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A lesson in building a backyard retaining wall

Flat, even landscapes are often coveted in backyards. However, flat backyards are not always so easy to find. Fortunately, varied terrain does not mean that certain landscaping plans are entirely off limits, especially for homeowners willing to build retaining walls.

Retaining walls help turn steep slopes in a yard into terraced focal points. They also can reduce soil erosion in hilly areas and can be used for aesthetic purposes, like raised planters, or to create more usable space within the yard. When an inground pool or pond is cut into a backyard hill, a retaining wall helps keep the remaining portion of that hill from collapsing into the cut-away area.

When contemplating retaining wall projects, a lesson in physics and engineering may be needed. A sturdy and long-lasting retaining wall needs to be built in a way that will take into consideration the force of the soil and the point at which the soil will begin to slide away, advises the experts at The Family Handyman. If these calculations seem beyond the scope of your ability, installation of a retaining wall is a job best left to a professional. If you are ready to forge ahead, these tips can get you started. However, it’s important to note the potential benefits of working with others who have already built a retaining wall.

Safety first: Call to have underground utilities plotted and marked before beginning any excavation.

Map out your trench and begin to dig. The trench should have a level, compacted base as it will be the foundation for which the retaining wall materials, be they blocks, bricks or wood, sit in. A crushed stone base will help anchor the courses and serve to promote drainage. The Family Handyman says to bury the first course of the retaining wall one-tenth the height of the wall to prevent soil behind it from pushing the bottom out.

Check for level. When placing blocks or timbers, make sure they are even with the first and periodically check for level as you go, advises the home improvement retailer Lowes®.

Stagger and set back. The next row of blocks or material should be positioned so that the joints are staggered for blocks, bricks or wood. A masonry blade will be needed to cut the harder materials; a circular saw will cut timber. Also, work against gravity by setting the second course slightly back from the first to help push back against the soil that is trying so hard to push forward. Repeat the process as each level is placed. Many retaining wall products are made with a lip to create this set back.

Go with the grade. For especially steep slopes, a gradual step-up design may be more secure and more appealing than a very tall retaining wall. Each level of a stepped design is easier to walk on and adding a stone base will help anchor the courses and serve to promote drainage.

Backfill with stone for drainage. Using a layer of stone behind the retaining wall can help successfully direct water away so it will not increase the weight of the soil behind the wall and push against the retaining wall, advises The Home Depot.

Retaining walls serve different purposes in a yard. Building such a wall requires planning and careful execution to ensure the job is done correctly.
A guide to buying and setting up a bird bath

Warm weather means more opportunities to spend time outdoors while at home. Whether your favorite form of outdoor recreation includes sitting on the patio reading or digging in the garden, there’s a good chance that you will be sharing the space with local wildlife. Optimizing opportunities to view and interact with backyard wildlife can make the great outdoors even more enjoyable.

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology indicates that there are around 2,059 bird species on the continent of North America. Red-winged blackbirds, yellow-rumped warblers, American robins, and chipping sparrows are among the most commonly seen birds in North America.

Making a backyard hospitable to birds can increase the chances for sightings and hearing their sweet songs. Installing a bird bath can be a step in the right direction.

Bird baths can make yards more attractive to birds. Birds require a supply of fresh, clean water for drinking and bathing. By setting up a bath, homeowners can attract not only seed-loving birds, but those that don’t eat seeds and wouldn’t normally congregate around feeders, indicates All About Birds. Experts surmise that birds may bathe to maintain their feathers.

Not all bird baths are constructed the in the same fashion. Many bird baths sold in stores are better suited for decoration than for serving as functional baths. There are four general types of bird bath: standing pedestal, hanging bath, deck-mounted, and ground-level. In general, the lower a bird bath is to the ground, the more likely birds are to use it. Most natural sources of water birds use are on or near the ground. Therefore, ground-level bird baths may be the best investments.

It is important to keep the water in a bird bath shallow (around two inches of water or less). This enables birds to splash around safely and wade in.

Birds do not want to slide around, so a material that is coated and slippery, like glazed ceramic or glass, may not be too popular. Rough stone or a bird bath modified with pea gravel or rocks can give birds steady footing.

Place the bird bath in the shade if possible to ensure the water is cool and fresh. Locate it by a tree so the birds can hop up to a branch and preen afterwards. All About Birds also says that a bird bath is more attractive if it has a dripping or moving water feature, as this is often irresistible to birds.

Another way to ensure the bath will be used is to keep it clean and maintained. Change the water every day or two. Rinse off the bath to remove droppings, bugs and other debris.

Once birds learn there is a comfortable bath nearby, they may be more apt to visit a yard and may even become frequent guests.

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**Need Help With That Down Payment?**

If your income is less than the amount listed on the chart below and you have not owned a home in the last three years and you want to purchase in Allen County, you may qualify to earn up to $6,000 for a down payment on a home in the City of Lima and you may be eligible for limited funds in areas outside of the City.

**Home ownership classes are provided by the West Ohio Community Action Partnership**

Anyone wishing to attend the home ownership class must have submitted an application and been approved. Applications need to be received by West Ohio Community Action Partnership no later than two weeks before the start of the class.

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For additional information contact the Home Ownership program at 419-227-2586 (Qualifications may vary with different programs.)
Decor ideas to give homes a fresh look this spring

Spring is a season of rejuvenation, and that spirit of renewal can take hold inside a home.

Warm weather and longer hours of daylight make spring a perfect time to imagine a home’s interior design in a new light. The following are a handful of decor ideas that may inspire homeowners to give their homes an entirely new look this spring.

- **Wallpaper:** Wallpaper fell out of favor years ago, but new styles that aren’t so heavily patterned can make for wonderful additions to any room. Large-scale prints can give a room a whole new feel without giving homeowners or their guests the impression that they have stepped back in time. A simple, mural-style floral wallpaper on the walls surrounding a table in a breakfast nook can bring nature inside.

- **Pastel colors:** Nothing embodies the spring quite like pastel colors. If colorful, bright flowers dot the garden in the backyard, homeowners can bring those uplifting pastels inside by painting an accent wall or even adding some brightly colored accent furniture to rooms that could use a lift.

- **Declutter:** Clutter is often conquered during spring cleaning sessions, but homeowners who want to create more free-flowing interior spaces can downsize their furniture and/or look for multi-purpose features that make it hard for clutter to take over a room. Create more open space in entertaining areas by mounting the television and getting rid of a bulky entertainment center. Create even more space by replacing rarely used end tables with a storage ottoman where books and magazines can be stored to give a room a fresh, clean look.

- **Accent features:** Sometimes the smallest changes to an interior space make the biggest impression. Replace dated accents like vases and table lamps with newer items that reflect the latest styles and trends. Such adjustments won’t break the bank, and they can give rooms a whole new feel.

Spring is a great time to reconsider home interiors. This spring homeowners can embrace various strategies, both big and small, to give their homes a whole new feel.
5 outdoor projects that add value

Exterior renovations can enhance the appearance of a property and make it more enjoyable for homeowners. Certain renovations have the potential to add value to a home, while others may do the opposite. Learning which one have the largest return on investment can help homeowners select features that will have the most positive impact.

Curb appeal goes a long way toward attracting potential buyers. According to the National Association of Realtors, first impressions of a property have a strong influence on buyers. Landscaping and external features can do much to influence such impressions.

- **Lawn care program**: Investing in a lawn care program that consists of fertilizer and weed control application and can be transferred over to a subsequent home owner is an attractive feature. NAR says such a care program can recover $1,000 in value of the $330 average cost, or a 303 percent ROI.

- **Low-maintenance lifestyle**: When choosing materials for projects, those that offer low-maintenance benefits can be preferential. These include low-maintenance patio materials, composite decking, vinyl fencing, and inorganic mulched beds.

- **Fire pit**: A fire pit can be used for much of the year. In the spring and summer, the firepit is a great place to congregate to roast marshmallows or sip wine and gaze into the fire. In the fall, the fire pit can make for a cozy retreat. A fire pit that has a gas burner is low-maintenance, and the National Association of Landscape Professionals says that most can recoup about $4,000 of their $6,000 average price tag.

- **Softscaping**: Hardscaping refers to structures like outdoor kitchens or decks. Softscaping involves the living elements of the landscape. Hiring a landscape designer to install trees, shrubs, natural edging, and rock elements can do wonders toward improving the look and value of a home.

- **Pool or water feature**: In certain markets, particularly hot climates, a pool or another water feature is a must-have. However, in other areas where outdoor time is limited, a pool or water feature can actually lower the value of a home. Speaking with a real estate professional can give homeowners an idea of how a pool will fare in a given neighborhood.

Outdoor improvements can improve the marketability of a home, as well as enhance its appearance and function.
The differences between organic and inorganic mulches

The benefits of mulch are widely known among lawn and garden enthusiasts. By insulating soil from extreme temperatures, helping soil to retain moisture and preventing weed growth, mulch can help plants, trees and gardens thrive, even during periods when Mother Nature can make that very difficult.

Novice gardeners may find themselves a little confused when visiting a lawn and garden center to purchase mulch. That’s because there are various types of mulches. One of the ways to simplify that is to break mulches down into two main classes: organic and inorganic. Learning to distinguish between these two classes can help homeowners choose the best mulch for their properties.

**Organic mulch**
Organic mulches are made up of materials that decompose over time. The experts at BobVila.com note that, because they decompose over time, organic mulches must be replenished on a regular basis. Hardwood and softwood chips are among the most popular and recognizable organic mulches. Evergreen needles, leaves, grass clippings, and compost mixes also fall under the organic mulch umbrella. Many gardening enthusiasts prefer organic mulches because they help soil retain moisture, improve soil fertility and help to deter weed growth.

**Inorganic mulches**
Inorganic mulches are permanent because they do not decompose over time. Gravel, brick chips and crushed stone are examples of inorganic mulches. Homeowners who do not intend to plant after laying mulch may lean toward inorganic mulches, as they won’t require much work, if any, after being laid. However, the Chicago Botanic Garden notes that inorganic mulches do not improve soil quality. In fact, because inorganic mulches like rocks and stones absorb heat, they can be detrimental to plants in areas where weather tends to be very dry and hot.

The right mulch for a given property depends on a host of factors. Understanding the differences between organic and inorganic mulches is a great first step toward finding the right mulch for your landscape.

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Mulching

mistakes to avoid

Landscape features vary significantly from house to house. Some homeowners may prefer water features on their properties, while others focus on flowers that would be the envy of a botanical garden. Regardless of those preferences, lawn and garden enthusiasts who want to make their properties as idyllic as possible may eventually look to mulch to help them accomplish that goal.

Mulch helps soil retain moisture, which promotes strong, healthy flowers, plants, trees, and shrubs. And because soil beneath mulch retains more moisture than soil that’s not protected by mulch, homeowners won’t have to spend as much time watering mulched landscapes. That saves time and conserves water, which can be a big benefit in areas prone to drought and/or especially hot summers. Mulch also helps to suppress weed growth, which can ensure all that hard work needed to create an eye-catching garden won’t be compromised by the presence of unsightly, thirsty weeds.

Mulching seems like a simple task, and it can be. But that does not mean homeowners cannot make mistakes when mulching. The following are some common mulching mistakes to avoid as lawn and garden season hits full swing.

• Not enough mulch: Mulch is ineffective when spread too thin. The Virginia Cooperative Extension at Virginia Tech and Virginia State University recommends applying mulch no less than two inches in depth. Anything less than that will prove ineffective at preventing weed growth and helping the soil retain moisture, and that means you will need to water more often.

• Poorly located mulch: Mulch should not be placed too close to plant stems or tree trunks. When it is, tissue is so wet that it makes for a perfect environment for disease and insect infestation.

• Failing to mulch to the drip line: The drip line of a tree refers to the outermost circumference of the tree’s canopy from which water drips onto the ground. The VCE recommends mulching to the drip line of a plant or tree, which ensures the plant or tree will get the most out of the mulch. Mulching to the drip line also minimizes competition from the grass, leading to stronger plants and trees.

• Failing to weed before mulching: Weeds should be removed prior to mulching. If they’re not, the mulch can provide the same growing environment for weeds that you’re trying to create for your plants and trees.

Mulching benefits a landscape in myriad ways, especially when homeowners avoid some common mulching mistakes.
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