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# Home & garden

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in these challenging times

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# Home & garden

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**Design team:** Lili Cao, Trina Cannon, Kristin Herman

**On the cover:** Spring is bursting out all over and what better way to enjoy it than on a garden tour? Photo courtesy Danville-Alamo AAUW.



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# Construction trend: Remodel old family digs into a dream home

By **MATT CLAWSON**

If you want to move out, up and into a better living environment — where the driveway never cracks, appliances never falter, and enormous doorways lead to the blissful spaces you have yearned for — you have probably considered the question: “Is it a good time to sell my home?”

Afternoons of traipsing around to open houses show that they are selling at low figures these days, not associated at all with what the home would cost to build. I suspect that most of my recent customers set their course when they came to accept the true, likely sales price of their existing homes in this economy.

Rather than search out greener pastures in the dizzying plethora of home inventory, we’ve had a series of customers undertake plans to find that greener grass right under their feet in their own lawns.

An old rancher in Diablo? An outdated Mediterranean in Pleasanton? Maybe that’s how it looks to you and me. But our recent customers see the past in these weathered structures, remembering what the spaces

were like when they were new. And after raising families in the homes, they carry heartfelt affinities for the places where their memories were created. Each of these clients made the decision to create a new dream home without a change of address.

In these whole-house remodels — all undertaken in the worst economic environment since the Great Depression — a few trends can be discerned.

■ Customers have always sought a good deal from their contractor. Now they demand one. Contractors who cannot prove they are cost-competitive will soon be in another line of work. The fact is that every contractor out there, and every subcontractor, is scrambling for jobs, and everybody knows it. Customers insist on understanding the bidding process, and good, fair contractors will be able to prove they have pursued the lowest costs possible. This involves sending each facet of the job to numerous subcontractors, so customers can reap the benefit of the current competitive environment. Also, contractors are willing to accept a lower profit margin than would have been conceivable just a few



MATT CLAWSON

This outdoor sunroom in Ruby Hill becomes an indoor room when the French doors on three sides are closed. The trend in homes, either new or remodeled, is to create living spaces outside.

years ago. Our clients have only proceeded with projects when 100 percent satisfied that we have done everything in our power to create the best possible value for their dollar.

■ Customers are not set on creating show places anymore. They are not building a house for a future sale — a place to flip in a couple of years for a nice tidy profit. A few years ago, there seemed to be a tendency to place a greater emphasis on perception. What is the hippest style of carpet? What the newest tile design scheme? Our customers today do seek design and selection advice, but they know what they want; the driving force in all their selections is to create the home they want to live in.

■ The remodels extend outside the home to the landscape. Clients are creating more than just a house structure, as more of an emphasis is being placed on creating yards that extend their living environments. Outdoor living spaces with kitchens, fireplaces and bocce courts are just as likely to be a part of the plan as the old standbys of pools, spas and sport courts. Marty Hoffman of Hoffman Landscape Architecture, who is well known in the local industry,

says, “It’s the hottest thing in the industry today. The concept of bringing the indoors out and the outdoors in. It’s a blurring of lines for the sake of comfort, and furniture manufactures are beginning to cater to it, creating lounge furniture, love seats and coffee tables that are literally designed for these protected, covered spaces.”

As a contractor, I have found that a lot of my recent work has involved constructing outdoor living rooms with cooking centers and fireplaces. At one Ruby Hill home in Pleasanton, we created a space attached to the family room that was entirely clad in stone, inside and out. It included a massive stone fireplace with a distressed alder mantle, and enormous, sliding doors that completely disappear into wall pockets framed on three sides. The room can be entirely open to the elements or entirely closed off from them — it is all about convenience, and the ability of the home to adapt to the everyday whims of the homeowner.

*Matt Clawson is a project manager with Clawson Construction, a tri-valley custom home builder headquartered in Danville.*



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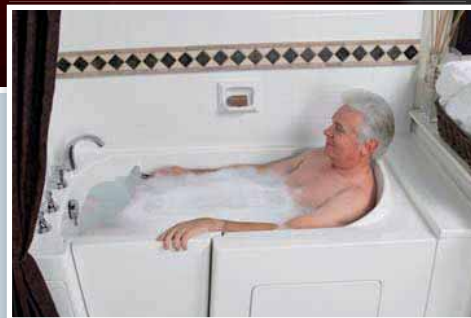
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## Take TV to the wall

Following are some hot trends in wall mounts to help you show off and enjoy your new flat screen TV.

### Look Mom — no cables!

A new generation of "cable-free" wall mounts eliminates unsightly wires with in-arm cable channels that protect and conceal cables the entire length of an extension arm.

### Don't take this laterally

New mounts allow you to move a TV laterally — left or right on the wall bracket — so it's positioned how you want it on the wall. It's also a useful feature if your wall studs are off-center.

Other mounts allow for a full range of movement, so if your flat screen is mounted over a console table, you can move the TV for the best view from wherever you're sitting.

### Lighten up

Mounts made of extruded aluminum compare to steel in terms of strength and durability but are much lighter, making installation easier. Plus, they're eco-friendlier since aluminum is an easy to recycle material.

### Get your motor running

Not only can your mount move, it can move by itself, thanks to motorized versions

that allow you to adjust the position of your TV without ever leaving the comfort of your armchair. A new mount, debuting from Sanus, supports 37- to 56-inch flat panel TVs weighing up to 110 pounds. A remote control allows you to move the TV by extending the mount up to 9 inches from the wall and swiveling it up to 120 degrees.

### You can never be too slim

Super slim is the hottest trend in flat panels, and a new generation of wall mounts continues the minimalist concept by keeping super slim flat screen TVs closer to the wall than ever before. Some mounts emphasize the sleek look of ultra-thin LCD, plasma and LED TVs by placing them just over half an inch from the wall.

### More cable news

HDMI cables can make all the difference in how great the picture is on your high-definition flat screen TV. Good quality cables deliver images so crisp and clear you might think you're looking through a window, rather than at a TV screen. The next hot thing in HDMI cables is a head that pivots 180 degrees, making it easy to connect to hard-to-reach ports in tight places and behind TVs mounted on low-profile wall mounts.

—*Courtesy of ARAcontent*

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# Curb appeal: It could sell your home

By JEB BING

Curb appeal may not sell your home by itself, but without it many prospective buyers will just keep on driving after they've seen the front of your home. That could include the buyer you're looking for who might rave about all the work you've done inside and make a top-dollar offer.

Ask Realtors and they'll say that curb appeal is most important in attracting prospects into the home where sellers often have spent thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours putting down new carpet, painting or touching up walls and upgrading dated kitchens and bathrooms. They may not recover all of their expenses by staging their home properly for sale, but their chance of selling at a reasonable price in this challenging market is far better if the house is clean, well kept and ready for a buyer to move in without a lot of additional expenses.

"That's just as true for the outside," said Realtor Tim McGuire of Alain Pinel Realtors. "If I can 'stage' the house and make it look beautiful inside, I also have to do everything I can to make it equally beautiful outside. If I can't get them out of the car, they're not going to buy the house."

When someone calls McGuire to say they are interested in selling their home, the first step he takes is to look at the property to make sure it's appealing. Especially now, with recent heavy rains and cold weather, lawns may show a bit of winter rot that makes grass more yellow than green, shrubs un-trimmed and flowers drooping.

"That's what I tell a prospective client upfront, that it's just as important for their home to have as much curb appeal as it is to have the inside of the home attractive and appealing in every other aspect," McGuire said. "The house has to look absolute-



TIM MCGUIRE

Extensive work by the curb appeal team of Realtor Tim McGuire of Alain Pinel Realtors helped him sell this home on Hanover Court in Pleasanton for \$965,000.

ly stunning from the time I drive my clients onto the driveway to the overall walk-through that always includes a look outside."

McGuire has a whole team of curb appeal specialists who do the work, including inside stagers, landscapers, painters and even concrete specialists. As important as a great curb appeal is to prospective buyers, it's also necessary for the photo perspective they'll see in newspaper ads and digital presentations online.

There are times when McGuire's team has re-sodded a whole front yard that was just in too poor a condition to restore. His landscaper looks carefully at all the plants just coming to life in the spring-like temperatures and decides if they're the right ones for the walkway, front setbacks and home color. If not, new ones will go in. Whatever yard improvements are made, Realtors such as McGuire make sure the costs are minimal since sellers today often don't have the funds needed to make major new improvements.

Simple improvements are often overlooked, so McGuire and his team add foliage to cover stained downspouts or exposed concrete foundations. Even driveways get

the team's attention with sealers to concrete paint to cover oil stains and small cracks.

Rick Barroso agrees. Barroso, who has been in the exterior staging business for the last 13 years and owns East Bay Renovations, said his crews do everything from power washing a home's exterior to patching concrete to handling complete landscape jobs. His objective, he tells clients, is to make their house look like the model home in the neighborhood.

"Not everyone wants a manicured lawn, which I can do," Barroso said. "Some like it natural and that takes special skills, too, just to restore a time-worn, winter-worn lawn to its true natural look. If it once had an English garden look, it'll have that look again before I finish. That's what I do. I cater to Realtors and clients to make sure the house sells for as much as it can."

Barroso said the more challenging calls are from Realtors, bankers and others who want to sell homes that are in foreclosure. The former owners couldn't make their mortgage payments and it can take as long as six months before they're forced out of the home. During that time,

routine lawn and other outdoor maintenance is often neglected. By the time Barroso is called in, weeds may be 3 feet tall with little grass left, bushes are overgrown or dying, flowers have long since withered away.

"It's more than a day's work, but we'll make the front of the house look attractive again so that it has curb appeal and can be sold," Barroso said. "We can take a million dollar home and make it look again like a million dollar home even though the owners have let things go."

Also part of a home's curb appeal are fences, front doors, even brass doorbells. Over time, wood fences show stains from sprinklers and fertilizer, but landscapers can power wash fences with special solvents that make the wood look like new. Front doors should be re-stained or painted. All the brass on the outside of the home should be polished. Often overlooked: those handy hose carts and reels homeowners find convenient in the front yards need to be moved to the side or back yards.

"It's important to maintain the outside of your home in this tough market," said Realtor Donna Garrison of Keller Williams Tri-Valley Realty. "I can't remember how many times I've driven by for-sale homes with my clients who just say 'Keep on driving.' They're not interested in even going inside because the house looks terrible from the street."

Garrison said that a home with a front yard or driveway that looks poorly maintained, that is filled with leaves or that is just plain dirty reflects poorly on the whole house even if the owners have invested time and money in improving, cleaning and upgrading the inside.

"It's the buyer's first impression that can make or break a sale," Garrison said. ■

# Walk down the garden paths

*Garden tours: a beautiful way  
to raise money in the spring*

**BY DOLORES FOX CIARDELLI**

Garden tours are a lovely way to spend a few hours. They are also inspirational. We may not have the yards of these people who so graciously open their homes for good causes, but we can use some of their ideas: planter boxes, garden paths, color combinations, statuary.

This year two favorite fundraising garden tours are returning: the fifth annual Hidden Gardens of the Valley Tour in Pleasanton presented by the Valley Humane Society, and the 10th annual Danville-Alamo Branch of AAUW Garden Tour.

Wendy McNelley, general manager of Valley Humane Society, said her group encourages people to make a day of viewing the 10 gardens. Two restaurants in downtown Pleasanton — Stacey's Cafe and Redcoats British Pub — will donate 10 percent of the check to the Valley Humane Society for those on tour who stop for lunch.

"See five houses, have lunch, then see five more," suggested McNelley.

She said a Realtor on their board of directors always has new gardens to suggest. The tour has never duplicated but organizers are considering two or three repeats that people have said they'd like to revisit.

"People love a self-guided tour," said McNelley.

Mary Mix, co-chairwoman with Jacque Schubert of the Danville-Alamo AAUW Garden Tour, agrees and says it is not difficult to find the venues.

"A gardener kind of likes to show off her garden," she said. "It's not your personal space that's being invaded."

The chairwomen get referrals from landscape designers, and in January visit 12-14 gardens to decide which to feature. They have eight new ones this year although two have been featured by other groups.

About five years ago, AAUW expanded its tour to two days, Friday and Saturday.

"It is a big project but it works really well," said Mix. "The homes aren't as congested. At the most, there will be 10-15 at a home at a time, which is good with parking and everything."

At right is information on these fundraising tours and two others that use native plants and are Bay-friendly. Mark your calendars now and plan a pleasant outing to the gardens. ■



COURTESY DANVILLE-ALAMO AAUW

Flowers in bloom are a delightful part of spring garden tours, along with seeing how individual gardeners create special places.

## **Fifth annual Hidden Gardens of the Valley Tour**

**What:** 10 beautiful private gardens in Pleasanton

**When:** 10 a.m.-4 p.m., Sunday, May 16, rain or shine

**Tickets:** Tickets for \$35 go on sale in April at [www.valleyhumanesociety.org](http://www.valleyhumanesociety.org); Town Center Books, 555 Main St., Pleasanton; and the Wine Steward, 641 Main St.

**Benefits:** Valley Humane Society

## **10th annual Danville-Alamo Branch of AAUW Garden Tour**

**What:** Eight delightful gardens in Alamo and Danville. Light refreshments; no children under 12 please.

**When:** Friday-Saturday, May 7-8; 10 a.m.-4 p.m. each day

**Tickets:** \$30 if postmarked by April 30; \$35 thereafter; \$25 for seniors 65-plus. Mail check payable to "Danville-Alamo AAUW EF" with a business size, self-addressed, stamped envelope to: AAUW Garden Tour, 400 Cliffside Drive, Danville 94526. Tickets (cash or check only) are also available at the East Bay Flower Company in the Danville Livery.

**Information:** Mary at 831-1784 or [gardentour@aauw-da.org](mailto:gardentour@aauw-da.org).

**Benefits:** AAUW's Educational Foundation, which supports aspiring female scholars.

## **Sixth annual Bringing Back the Natives Garden Tour**

**What:** This self-drive tour features 50 pesticide-free Alameda and Contra Costa county gardens that conserve water, provide habitat for wildlife, and contain 50 percent or more native plants. It showcases a variety of gardens, from large parcels in the hills to small lots in the flats. Native plant sales and talks at select gardens.

**When:** 10 a.m.-5 p.m., Sunday, May 2

**Tickets:** Free but registration is required. Volunteers are needed. Register or volunteer at [www.bringingbackthenatives.net](http://www.bringingbackthenatives.net).

**Other information:** A companion event, the Native Plant Sale Extravaganza, will take place throughout the weekend of May 1-2. For details, visit [www.bringingbackthenatives.net/plantsale.html](http://www.bringingbackthenatives.net/plantsale.html).

## **Bay-Friendly Garden Tour**

**What:** Seventh annual tour celebrates the diversity of Bay-Friendly gardens. Forty public and private gardens will be featured in geographic clusters throughout Alameda County. Several of the garden clusters are walkable and/or bikeable.

**When:** 10 a.m.-4 p.m., Sunday, April 25

**Tickets:** Free. Registration by April 16 is required to receive a guidebook with directions and garden descriptions, at [stopwaste.org](http://stopwaste.org).

**Other information:** Native plants, Mediterranean perennials and vegetable starts will be available for sale at select gardens. Call (510) 444-SOIL (444-7645).

## Create playful kids' rooms

Most parents can relate: Re-decorating your child's room often turns out to be far more challenging than freshening up the decor in other areas of your home. After all, kids have their own personalities and tastes.

If you do it right and with some thoughtful pre-planning, re-decorating kid spaces doesn't have to be draining to your bank account or your patience.

Painting their child's room is a fun, easy and very inexpensive way to update a living space. It's also a great way to involve your child in the decision process. Don't make the mistake of thinking there are "right or wrong colors." Let creativity — and your child's tastes — be your guide.

If you're planning a significant revamping of a room look into double-duty furniture, such as changing tables that convert eas-

ily into a bureau, so once a baby is out of diapers, the table can still serve a purpose in the room.

If your children are older, there's nothing wrong with refurbishing hand-me-down furniture to give their rooms a new look — and save some money. A little ingenuity, paint and some old-fashioned elbow grease can turn a beat-up, dated old armoire, bookshelf or desk into a whimsical piece of expression in any room, not to mention handy storage for toys, clothing, books and more.

Speaking of storage, more is always better. Let's face it: Kids come with lots of stuff that seems to multiply nightly.

And don't forget extending creativity to the finishing touches — accessories like window treatments and novelty throw rugs.

—*Courtesy of ARAContent*

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