

## **10 MUST-DO REPAIRS BEFORE SELLING**

Tackling these basic, inexpensive improvements will help your home stand out from the crowd in a difficult market. When you're putting your home up for sale, you're facing stiff competition. Before asking strangers to trade hundreds of thousands of their hard-earned dollars for your home, make all of the little repairs you've always meant to do but never had the time for.

These basic repairs will help prepare your house for a buyer's critical inspection:

**1. Repair sagging screen doors and other entry red flags.** The entrance to your home is the key to creating a great impression right off the bat. You're not so much selling the house as selling the experience of living in this house. Buyers will be alert to signs of neglect or deferred maintenance, since they want to avoid expensive hidden problems down the road.

Make sure everything at the entrance is in working order. If the screen door is sagging, you'll probably have to install a new one, as aging aluminum parts often become too bent or broken to repair. But first, try replacing any missing or corroded hinge screws and tightening the rest.

Patrol the perimeter of your home, inspecting it with the critical eye of a stranger. Clear dead plants from flower beds, clip dead blossoms and stems, rake and haul the yard waste far away.

**2. Spiff up the roof.** Missing shingles and hanging gutters broadcast a loud, scary signal to potential buyers. You want the house to look as presentable and nonproblematic as possible. You want buyers to be able to focus on "Where does my bed go?" and "Can we live here?" rather than "There's a problem with the roof."

Get a roofer to replace any missing or broken shingles or roofing tiles. Moss growing on the roof signals neglect, so it's important to get it cleaned off. Ask a roofing expert to remove moss or to recommend someone who can. Roofing professionals may suggest treating the surface of your roof with a chemical to kill

moss or they may recommend installing zinc strips on the roof ridge. Water running over the zinc washes minute amounts of zinc carbonate over the roof, killing algae and moss, according to Z-Stop which manufactures the strips. When hiring someone to work on your roof, it's crucial to check their recommendations. Amateurs can damage your roof with the careless use of a high-pressure power washer.

**3. Clear and caulk gutters.** On a dry day, climb up on a ladder and clear all the debris out of the gutters so water can flow freely. While you're up there, recaulk the gutter end caps. Seamless gutters are finished at the ends with a cap that's crimped and caulked. Aging caulk allows leaks to drain water down your home's siding.

**4. Patch nail holes and repaint.** Moving inside the house, you'll want to patch up nail holes in the walls. Ask at a hardware store for lightweight putty. Apply it with a putty knife and fill in each hole, scraping the excess off the wall. Following directions on the package wait for it to dry. Then sand the putty until it's smooth and flush with the wall. Paint the repaired spots with primer. Call a handyman for anything bigger than a nail hole, as it's not easy to blend bigger repairs into the wall and obvious patches telegraph the message, "I'm hiding something." Repaint the entire wall—you're unlikely to be able to hide a touched-up patch--from one corner to the next.

**5. Divorce your smoker and ship kitty to Siberia.** All right, just kidding. The thing is, smells are a serious deal killer. When strangers enter a home, the first thing they notice is the smell. Don't even try hiding behind scented candles, potpourri and plug-in room fragrances. Buyers, ever suspicious to problems, catch a whiff of those and conclude that you're hiding something.

In the kitchen and bathrooms, deep clean with bleach, then regrout tiles and recaulk cracks between sinks, tubs, toilets, counters and floors to seal out the moisture that encourages the growth of smelly mold, mildew and bacteria.

If you've had smokers in the house, you've got extra work to do. To rid walls of smoke and nicotine film, some experts suggest washing the walls with cleaners using an alkaline builder, such as ammonia, and a glycol solvent (found at paint

stores). It is recommended to paint an undercoat of Kilz primer onto clean, dry walls to seal in nicotine smells. Finish the job with a fresh coat of paint and change the furnace filter to further freshen the air in the house.

Ban smoking, even in the garden, because the smell clings to porches, decks and clothing. Gardens lose their appeal when littered with cigarette butts. If possible, board your cat off-premises while you're showing your home; at a minimum, clean the litter box daily.

**6. Replace damaged vinyl flooring.** Inspect the vinyl flooring in your bathrooms. If it has discolored spots or is loose, moisture may be damaging the floor. You'll probably want a professional to lay the actual flooring, which could cost \$400 or more. But you can save as much as half of the cost by preparing the floor yourself.

Remove the baseboards by pulling them away from the walls with a small pry bar. Next, pull up the flooring using a larger pry bar—it will be glued and nailed or stapled. Also remove the next layer, called the underlayment, made of particleboard or layered plywood.

While your new floor is being installed, you can sand and repaint the baseboards so the whole job will look terrific when it's finished. Another good choice for flooring material is linoleum, a green product made from linseed oil, pine resin, sawdust and other natural binders. It can add 30% to 40% to the cost of a \$400 job.

**7. Reseal the toilet.** Not all flooring installers will remove and reinstall the toilet, something that must be done to replace the floor. Pulling the toilet yourself can save you money. With plumbers' fees running about \$85 an hour (with a minimum hour and a half charge for a house call), you could save yourself \$200 or more (for two trips) by pulling the toilet yourself.

Even if you aren't replacing flooring, the seals may need replacing. How to tell? If the toilet rocks when someone sits down, or if the floor at the base is moist or discolored, the seal could be broken. Corroded nuts that hold the toilet to the floor are another sign that the toilet needs to be reinstalled.

While we're talking about toilets, if you have a septic system, obtain a copy of the most recent septic permit at your County Health Department to make sure your drain fields are adequate for the house. If not, you can correct this problem before it causes any delay in your home sale.

**8. Stop faucet drips.** A dripping faucet calls attention to itself, and it's not hard to fix. If the plumbing repairs seem like more trouble than you're willing to tackle, call a plumber.

**9. Renew dinged baseboards.** Beat-up baseboards detract greatly from the appearance of your home, and they're easy to spiff up. First, clean them to remove scrapes and smudges left by clawing pets and toddlers on wheels. Mr. Clean Magic Eraser sponge works great on painted surfaces. Fill in dents with spackle, sand the baseboards smooth and repaint them. If you've lost the name of the original paint color, chip off a coin-sized bit, slip it into an envelope and bring it to the paint store where you can have the color computer matched.

Use primer before painting. Don't just retouch small areas; paint the entire piece of baseboard, from one end to the other. Choose a washable eggshell finish. White is a great choice for making baseboards and trim look crisp and clean.

**10. Repair cabinet scratches.** You can quickly improve the look of unpainted woodwork and worn cabinets with an application of products that even out the surface color. Cover scratches on woodwork and cabinets with Old English Scratch Cover or a Tibet Almond Stick, a tight roll of cotton saturated in chemicals that the manufacturer, Zenith Chemical Works, says is a 100-year-old family formula. (You can find these at hardware and home-improvement stores.)

The almond stick goes on clear but covers scratches and works best with shallow surface scratches on dark finishes. It doesn't work in every case, and even a good result may fade with time and need to be reapplied periodically.

Old English makes separate formulations for light or dark wood. These are oily stains, so use them carefully. Try out any products first in a corner where results will not be noticed. Do not use the dark stain on light wood. Finally, polish wood cabinets to a glow with lemon oil.