

Spring has sprung

Spring has sprung—but with the robins and flowers come a bevy of exterior maintenance chores that have to be tackled. Winter’s wrath did a number on your home and yard, from filling your gutters with unidentifiable muck to leaving the lawn looking lifeless. Before those lazy days of summer arrive, prime your surroundings for a season spent outdoors by following these six steps.

Inspect the house

Extreme winter temperatures can dislodge caulk around windows and doors, loosen decking, crack shingles, and separate gutter segments. To determine if your home has sustained this kind of damage, walk the perimeter and look it over closely. Use binoculars to view upper stories and the roof. If you need to recaulk, choose a premium, exterior-grade caulk that you can paint over. Nail down loose deck boards with galvanized decking nails or screws, making sure to hit the structural supports underneath. And if gutter segments have pulled apart, reconnect them using gutter caulk in a matching color. Rehanging significantly misaligned pieces, though, is best left to a professional gutter installer, who can position gutters at the appropriate pitch to ensure that water flows efficiently to the downspouts. Consider hiring a professional for other substantial repairs, too, such as replacing broken roof shingles, repointing bricks, or repainting exterior walls that risk weathering prematurely due to peeling or chipping paint. For a thorough inspection of your home, consider hiring a professional home inspector.



Clean out the gutters

Even if you cleaned out the gutters last fall, they will likely be choked again with leaves, twigs, and bark dislodged by winter storms. Overflowing gutters can cause moisture to seep into your roof, siding, and foundation. If you’re competent on a ladder, scoop out the muck yourself with gloved hands. Choose heavy-duty waterproof gloves that extend to the mid-forearm. Wear a mask to keep from breathing leaf mold and other irritants. A thick plastic putty knife can help release stubborn muck, and a garden hose with a spray nozzle is perfect for washing out the gutters and downspouts to finish the job.



Fertilize the lawn

Your lawn lay dormant over the winter, but now it’s in an intensive growing phase. Fertilizing will create lush green turf that naturally crowds out weeds. You should fertilize the lawn four to six times a year, depending on the location and type of grass (contact a local nursery to find out which type of fertilizer is suited to your climate and type of grass, and when to make applications). To fertilize, scatter spadefuls as you move around the lawn; for more even results, use a lawn spreader, a small wheeled basin that distributes the grainy material. Pull up by hand any dandelions, oxalis, or other weeds before they infiltrate the rest of the lawn. And it’s also a good idea to sprinkle grass seed over any bare patches in early spring and early fall. Cover the seed with a light layer of straw to prevent birds from eating it, then water the lawn for 20 minutes every (non-rainy) day for a month.





Prepare outdoor furnishings

Look for products designed to clean the types of materials used in your deck and patio furniture. Check the auto-care aisle. Vinyl car-top cleaners do wonders on vinyl chair straps; car-wash soap is ideal for metal. Touch up chipped paint to prevent rusting. Rub away rust that has already formed with sandpaper or a wire brush. If chair cushions smell musty, wipe them down with a cleaner that combats mold and mildew. To get your gas grill ready for the season, crank it up to high and close the lid for five minutes to burn off food debris. Once it has cooled, gently scrub all interior surfaces with steel wool. Use dish soap and a soft sponge for the exterior. Replace disposable grease pans.

Eliminate mosquito breeding grounds

Mosquitoes aren't just annoying; they can carry the deadly West Nile virus. And because the insects lay their eggs in standing water, the best way to reduce the mosquito population around your home is to eliminate the places where water collects. Often overlooked culprits include tire swings, misaligned gutters, and plastic children's toys. Also, replace torn window screens or repair them with a do-it-yourself kit. Weatherstrip any gaps around exterior doors and windows, and reapply weather-stripping that's worn.



Cut back overgrowth

A late burst of growth last fall—and some end-of-season slacking on your part—may mean the plantings closest to your house are overgrown. This can attract moisture and bugs, so cut greenery so that it is at least a foot away from the exterior walls. Also prune the trees and shrubs in your yard. Pruning adds definition, contains size, keeps some plants from overtaking others, and encourages more blooms and thicker foliage. Always prune flowering plants right after the blooms fade (if you wait too long, you'll be removing buds and may not get flowers the following year).