

How to Maintain Your Home

201 Great Home Maintenance Tips And Ideas

By Judith Brown

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1. Flooring and Stairs

If you have a squeaky wood floor under tile or carpet, you may be able to eliminate the squeak without removing the floor covering. To reset loose boards by pounding a hammer on a block of scrap wood in the area over the squeaky boards. The pressure may force loose nails back into place.

You may be able to silence squeaky hardwood floors by using talcum powder as a dry lubricant. Sprinkle powder over the offending areas, and sweep it back and forth until it filters down between the cracks.

Sometimes you can flatten bulges or curled seams in a linoleum floor by placing aluminum foil over them and "ironing" them with your steam iron. (The heat will soften and reactivate the adhesive.) Position weights, such as stacks of books, over treated areas to keep them flat until the adhesive cools and hardens.

To remove a resilient floor tile for replacement, lay a piece of aluminum foil on it and then press down with an iron set at medium.

The iron's heat will soften the mastic, and you can easily pry up the tile with a putty knife.

To remove a damaged resilient tile, soften it with a propane torch fitted with a flame-spreader nozzle. (Be careful not to damage surrounding tiles. When the tile is soft, pry it up with a paint scraper or putty knife and scrape the adhesive off the floor so that the new tile bonds cleanly.

You can also remove a resilient tile by covering it with dry ice, wearing work gloves to protect your hands. Let the dry ice stand for 10 minutes and then remove any remaining ice. The cold will make the tile brittle, so it will shatter easily. Chisel out the tile from the edges to the center.

Laying resilient floor tile will be easier if the room temperature is at least 70°F before you start, because tile is more pliable at higher temperatures.

Put all boxes of tile in the room for at least 24 hours prior to positioning tiles on the floor. Try to keep the room temperature at the same level for about a week after laying the tiles, and then wait at least a week before washing the floor.

To prevent scratching the floor when moving heavy furniture across uncarpeted areas, slip scraps of old carpeting, face down, under all furniture legs.

After laying floor tiles, you can help them lie flat by going over them with a rolling pin.

If you want to replace a damaged area of resilient flooring, here's a way to make a perfect patch from scrap flooring: Place the scrap piece over the damaged area so that it overlaps sufficiently, and tape it to hold it in place. Then, cut through both layers at the same time to make a patch that is an exact duplicate. Replace the damaged area with the tightly fitting patch.

To patch a gouge (not a dent) in a resilient floor, take a scrap of the flooring and grate it with a food grater. Mix the resulting dust with clear nail polish and plug the hole.

Another way to camouflage a gouge or hole in a resilient floor is with crayon wax. Choose a crayon that matches the floor color, melt it, fill the gouge or hole, and then wax the floor.

Solvent-based cleaners and polishes preserve cork tile floors and should be used instead of water or water-based products.

So chairs won't scratch a hardwood floor, glue bunion pads to the bottoms of the chair legs.

To make a bathroom carpet fit perfectly, make a precise pattern with paper. Lay overlapped sheets of paper on the bathroom floor, tightly butted up against corners, walls, and obstacles.

Tape the sheets together and cut. Turn the pattern over, face down, on the back of the carpet, trace with a pencil, and then cut.

Thumbtacks pressed into the bottom ends of wooden chair legs will also allow them to slide more easily across a wood or tile floor.

If you're going to use flagstone or slate as indoor flooring, these porous materials should be sealed to keep them looking their best.

Brick flooring can also be sealed and waxed to protect its porous surface from staining. It is especially helpful to treat brick this way if it is used for flooring in a kitchen.

Install floor tiles from the center of a room outward, because the center of a room is where appearance and matching are most important.

To stop squeaks at the front of a stair tread, drive pairs of spiral flooring nails, each pair angled in a "V," across the tread and into the top of the riser below it.

Try eliminating squeaks in stairs by using packaged graphite powder or talcum powder in a squeeze bottle, applying the lubricant along the joints in the problem area.

If an application of graphite powder or talcum powder fails to eliminate a stair squeak, go under the stairs and drive wedges into the gaps between the moving components.

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2. Furniture Care and Refinishing

There are several ways to remove white spots, such as those left by wet drinking glasses.

You can rub them with toothpaste on a damp cloth. (Try this on other surface stains, too.) Or rub them with paste furniture polish) any mild abrasive, or oil. Appropriate abrasives are ashes) salt, soda, or pumice; suitable oils are olive oil, petroleum jelly, cooking oil) or lemon-oil furniture polish.

You can tighten a loose furniture leg caster by wrapping a rubber band around its stem and reinserting it.

When wood fibers in a piece of furniture are merely bent) but not cut) straighten out any dents with an iron) set on medium, and a damp cloth.

Place the damp cloth on a dent, hold the iron on it until the cloth begins to dry, redumpen the cloth, and repeat the process as needed.

Tighten a cabinet or dresser knob by dipping its screw or screws in fingernail polish or shellac and reinserting the knob. When the polish or shellac hardens, the screws will be set and the knobs will be tight.

It's best to position a piano where the sun won't shine on it and where it's least likely to be exposed to changes in temperature or humidity.

You can un-stick wooden drawers by rubbing contact surfaces with a bar of soap or a candle.

A coat of wax prevents rusting on chrome kitchen chairs.

Paper stuck to a polished table can be lifted after saturating the paper with cooking oil.

Decals will easily lift off painted furniture if you sponge with vinegar.

To tighten wobbly wicker furniture, wash it outdoors with hot soapy water, rinse it with a hose, and let it air dry. The wood and cane will shrink and tighten.

Saggy wicker or cane seats can be similarly tightened by sponging them with hot water.

Sometimes a warped table leaf or other board can be straightened by exposure to wet grass and hot summer sun. For this treatment, water a grassy area thoroughly and set the board, concave side down, on the wet grass. As the dry side of the board absorbs moisture from the grass, the moist (convex) side is dried out by the sun and the board un-warps. This process takes no longer than a day.

You can usually rub cigarette burns out of wooden furniture with very fine sandpaper or steel wool. Then, if necessary, color the area with shoe polish to match the rest of the surface.

If you need to pound apart sections of a chair that needs regluing, a soft mallet will provide enough power but will be much kinder to the wood than a hammer.

Instead of straining your back when rearranging a heavy piece of furniture, simply position a child's roller skate or skateboard under each end, and then wheel the piece to its new location.

If a loose cane on a rattan chair is snagging your clothing or stockings, tame it with clear tape, or blunt it by dabbing on clear nail polish.

Always remember to tape the drawers shut before moving a piece of furniture-and remember to remove the tape quickly, too, otherwise it will leave marks.

If your home has central heating, turn it off before starting to varnish a piece of furniture. This will help to keep dust from circulating and settling on the wet varnish. Don't let the temperature drop

below 70°, however, because varnishes (or glues) don't work well in a cool environment. Remember that your work space should be well ventilated.

When using paint stripper on a piece of furniture that has legs, put a tin can under each leg to catch drips. This protects the floor and lets you reuse the stripper that collects in the cans.

Use a tourniquet to hold a freshly glued chair rung firmly in place. Clamp the glued rung with a heavy cord wrapped around the chair legs.

Use a dowel to twist the cord until the proper tension is reached, then prop the dowel to maintain pressure.

If a chair wobbles because one leg is shorter than the others, steady the chair by forming an appropriately shaped piece of wood putty to "extend" the short leg. When the putty dries, sand and stain it to match the leg and glue it in place.

When gluing dowels, a dowel that's exactly the size of the hole it fits into can push much of the glue to the bottom of the hole and therefore not hold as well as it should. To avoid this, cut a few grooves in the dowel so the glue is distributed along its surface for a more secure bond.

It's a practical idea to use newspaper to protect your floor or workbench when you're refinishing a piece of furniture, but the legs may stick to the paper. To avoid this, drive a nail part of the way into the bottom of each leg.

When you're working with varnish, hold the container as still as possible so that bubbles don't form and spoil the smooth finish.

Refinishing Furniture

If you'd like to know how your unfinished furniture would look if it were stained, try the "wet test." Dampen a cloth with turpentine and wipe it over the surface; the moisture will bring out the grain, showing any contrasts and giving the wood the appearance it would have if stained.

Sanding concave curves will be easier if you hold the sandpaper around a piece of dowel the same diameter as the curve or smaller. Or, slit a length of rubber garden hose and wrap the paper around it, with the ends held in the slit.

To sand a furniture spindle or rung without flattening it, hold a sandpaper strip behind the part, one end in each hand, and saw the ends back and forth to buff-sand the wood.

For scraping small areas when refinishing, consider using such unconventional tools as a coin, bottle cap, golf tee, screwdriver, or your thumbnail. Even a car windshield scraper can be pressed into service.

When refinishing, a flat rubber kitchen spatula can be a useful scraper for removing paint from curved or rounded surfaces, especially since it can be used even on delicate carvings. For greater versatility, buy both wide and narrow sizes.

Many small items are useful for cleaning furniture crevices and cracks when you're refinishing. Enlist the aid of a nut pick, a plastic playing card, a plastic credit card, the broken end of an ice cream stick, the tine of an old fork, an orange stick, wood toothpicks, or an old spoon.

If you need an unusually shaped smoothing tool for use on wet spackling compound and other wood fillers, try whittling an ice cream stick to the required contour.

A heavy string is useful when stripping the narrow turnings of a spindle furniture leg. Gently "saw" the string back and forth to remove the finish.

To avoid gouging wood when using a putty knife to strip furniture, round the putty knife's sharp corners with a fine-toothed file. If you're working on large flat surfaces, dull a paint scraper the same way.

To smooth wood evenly and thoroughly in the refinishing process, work with successively finer sandpaper grades. Between sandings, brush off or vacuum the sanding debris; then wipe the wood clean with a tack cloth.

If wood still shows ink stains, white water marks, splotches, or traces of any previous stain or filler after stripping, try wiping them away with liquid laundry bleach. To remove

black water marks or to lighten chemically darkened wood, use oxalic acid (available in paint stores and drugstores).

Remember that treatment with any bleach raises the wood grain, even when the furniture piece has been thoroughly sanded. To prevent the raised grain from affecting the finish, re-sand to the level of the wood surface after the wood dries.

To obtain a smooth, evenly finished surface on open-grained woods, treat them with a filler after staining. First apply filler in the direction of the grain; then work across the grain to fill all pores completely.

If large knots in unfinished furniture are loose, remove them, apply carpenters' glue around their edges, and replace them flush with the surface. If small knots (pin knots) are loose, remove and discard them and plug the resulting holes with plastic wood or water putty.

For the most professional patching job, use shellac sticks to fill cracks and gouges since they leave the least conspicuous patch.

It will be easier to apply paint or varnish remover to a piece of furniture if all hardware has been removed. If you label the hardware along with a sketch of the furniture, it will also be easier to reassemble it correctly.

If hardware is spotted with paint or finish, drop it into a pan filled with paint remover. Let it soak while you work on the wood, then wipe it clean.

Small blisters on a veneered surface can sometimes be flattened with heat. Here's how: Lay a sheet of smooth cardboard over the blistered area and press firmly with a medium-hot iron, moving the iron slowly and evenly until the blisters soften and flatten. Leave the cardboard in place and weight the smoothed-out area for 24 hours.

To help slow evaporation after applying a coat of paint remover-and give it more time to work-cover the surface with aluminum foil. Keep in mind, though, that paint remover stops working in any case after about 40 minutes.

You can make a template to patch damaged veneer this way: Lay a sheet of bond paper over the damaged area and rub a soft lead pencil gently over the paper. The edges of the damaged area will be precisely indicated on the paper so you can cut a pattern.

For more durability, top an antiqued finish with a coat of semi-gloss or high-gloss varnish.

If you apply a protective shellac coating to cane chair seats they'll last longer and be easier to clean.

Upholstering Furniture

When you reupholster furniture, put fabric scraps in an envelope and staple the envelope to the underside of the newly covered piece. That way you'll have scraps for patching.

To hammer decorative furniture tacks without damaging their heads, place a wooden spool over each tack and pound on the spool.

When using ornamental tacks for upholstery, push extras into the frame in an inconspicuous spot so you have replacements if needed.

Before covering kitchen chair seats with plastic, warm the plastic with a heating pad so it will be more pliable and easier to handle.

For speed and convenience, you can cut foam rubber upholstery padding with an electric carving knife.

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3. Maintaining and Repairing Windows

Spattered rain and dirt will easily wipe off window sills that have a protective coat of wax.

Applying a reflective vinyl coating on the inside of your windows will both protect your furniture upholstery or drapery fabric from the fading effects of strong sunlight and help keep your home cooler in the summertime.

To free a window that's been painted shut, use a scraper, knife, or spatula to cut the paint seal between the sash and the window frame. Then, working from the outside, insert the blade of a pry bar under the sash and pry gently from the corners in. Lever the bar over a block of scrap wood.

When replacing a broken sash cord, consider using a sash chain, which lasts much longer.

Soften old putty for easy removal by heating it with a soldering iron, propane torch, or hand-held hair dryer. Or, if you prefer, soften it with linseed oil and then scrape it away.

To prevent a window pane crack from spreading, score a small arc with a glass cutter just beyond the crack, curving around it. Usually the crack will travel only as far as the arc.

To remove cracked glass from a window without excessive splintering, crisscross the pane on both sides with several strips of masking tape, then rap it with a hammer. Most of the pane will be held together.

If you try to open a window and it refuses to budge, tap a hammer on a block of wood at various places on the sash. (Don't hit the sash directly with the hammer, or you'll leave dents.) The tapping may jar the sash loose.

To make dried-out putty workable again, sprinkle it with a few drops of raw linseed oil and knead it until it is soft and pliable.

Before attempting to chisel dried and hardened putty from a wooden window frame, brush raw linseed oil over the putty's surface. Let it soak in to soften the putty.

You can fill a pellet gun hole in a window pane with clear nail polish or shellac. Dab at the hole; when the application dries, dab again-and reapply until the hole is filled. The pane will appear clear. A pellet-gun hole in stained glass can be filled the same way.

When installing a new window pane, speed up the process by rolling the glazing compound between the palms of your hands to form a long string the diameter of a pencil. Lay the "string" along the frame) over the glass, and smooth it in place with a putty knife.

When glazing windows, brush the frames where the putty will lie with boiled linseed oil to prevent the wood from drinking the oils from the putty.

If you want to cover your clear bathroom window without putting up curtains, render the glass opaque by brushing on a mixture of 4 tablespoons of Epsom salts and 1/2 pint of stale beer.

Alternatives: Glue on stained-glass pieces, silver Mylar, or wax paper. Double-duty alternative:

Cover the panes with mirrored squares, which, as a side benefit, will make the bathroom seem larger.

If the putty knife sticks or pulls at the glazing compound when you're glazing a window, "grease" the knife by dipping the blade into linseed oil. Wipe off the excess.

When painting glazing compound, lap the paint slightly over the edge of the compound and onto the glass.

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4. Maintaining and Repairing Screens

To keep aluminum screens from pitting, clean them outdoors (never indoors) with kerosene. Dip a rag in the kerosene and rub both sides of the mesh and the frames, then wipe off the excess. This is a particularly good rust inhibitor for older screens.

(Since kerosene is highly flammable, it should always be stored in small amounts in a cool place.

To repair a small tear in a wire window screen, push the wire strands back into place with an ice pick. If the hole doesn't close completely, brush clear nail polish or shellac sparingly across the remaining opening. Let the sealer dry, and reapply until the pinhole is transparently sealed. (Be careful not to let any sealer run down the screen; immediately blot any excess.)

Clean awnings in the direction of the seam, not against it. As fabric awnings age, their seams weaken.

You can rejuvenate faded canvas awnings with a special paint available from awning dealers or paint stores.

To close a large hole in a window screen, cut a patch from a scrap piece of screening of the same type as the damaged screen. Zigzag stitch the patch into place, and then apply clear nail polish to the stitching.

If there's a clean cut or tear in a window screen, you can stitch it together. Use a long needle and a strong nylon thread or a fine wire.

Zigzag stitch across the cut, being careful not to pull the thread or wire so tight that the patch puckers. After stretching, apply clear nail polish to keep the thread or wire from pulling loose.

To repair fiberglass screening, lay a fiberglass patch over the hole or tear with a piece of foil over it, and run a hot iron around the edges; the heat fuses the patch to the screen. The foil prevents the iron from touching the screen directly. Lower rolled-up awnings after a storm to allow them to dry.

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5. Maintaining and Repairing Doors

If hinge screws on a door are loose because the screw holes have become enlarged, fill the holes with pieces of wood toothpick dipped in glue. When the glue dries, reinsert the screws. Or, wrap hinge screws with steel wool and reinsert.

If you're trying to remove a door's hinge pin and the pin won't budge, press a nail against the hinge bottom and tap upward against the nail with a hammer.

If a door binds on the knob side when the door is closed, its hinges may be misaligned. If the top of the knob side binds, try putting a cardboard shim behind the bottom hinge. If the bottom corner binds slip a cardboard shim behind the top hinge. To shim a door hinge, loosen the screws on the door frame side. Cut a

shim from thin cardboard with slots to fit around the screws, slide it behind the hinge, and tighten the screws.

Children old enough to answer the door should be able to see who's there, just as you do.

Install a second peephole low enough for youngsters to use.

If a doorknob bangs against a wall, protect the wall by covering the knob with a slit-open powder puff.

For better control when lifting a door off its hinges, remove the bottom pin first. When replacing a door on its hinges, insert the top pin first.

If a door sticks at the sides, try to plane only on the hinge side. The latch side is beveled slightly and planing could damage the bevel. Plane from the center toward the ends.

To prevent people from mistaking a closed sliding glass door for an open one, apply eye-level decals-at both adult and child levels if necessary-to alert people before they walk into the pane and possibly injure themselves. You can use the same trick to mark lightweight screens.

You needn't worry about oil dripping on the floor if you quiet a squeaky hinge by lubricating its pin with petroleum jelly rather than oil.

Cardboard shields will protect the finish on a door when you clean and polish door hardware.

Fit the shields around the pertinent metal parts, holding them in place with masking tape.

If you have to remove some wood at a door's binding points, use a block plane on the top or bottom of the door and a jack plane to work on the side. Work from the ends to the center on the top or bottom edge, from the center out on the sides.

When you've fashioned a door to the exact size for hanging, bevel the latch edge backward just a bit to let it clear the jamb as it swings open and shut.

If you need to plane the bottom of a door because it scrapes the threshold or the floor, you can do so without removing the door. Place sandpaper on the threshold or floor, then move the door back and forth over this abrasive surface. Slide a newspaper or magazine under the sandpaper if it needs to be raised in order to make contact.

Before you replace a door that you have planed, seal the planed edges. If you don't, the raw wood will absorb moisture and the door will swell and stick again.

Graphite from a soft pencil can be used to lubricate a resistant door lock. Rub the key across the pencil point, and then slide it in and out of the lock several times.

If you want to replace an existing lock but you can't find a new one that will fit the existing holes, cover the old holes with a large decorative escutcheon plate.

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6. Soundproofing

Heavy, lined curtains will absorb excess noise in a room. Placing heavy furniture against the wall facing noisy neighbors will also help cut down on sounds.

To reduce noise in your home and cut energy costs at the same time, weather-strip all doors and windows.

To insulate your home from street noise, double glaze the windows, insulate the walls and ceilings, and install wall-to-wall carpeting.

Cover hardwood floors with area rugs to cut down on noise in your home. Upholstered furniture also absorbs noise, while glass, chrome, and wood reflect noise.

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7. Home Lighting and Electricity

Safety is an important consideration when you're working with electricity. To make sure that no one accidentally flips the circuit breaker back on while you're making electrical repairs, put a piece of tape-and a sign to let people know what you're doing-over the handle of the circuit breaker. The same applies to a fuse box.

Wait to tinker with a switched outlet or lighting fixture-even though you've flicked off the switch-until you have also deactivated the circuit. In many switching systems, parts of the circuit are still energized when the switch is off.

When working with electricity, insulate your pliers by slipping a length of small-diameter rubber hose on each handle. Wrap other metal parts with electrician's tape. Insulate the shank of a screwdriver by slipping a section of rubber or plastic tubing over it. Be sure to cut the tubing so that it extends from the handle down to the blade.

Replace a fuse with one of the same amperage as the one you took out. You risk causing an electrical fire if you use a fuse rated to carry more amps or if you try to bypass the fuse in any way.

Save time ahead of time. Determine which circuits activate which outlets in your home; then diagram or print the information on a card attached to your circuit breaker or fuse box. When your electricity fails, you'll be able to solve the problem quickly.

For safety's sake! stand on a dry board when working with a fuse box or a circuit-breaker box.

Also use a wooden rather than an aluminum stepladder to minimize the risk or shock when working with electrical wiring.

Everyone in the family should know how to throw the master switch that cuts off all electrical current. Any time there's a chance of contact between water and electricity! avoid wading in water until the master switch has been shut off.

When maneuvering a section of electrical cable through a wall, play it safe and use roughly 20 percent more than a straight-line measurement indicates that you need. Often there are unexpected obstructions and the cable must be moved around. You can cut off any extra cable.

A blown fuse or a tripped circuit breaker is a sign of trouble. Locate and eliminate the problem before you replace a blown fuse or reset a tripped circuit breaker. Otherwise the problem will only recur.

So that you won't be left in the dark if a bulb burns out in the basement, light the area with a 2-socket fixture. If one bulb burns out! the other will still enable you to see.

If you're distracted by shadows that reduce visibility in your kitchen or workshop! replace incandescent fixtures with fluorescent lamps which provide even, shadow-free illumination.

If you're planning to replace a lamp socket, consider installing a 3-way socket for greater lighting versatility. Wiring a 3-way socket is as simple as wiring a standard on/off fixture.

Any change in a fluorescent lamp's normal performance, such as flickering or noticeable dimming, is a warning that the bulb should be replaced. Failure to replace the bulb can strain parts of the fixture; for example, repeated flashing wears out the starter and causes the starter's insulation to deteriorate. If it's difficult to remove a broken light bulb because there's little left to grasp, turn off the switch, jam a sponge-rubber ball against the jagged glass, and twist.

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8. Plumbing

You can keep drains free of clogging and odors by this once-a-week treatment: Pour 3 tablespoons of washing soda (salsoda) into the drain and then slowly run very hot water to dissolve any build-ups.

For better suction when plunging a clogged drain, cover the rubber cap of the plunger with water and plug the fixture's opening with wet rags.

If a plunger doesn't work when you try to unclog a drain, try using a straightened wire coat hanger, bent at one end to form a small hook. Using the hook, try to loosen or remove the debris that is causing the problem.

A garden hose can sometimes be effective in unclogging floor drains such as those in basements and showers, especially if the debris isn't close to the opening. Attach the hose to a faucet, feed the hose into the drain as far as it will go, and jam rags around the hose at the opening. Then turn on the water full force for a few moments to blast the debris away.

If you hear a squealing noise when you turn the handle of a faucet, the metal threads of the stem are binding against the threads of the faucet.

To fix this, remove the handle and stem and coat both sets of threads with petroleum jelly. The lubrication should stop the noise and make the handle easier to turn.

For a homemade, noncorrosive drain cleaner, mix 1 cup of baking soda, 1 cup of table salt, and 1/4 cup of cream of tartar in a small bowl. Stir thoroughly and pour into a clean, covered jar. To use, pour 1/2 cup of the mixture into the drain and immediately add 1 cup of boiling water. Wait 10 seconds, then flush with cold water. Do this weekly to keep drains clog-free and odorless. (One blending of this mixture equals 2 1/2 cups of cleaner.)

If a dripping faucet is getting on your nerves before the plumber arrives or before you have time to fix it yourself tie a 2-foot-long string around the nozzle, and drop the string's end into the drain. As the faucet drips, the drops will run silently down the string and away.

What can you do if too little water comes from the tank to flush the toilet bowl clean? Check the water level in the tank, and if it doesn't come to within 1/2 inches of the top of the overflow tube, bend the float arm up slightly to allow more water to enter the tank.

If there's very little water in a clogged toilet bowl, flushing will only cause the bowl to overflow. Instead, use a plunger to unclog the toilet; bring water from another source to cover the plunger cup for better suction.

To make a septic tank activator, combine in a large bowl 2 envelopes of active dry yeast with 1 pound of brown sugar; add 4 cups of warm water, stirring until

the mixture completely blends. Set the mixture in a warm place for 10 to 20 minutes until it's foamy and its volume increases. Then, flush it down the toilet.

If your water pipes bang and faucets leak, the water pressure in your home may be reaching or exceeding 70 to 80 pounds per square inch and you may need to install a pressure-reducing valve.

You can measure the average water pressure in your house by attaching a pressure gauge to the cold-water faucet nearest the main shut-off valve.

If a water pipe is banging against a wall and causing noise, you can silence it by wedging the pipe off the wall with a wood block and clamping the pipe to the wedge with a pipe strap.

If you have a stretch of water pipe that often freezes, consider buying heat tape (sometimes called heat cable). The tape is wrapped around the pipe and an automatic thermostat starts the heat

when the outside temperature drops to about When thawing a frozen pipe, start at the tap end and open the tap so that melting ice and steam can run off or dissipate harmlessly. If you start at the middle of a pipe, steam from melting ice may burst the pipe.

When you're using hot water faucets regularly, there's no danger of hydrogen gas building up in your water heater. But if you've been away for an extended period, this danger does exist. If you've been away for awhile, open all hot water taps for a few minutes to prevent the danger of an explosion.

Good sweat soldiers gain their expertise through practice. Buy a few short lengths of copper pipe and some fittings and practice before you tackle the real project.

To clean copper pipe before sweat soldering, wrap a strip of emery cloth around the end of the pipe and move it back and forth as if you were buffing a shoe.

Most amateur plumbers are so proud of their first sweat-soldered joints that they immediately turn on the water—a big mistake. Allow the joint to cool naturally, because the sudden cooling effect of rushing water can weaken the joint and cause it to crack.

If a pipe springs a leak, consider replacing an entire section rather than just patching the leak. A pipe that is sufficiently corroded to leak in one place will often start leaking in other places.

Whenever you secure a pipe, be careful to anchor it so that it can expand and contract with temperature changes. If you place a bracket on a pipe, include a buffer fashioned from garden hose, radiator hose, foam rubber, rubber cut from old inner tubes, or kitchen sponges.

To avoid having the teeth of the wrench scar a chrome-plated plumbing fixture during installation, first wrap the fixture with a double coating of plastic electrical tape.

To keep the water shut-off valve in good working order, turn it off and then on again once every 6 months.

Make sure everyone in the family knows where in your home the main shut-off valve is located. Also make sure everyone knows how to use it. This could prevent flooding in an emergency.

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9. Pest Control

You can keep ants away from your home with a concoction of borax and flour. Mix 1 cup of flour and 2 cups of borax in a quart jar. Punch holes in the jar's lid and sprinkle its contents outdoors around the foundation of your home.

Bothered by ants and other tiny insects in your cupboards? Scrub the cupboards and then leave several bay leaves in each to discourage return visits.

Bat-proofing your property is a good idea if you've been infested once and want to eliminate future colonies. The strong odor a colony leaves behind attracts other bats even after the first group has been evicted.

If you see a bat in your house, try to knock it to the floor with a tennis racquet or broom. Once it's stunned, pick it up wearing gloves, or scoop it up with a piece of paper, and get rid of it. Never handle a bat with your bare hands because of the risk of rabies.

If bees are nesting in a wall but you don't know exactly where, tap the wall at night and decide where the buzzing is loudest. Because the temperature inside the nest is usually about 95°F, you may also be able to feel its heat through the wall. Double check by drilling a small hole in the suspect area. If the drill bit comes out with honey or paraffin on it, you've found the nest.

Some people are allergic to bee or wasp stings. If you know or suspect that you are one of them, never try to exterminate a nest yourself. Have someone else do it.

If there's a hornet, wasp, bee, or other flying insect in your house and you have no insect spray, kill it with hair spray.

If your home becomes infested with fleas, vacuum rugs thoroughly before spraying and throw out the dust bag at once.

Mealworms, which are attracted to open packages of spaghetti, noodles, or macaroni, are repelled by spearmint chewing gum. You won't be bothered by the pests if you place a few sticks of wrapped gum in or near the packages. (Note: The gum must be wrapped so that it won't dry out and lose its scent.)

The scent of peppermint repels mice. To discourage these rodents, place sprigs of this herb where the rodents are likely to enter the house.

You can achieve the same effect by soaking pieces of cardboard in oil of peppermint and leaving them in appropriate places.

Raw bacon or peanut butter makes good bait for a mousetrap; so does a cotton ball saturated with bacon grease. So that a mouse can't get the bait without springing the trap, make sure it will have to tug to remove the bait. If you're using peanut butter, dab some on the triggering device and let it harden before setting the trap. If bacon is your bait, tie it around the triggering device.

If you live in a multiunit building, any pest control measures you take individually will be ineffective in the long run simply because insects can travel from one apartment to another.

To eliminate bugs completely, the entire building should be treated at one time.

Since mosquito larvae thrive in water, changing the water in the birdbath every 3 days will help reduce the mosquito population.

Because raccoons carry fleas, take immediate action if one sets up housekeeping in your attic or chimney. Chemical repellents such as oil of mustard are temporarily effective, but the smell may bother you as much as it does the raccoon. Your best bet is to let the animal leave, and then cover its entrance hole with wire mesh so that it cannot return. In the spring, moving leftover firewood away from the house will help discourage insect infestations.

Centipedes prey on other bugs, so the presence of centipedes in your house may indicate the presence of other insects as well.

The presence of carpenter ants indicates another problem. Because they're fond of damp wood, you should check your pipes, roof, and window sills for water leaks.

You can distinguish termite damage from other insect damage by examining any holes you find in wood. Termites eat only the soft part of wood, leaving the annual rings intact.

You can control roaches with a mixture of 1/2 cup of borax and 1/4 cup of flour. Sprinkle this powder along baseboards and door sills, or spoon it into clear jar caps positioned under sinks or under cabinets.

Remember that supermarkets and grocery stores almost always have roaches, so check bags and boxes when unpacking food at home.

To keep rodents out of your house, seal every opening they could squeeze through. Some need less than a 1/4-inch space. Put poison in deep cracks or holes, and stuff these with steel wool or scouring pads pushed in with a screwdriver. Close the spaces with spackling compound mixed with steel wool fragments.

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