



CURB APPEAL

BEST FACE FORWARD

Spiffing up a listing's exterior can mean the difference between a drive-by and a signed deal.

BY CHUCK PAUSTIAN

Warm. Welcoming. Arresting. Appealing. Although landscape and real estate professionals differ about how to define curb appeal, they agree that a home's first impression can make a huge difference in how well it fares on the market.

"People who prepare their homes—inside and out—before they put them on the market are the ones who have quicker sales and who receive top dollar," says Mary Harker, ABR®, CRS®, a broker-associate with Keller Williams Realty in Dallas.

There are several improvements, from minor repairs to major yard overhauls, you can suggest to sellers that will add pizzazz to listings. The course of action will depend on the owner's budget and how much time you have to sell the house. Some experts say, for example, that owners should spend between 10 percent and 20 percent of a home's value on landscaping. But that's for owners who are staying put; it wouldn't be advisable to spend that much unless the sale was a year or more away. For a more typical sales cycle—30 to 60 days—practitioners say spending between 1 percent and 2 percent of a home's value is a reasonable investment in curb appeal.

"Some homes need more attention than others," says Jim Albrecht, ABR®, a broker with First Weber Group, REALTORS®, in Waukesha, Wis. Tammy Fadler, CRS®, GRI, broker-owner of Signature Properties in Festus, Mo., agrees: "I look at what the owners can spend and then recommend improvements accordingly."

Sometimes consumers balk at the idea of spending money to improve a house they're about to leave, Albrecht says. So you may need to underscore the benefits of the investment. "People cost themselves a lot of money in terms of the offers they receive by not paying attention to the appearance of their house," he says. "Even if the project amounts to basic maintenance that homeowners can take care of themselves, they'd get back at least what they put into it." Industry experts say new landscaping can add two to three times its cost to the home's sales price.

THE BASICS

At a minimum, everything a potential buyer might notice about a home's exterior and lot should be in working order and well maintained. For the most part, homeowners can take care of this work themselves with a little money and a lot of elbow grease.

Items such as burned-out lightbulbs, broken doorbells and fountains, cracked panes of glass, and damaged trim should be repaired or replaced. Windows and siding should be clean, and any

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LET THERE BE LIGHT

Location: Maryland

Objective: Bring more light into the home and make the entrance more inviting.

Cost: \$3,500 for hardscape; \$2,000 for plant materials **Time:** Four days

The landscaper replaced the old sidewalk with a wider walkway of brick and slate to accommodate two people walking side by side. The brick matched the material used in the house, and the color of the slate matched that of the shutters. For continuity, the front porch was built out with the same kind of brick and slate.

All the existing plant material, which was overgrown, unhealthy, or unsuitable with the new design, was removed, except for a lace leaf maple, a \$450 specimen. After the flower beds were reshaped to follow the contours of the sidewalk, the landscaper added blue star juniper, Bar Harbor juniper, and Japanese garden junipers; Stella d'Ora daylilies; skypencil hollies; William Penn barberries; and Miss Kim lilac plants. The plants provided a variety of colors, branch structures, and textures throughout the growing season.

"Our goal was to make sure there was something blooming all year," says John Widener, president of Shaded Leaf Landscaping in Columbia, Md.

QUICK FIX

Location: California

Objective: Soften the look of concrete and stone in the front yard.

Cost: \$800 **Time:** One day

To give this building a more appealing entrance, the yew bushes and juniper ground cover were removed and replaced with a variety of plants of tapering heights. The owners added an ornamental strawberry tree; flax; Patty's Purple, a hebe plant; and Santa Barbara daisies. "They're all hearty plants that are drought tolerant since there's no irrigation in the area," says Tammy Key, president of Garden Spaces Inc. in San Francisco. "Curb appeal has to do with bringing life to an area," she adds. "It's when you walk up to a home and say, 'Ah, this is refreshing.'"



BEFORE



AFTER

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metal objects, such as doorknobs, mailboxes, and kick plates, should be polished.

"If the house shines like a pretty penny, it'll sell quicker," says Ed Huck, ABR®, CRS®, an associate broker with Realty One Real Living in Westlake, Ohio. "When I started out, curb appeal wasn't such a big deal. But now it's become huge."

Keep sidewalks and driveways clean and passable. Lawns should be cut, edged, and green. A bag of fertilizer from the local hardware store or garden center and some regular watering will perk up grass in a week or two. In addition, all bushes and trees should be trimmed, and flower beds should be weeded and covered with fresh mulch.

"If the yard is overgrown and weedy, it's a turnoff," says Steve Griggs, president of Land Design Studio Inc. in Blauvelt, N.Y. If bushes are beyond trimming, the homeowner should remove them unless they're covering up an unattractive feature. "It's better to have minimal landscaping than bad landscaping," says W Scott McAdam, president of McAdam Landscaping Inc. in Forest Park, Ill.

After homeowners get the outside in tip-top shape, they must maintain the property, because potential buyers could drive by at any time. Remind sellers to turn on any exterior lighting so that a home's features can be seen at night. The home has to say "Come buy me" at all times, says Harker.

MUST DO vs. SHOULD DO

Once the owners have covered the basics, the line between "must do" and "should do" projects becomes blurred, with budget and timing of the sale often determining which tasks to tackle.

Encourage owners to pursue some projects even though they carry potentially high price tags and might require hiring professional contractors. "The roof is a biggie," says Albrecht. "If the shingles are starting to cup and curl, owners should consider replacing them." Painting a home's exterior, replacing damaged gutters and shutters, repairing broken concrete in walks and driveways, and adding exterior lighting should also be high on the list.

Fadler adds that if painting isn't an option, the seller can hire someone to power wash the exterior "so that it looks nice and fresh."

Other projects fall into the optional category. Landscaping is a good example of the type of improvement homeowners can pursue, but only if they have the money and time. A yard makeover

can have a dramatic effect on a home's curb appeal, but the cost can easily run into several thousand dollars or more, and the improvements might take weeks to install and several months to mature.

To add splash when owners have limited money and time, real estate and landscape experts recommend adding larger, more mature plants. They cost a little more individually but will add immediate color, texture, and interest, and the homeowner won't need to buy as many. If flower beds are scarce or nonexistent, fill flowerpots to add splashes of color.

"Yellow and red flowers are buyer colors. They really seem to stop people in their tracks," says Harker. "If there's room, add a bench to the front porch. If not, try putting it in the yard."

Another cost-saving suggestion is to focus on plants and not worry about projects such as putting in a brick pathway. "Plantings tend not to be the expensive part of the job. It's usually the hardscape that adds a lot of expense," says Howard Cohen, vice president of Surrounds Landscape Architecture and Construction in Sterling, Va.

PLANNING AHEAD

Sellers often have more than 60 days to prepare their home for sale. A recent survey by Hebert Research for HouseValues Inc., based in Kirkland, Wash., found that the average home sale takes 9.3 months from the time the owner thinks of selling to the closing date. That perspective gives sellers more options.

"I'm working with two clients now who'll be putting their homes on the market next spring," says John Widener, president of Shaded Leaf Landscaping in Columbia, Md. "We're planning now for plants that will be blooming when they put up the For Sale sign."

Fadler says about 2 percent of the people contacting her want to sell in a year or more. The added lead time allows sellers to spread out expenses and consider more elaborate plans, she says.

"If you're looking to sell in six months or more, you might not have as much cost on the landscape installation," says Tammy Key, president of Garden Spaces Inc., a San Francisco landscape design company, noting that the additional time gives homeowners the option of using seeds and smaller plants that require more time to grow and are less expensive than mature plants.

Whether the listing period is a week or six months, real estate pros say sellers will maximize their home's marketability by investing in a few well-chosen exterior touches. RM



ARCHITECTURAL UNVEILING

Location: Illinois

Objective: Reveal the home's interesting features, including a large front porch and stone balustrade.

Cost: \$10,000 **Time:** Four days

Large yew bushes were obscuring some of this home's more interesting details, including the front porches on either side of the entrance and a beautiful stone railing. "This house has great architecture and great lines, but you couldn't see it," says W Scott McAdam, president of McAdam Landscaping Inc. in Forest Park, Ill. "There needs to be a symbiotic relationship between the structure and the land."

McAdam removed the bushes and substantially improved the soil with nutrients, which accounted for between 15 percent and 20 percent of the project's total cost. He then planted pagoda dogwood and redbud trees for seasonal color, dwarf Korean spice vibernums for fragrance, ornamental grasses that will sway in the breeze, and a variety of perennials—black-eyed Susans, dwarf fountain grass, and Russian sage.

Different plant choices—using smaller or less expensive specimens, for example—could reduce the overall cost, McAdam says.