

Chapter 1

Home Maintenance: What It Is and Why It Matters

In This Chapter

- ▶ Making your home a safer and more comfortable place to live
 - ▶ Enhancing your home's value
 - ▶ Saving money on repairs and energy
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We grew up in house that was built by our grandfather shortly after the turn of the 20th century. Our family (all six of us) continually did maintenance on that house — painting, plastering, plumbing, repairing window screens, and a billion other tasks. Or so it seemed.

However, maintenance is not reserved for older homes. Home maintenance should begin the day the house is completed, and continue for as long as the structure exists. But please don't think that you've signed up for years of drudgery. In this chapter, we show you how home maintenance can be fast, easy, and even fun — and how it can save you money in the long run.

Keeping Up with Upkeep

Some homeowners think of maintenance as a challenge, something to take on, overcome, and, with luck, complete. Some see it as a learning experience, looking to master new skills, and, in the process, improve their home. Some get into the Zen of it, finding enlightenment in knowing — and truly understanding — the inner workings of their dwellings. And some focus on the bottom line, seeing maintenance as the preservation and enhancement of their huge home investment. Most just want their homes to look nice and work well.

However you approach maintenance (and regardless of whether you achieve insight into the meaning of your existence), you have to stay on top of your to-do list, because you need to keep little problems from becoming big trouble, because it's smart to keep everything looking good, and because keeping your home's systems working efficiently makes financial sense.

From little to big

Maintenance is not about big, time-consuming, and expensive projects. In fact, one of the most effective and worthwhile tasks — painting a room — requires only a couple of gallons of paint, a \$10 brush, and a \$3 roller cover. Changing the furnace filter takes two minutes. Caulking a drafty window frame is a five-minute, \$5 job. Doing these little things, and doing them continuously or as needed, makes a huge difference in the appearance, comfort, and efficiency of your home.

Over time, there will be more little projects than big ones. Our advice: Do the little ones yourself. Most of them are easy to do. You'll save money, your home will look and work better, and you'll feel as though you've accomplished something.

Medium-size projects — like cleaning and adjusting your furnace, adjusting a sticking exterior door, or replacing a toilet — need to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. To decide whether to do them yourself or hire a pro, ask yourself these questions:

- ✓ Do I have the right skills and knowledge?
- ✓ Do I have the necessary tools?
- ✓ Do I have the time?

If you have to say no to any one of these questions, you need to think hard before taking on the job. You may be better off hiring a pro.

Which brings us to the big projects, things like replacing the roof, re-siding, and pouring a new driveway. Unless you have some really awesome skills, solid experience, and know-how, as well as a workshop full of tools, hiring a pro is best. As a friend of ours says, "I know how to build a deck. But I've never done it before. There are people who build decks every day, people who know how to do the job right. It's worth the cost of hiring a contractor to be satisfied with the end product."

Many of our radio-show callers are homeowners who've taken on projects that are way beyond their expertise, require the purchase of expensive tools,

and are taking much longer than expected. And they're not calling to share how wonderful the projects have gone. They need help putting things back together or advice on how to find someone who can get the monkeys off their backs, so to speak. Don't get caught in this trap. Be smart. Know your limitations.

All the chapters in Parts II through V contain many of the most common small and medium-size maintenance tasks that you can tackle yourself (with our help, of course). And when a task really should be left to a pro, we tell you that, too.

From inside to outside

Homes are complicated. They have many components and systems that need to be monitored and maintained (see Chapter 2). Inside, the systems include plumbing, electrical, and heating/air conditioning. Plus, you've got the foundation, structural framing, walls, floors, appliances, countertops, cabinets, sinks, bathtubs, fireplaces, and more to care for. It sounds like a lot (and it is), but you can find all the details you need in Parts II, III, and IV.

Outside, the components that require attention include windows and doors, roof, chimney, garage door, concrete, masonry, and siding. The key thing to know about problems on the outside of your home is that, if you don't attend to them, they can become problems on the *inside*, too. That's why we devote an entire part (Part V) to helping you prevent and address problems outside.

Benefiting from a Little TLC

There are five major benefits to maintaining your home well:

- ✓ Improved safety
- ✓ Increased comfort
- ✓ Enhanced home value
- ✓ Money savings
- ✓ Energy efficiency

Here's what this list tells you: that home maintenance literally pays off. To put it another way, these five big benefits prove that an ounce of prevention really is worth a pound of cure. And, as you'll soon discover, those are words to live by when it comes to your home.

To your health (and safety)

A poorly cared-for home is not just an aesthetic problem — it can hurt you:

- ✔ A rotted subfloor can result in an unexpected visit to the floor below — complete with bumps, cuts, bruises, and maybe a trip to the hospital.
- ✔ A poorly maintained furnace can leak deadly carbon monoxide gas, which is the leading cause of poisoning deaths in the United States.
- ✔ An air-conditioning system that fails in the heat of summer, or a furnace that takes a hiatus in the worst of winter, can lead to extreme indoor temperatures, which can be dangerous, or even fatal for the elderly and very young.
- ✔ A smoke detector with a dead battery doesn't work — it's literally playing with fire.

Simple home maintenance can prevent these disasters and make your house a safer place to live for you and your family. For example, the one 9-volt battery, vacuuming, and three minutes that it takes to maintain your smoke detector could prevent you from losing your home, a pet, or a loved one.

So how do you spell safety when it comes to your home? M-A-I-N-T-E-N-A-N-C-E!

Comfort: You'll miss it if it's gone

Your house contains a number of systems that make it a comfortable place to live (see Chapter 2). Most people take the comfort systems in their house for granted. They don't think about them until one of the systems breaks down. And then the result is a distinct *lack* of comfort.

REMEMBER



You get what you pay for

Here's the first rule of home-maintenance materials: Buy the best that you can afford. Doing so gives your home the maximum benefit and protection. If you buy inferior materials, you'll likely be doing the job over again soon. Worse yet,

you may end up spending a hefty sum to make repairs that otherwise wouldn't be needed had you spent a little more upfront. Not a bad proposition if you enjoy spending all your free time and spare change fixing up your home.

For example, your home's electrical system powers lights, your refrigerator, your water heater, and your washer and dryer, among other things. You may not think about your electrical system when you turn on lights; grab a cold can of soda from the fridge; take a hot, relaxing shower; or fold your freshly laundered clothes. But if that electrical system breaks down, you'll quickly realize how much of your day-to-day comfort depends on it.

Because many of these systems have motors and moving parts, they're especially vulnerable to wear and tear that, without preventive maintenance, could result in major inconvenience — and, at least at our houses, lots of swearing.

Money in the bank

Preventing a problem is almost always cheaper than making repairs after a problem occurs. And it's always less expensive to fix a little problem before it becomes big trouble. Use this as your home-maintenance mantra: "Ommmmm, smart homeowners are proactive, ommmmm."

Avoiding more expensive repairs

Here's how the ounce-of-prevention thing works: The metal flashing that surrounds a chimney can be the source of a nasty roof leak if it's not maintained. The \$20 it costs to caulk and paint the flashing is a fraction of the hundreds or thousands of dollars you would spend to repair water damage to ceilings, walls, and flooring. We bet you can't find a blue-chip stock that pays those kinds of dividends! Ka-ching!

Gaps in siding and trim around windows and doors allow cold drafts and moisture to make their way into the wood skeleton of your home. Aside from driving up utility bills, the moisture produces rot that, in turn, weakens the structural elements in your home, and provides a veritable smorgasbord for structural pests like termites and other wood ravagers, as well as creating a breeding ground for dangerous mold. These small gaps can result in thousands of dollars' worth of repairs and, if left unrepaired long enough, can actually lead to the demise of your home. The flip side: Spend five minutes and \$5 to caulk the trim around a window. Your home will love you for it, and you'll love yourself for saving so much of your hard-earned cash.

Increasing efficiency

Most people know that the more efficiently a mechanical device works, the less it costs to operate. A well-tuned automobile engine, for example, delivers far

better fuel efficiency than a clunker. The same holds true with many of the machines that you have around your home. Your furnace is a great example. A clean furnace filter, coupled with other preventive maintenance tasks, makes the furnace operate more efficiently, consuming less energy and making it less susceptible to breakdowns.

Energy savings equal money savings. Keeping the appliances in your home running efficiently also helps the environment — a major benefit for yourself and the planet.

Many times, improving efficiency requires the replacement of the system or appliance in question. A brand-new refrigerator is twice as efficient as one just 7 years old. A new water heater is significantly cheaper to operate than the one in your basement. (A tankless water heater is more efficient still.) Your 10-year-old air-conditioning system? Terribly wasteful! New ones must meet significantly tougher efficiency standards. The repair-versus-replace decision is complicated when it comes to appliances and energy-consuming systems. You need to consider whether it's worth repairing an old, inefficient unit and whether (and how long it will take) for the new one to pay for itself.

ANECDOTE



Roots: A good place to begin

Before there were the Carey brothers (or Carey sisters — there are two), there were the Carey parents: Morris and Alvera. We can attribute our interest in building, remodeling, and repair to our parents — a couple of dyed-in-the-wool do-it-yourselfers. Both gone now, they made one heck of a home-improvement and -repair team. They were hard working, creative, and industrious. If ever a sow's ear could be turned into a silk purse, Mom and Dad could do it.

Mom's favorite source for sprucing up the home was the local thrift shop, while the local landfill — we called them dumps back then — was Dad's hangout. After any given shopping spree, Mom would return home with unusual items, such as an old, metal milk can, an assortment of picture frames, and a light fixture or two. Armed only with her innate creativity and her infamous gold spray paint, she would convert trash into family treasures. The milk can became

a lamp, the ailing frames were transformed into sought-after antiques, and the light fixtures would rival those of Liberace. What they all had in common was their radiant gold finish, her trademark.

Meanwhile, Dad would be pulling an old piece of furniture off his truck that he "rescued" from the local landfill. His favorites were old console radios and television sets. Once, Dad took a vintage radio cabinet, tore out all the guts, and transformed it into an elegant glass cabinet that Mom used to showcase all her fine crystal and china. The hinged top that once served as the hatch to a turntable allowed convenient access to her treasures.

Be it painting, plastering, or plumbing, there was always something that needed to be done around our house. With some ingenuity, our parents showed us that these tasks could be fun. And that's something we want to show you, too.

Maintaining and increasing your home's value

If you're like most people, your home is the single largest investment of your lifetime. Besides having a place to live, you may have also made this investment with the hopes of making some money on it when you sell the house. Thus, it makes good sense (and big bucks) to keep your home in tip-top shape.

We learned a valuable term from real-estate professionals whom we encountered over the years in our building and remodeling business: *curb appeal*. This term refers to how the outward appearance of a home affects its value. A home with a roof, windows, doors, siding, fencing, and landscaping that are well cared for is more appealing to potential buyers and, hence, more valuable. Conversely, a poorly maintained home can be a real eyesore and worth significantly less than its well-maintained counterpart.

Even if you don't intend to sell your home in the near future, you need to maintain your home in order to maintain your initial investment. We've probably beat this message into the ground already, but simple repairs, like replacing a furnace filter, can make a big difference in maintaining this investment. How, you ask, can a home's value be affected by replacing a furnace filter? Seem like a stretch? Not in the slightest. With a clean filter, a furnace doesn't work nearly as hard; thus, it places less stress on the motor, fan belt, and other components. Consequently, the furnace has a longer life, and, in turn, you avoid having to replace the furnace prematurely.

Let the Games Begin!

Now that you have an idea of what it is about your home that needs to be maintained and why it's important to do so, you can use the information in this book to charge forward to tackle projects that have been on your to-do list. Keep in mind that, when it comes to project order, you should crawl before you walk and walk before you run. So as not to become discouraged or end up with a mess on your hands, we suggest that you attempt smaller, more doable projects first. This approach gives you the opportunity to get comfortable using tools and materials that may not be so familiar.



Safety first! Always have the right tools and equipment for the job and never be in a hurry. Haste makes waste and is a recipe for potential injury and poor results. We suggest that you have a look at Chapter 3 for suggestions on what projects to take on first and the basic tools that you'll need to accomplish most home-maintenance projects. Start with small projects and work your way up the ladder — literally and figuratively — to more-complex projects.

With time and experience, you'll grow increasingly more comfortable and confident wielding a hammer in one hand and a caulking gun in the other.

When all's said and done, the idea is to protect your home, save money, and have fun in the process. Who knows? You may just find that you like this home maintenance stuff. Yippee!