

If you're thinking of listing your home this spring, now is the time to be thinking about one of the most important elements of real estate marketing: Curb appeal. It's your one and only chance to make a first impression on a potential buyer, so make it a good one! Here are some suggestions to make your home stand out from the rest:

1. **Get some new eyes:** The thing about curb appeal is that you need to look at your house through a stranger's eyes, not through your own. You don't even notice the faded paint on the trim or the missing house numbers, but other people do. So if you can't be honest and objective about the overall condition of the exterior of your home, find someone who can.

If you have a friend, relative, or neighbor who you trust to be honest with you (and that you have a good enough relationship with that it will survive their bluntness, then ask them). Ask your real estate agent. If necessary, hire a landscaper or a contractor to act as a consultant.

The main thing is to get a comprehensive, written list put together of what needs to be done to the outside of your home to improve the first impression it makes. Concentrate on the front, but don't overlook the sides and back either.

2. **Start with basic repairs:** The very first thing on your curb appeal list should be basic repairs. Is there a broken window? A torn screen? A loose gutter or downspout? A sagging screen door? It doesn't matter what it is or how small it is, fix it.

They may seem like little things, but making sure that everything is in proper working order can make a huge difference in how people perceive your house and the care you have taken with it as a homeowner. Make sure you have big, bright, easily visible house numbers. Oh yeah -- and don't forget to squirt a little oil on those squeaky door and gate hinges.

3. **Next, do some cleaning:** Break out the broom and clean the outside of your house better than it's ever been cleaned before. Rent a pressure washer, and clean the driveway, walkways and patio. Clean your decks and your siding (a scrub brush is a better choice in these areas than a pressure washer, to avoid damage to the wood). If your wood deck is badly weathered, consider a deck cleaner and brightener made specifically for that purpose -- available at paint stores. Wash all your windows, inside and out, including the window screens.

4. **Declutter:** Just as you would with the interior, you want to declutter the outside of your house as well. Pick up the kids' toys, and put away the garden tools and hoses (remember, you're going to have people visiting the house, so this is also a liability issue). Remove all that accumulated junk from the sides and back of the house, and haul it to the landfill.

5. **Next, tackle the landscaping:** As part of the decluttering and general cleaning, do the landscaping areas as well. Prune overgrown plants and trim back overhanging tree limbs. Pull out anything that's dead. Rake up leaves and needles, and pull weeds. If you have an underground sprinkler system, make sure everything is working properly. If you have a lawn, fertilize and water it regularly to green it up, and run an edger along sidewalks and driveway edges.

In your planter areas, you can make a huge difference in how your house looks with the simple addition of some fresh bark and colorful flowers. And if you don't have any planter areas, create a few, or add some simple planter boxes to do the same thing. There's nothing like color to really catch the eye and give your home a bright, fresh appeal.

6. **Consider a trip to the paint store:** Few things help your home show better than a fresh coat of paint. If it's been awhile since the outside of your home's been painted, this might be a worthwhile investment, especially in a tough seller's market. If you're handy with a brush and an airless sprayer, you might just want to undertake the project yourself. A long weekend and a few hundred dollars in paint can make a world of difference in how well the home shows and how quickly it sells. Otherwise, talk with a licensed painting contractor for an estimate.

Maybe painting the entire house isn't really necessary. Sometimes just a fresh coat of paint or maybe a new color on the trim, exterior doors, garage door or window shutters can make a big difference as well.

A word of caution about paint colors: When painting the house for resale, select colors that complement the house and the neighborhood and that will appeal to the greatest number of buyers, whether they happen to be your favorites or not. You may really have been itching to paint the house purple with black trim, but save that for another day.