

9. Tape plastic tarps to doorways, return air vents and floors to prevent the spread of dust and debris to other parts of the house.

10. Use a wet-dry vacuum to speed cleanup.

Tom Tracey is a local freelance writer.

# Tools of the trade: Right equipment keeps yard looking great

BY EILENE ZIMMERMAN  
Copley News Service

When you're ready to tackle the lawn and garden, you'll need more than just gloves and a sun hat. Using the right tools can make gardening less of a chore and with care, high-quality tools can last for years.

A mower is essential for lawns — and they have come a long way from the belching, gas-powered model your dad trotted out each Sunday. Lawn mowers can be push-style rotary, gas, battery or electric. Lou Manfredini, ACE's Helpful Hardware Man and host of the radio show "Lou Manfredini's Home Improvement Minutes," said if you have a small lawn — a quarter acre or less — you can get a healthy workout from a rotary lawn mower.

If you want an electric mower, Manfredini suggests a cordless mower model like the one Black & Decker

makes. Gas mowers, also a good choice, are more efficient and cleaner than they once were.

"Sharpen the blade at least once a year; if it's not sharp, it won't be efficient," said Manfredini.

Make sure you've also got a spade shovel, a rake and a set of smaller, hand-held tools such as a trowel and hoe. Buy a metal rake, which is longer-lasting than plastic. If the tines on the end become misshapen from use, they can be straightened with pliers.

Choose tools with a fiberglass or composite handle. Wood handles aren't as durable and without proper care become brittle and break. Manfredini suggests using a rag soaked in mineral oil to wipe down wood handles.

Mineral or vegetable oil can also be used for the blades of spades, hoes, shovels and trowels to pro-

tect them from rust — but don't use motor oil, advises the experts at Smith & Hawken, because it harms microorganisms in the soil. Remove rust as soon as it appears using a wire brush or pliable sanding block and sharpen blades with a file or sharpening stone.

You'll need a pair of hedge shears and pruning shears, which are smaller and resemble scissors. Higher-quality hedge shears have bumpers or metal shock springs to take some of the shock out of the cutting action and a high-carbon steel blade that will hold its edge a long time. Sharpen blades periodically and keep the joints where the blades come together oiled.

Finally, you'll need a hose and spray attachment. Most people walk into a store and buy a cheap, nylon mesh hose, said Manfredini, and those kink and break con-

stantly. Instead splurge on a much more durable polyblend hose — a combination of nylon and rubber. Always roll up the hose, ideally on a wheel. Never wrap it too tightly because it won't perform well; instead keep the loops about the size of a hula-hoop.

For about \$15 you can buy a good-quality multiple-setting spray attachment giving you the right water pressure for washing the car or watering tomato plants. If you want a watering can, get one that is a lightweight plastic, because each gallon of water in it weighs eight

pounds. If you must have metal, Smith & Hawken advises choosing one that's been hot-dipped in molten zinc. Avoiding the kind that have been cut out and pieced together from pre-galvanized metal. When you finish with it, turn the can upside down so it can drain and dry completely.

When choosing tools, one rule of thumb is that heavy is good.

"In almost every instance, the heavier tool is the better," said Manfredini.

Choose those with a lifetime warranty.

## Tips from the Audubon Society to keep birdfeeders healthy

- Try to eliminate access to your feeders and yard by cats. Outdoor cats are a major predator of birds visiting feeders.
- Leave brush piles to serve as cover for small birds if your yard is visited by predator birds.
- Clean all hulls off platform feeders and seed trays daily.
- Give your feeders (especially tube feeders) a good shake before you refill them to dislodge any compacted seed.
- Dump out any wet clumps of old seed.
- Don't allow large amounts of seed to become wet on platform feeders. On rainy days, feed only from covered feeders, or put out only a small amount of seed.
- Disinfect feeders by scrubbing with a weak bleach solution (¼ cup bleach in 2 gallons of warm water) at least once a month
- more often in summer or during rainy periods. Rinse feeders thoroughly and allow them to dry before refilling.
- Move your feeding station when the ground beneath is covered with seed hulls and droppings, or at least rake up the hulls regularly to allow the grass to recover.
- Store seed in a clean, dry, air-tight container. A metal or plastic garbage can works well.
- Use oversized feeders if you plan a vacation.
- If you find a sick or dead bird at your feeders, dispose of it at once and then halt feeding for a few days. Clean all feeders and the ground below them.

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