

29 super-fast fixes, upkeep shortcuts, and easy upgrades to get your home ready for guests

With the holidays just around the corner, that means—uh-oh!—company’s coming. If your home is looking a little rough around the edges, don’t despair. We’ve got tips to help you spiff up the spots visitors are most likely to focus on, from the front stoop to the dining table

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1. Perk up front-door containers

Replant entry pots with winter-hardy specimens, such as dwarf evergreens or boxwood (shown here), and ring the base with English ivy and a few faux berries for a festive shot of color. To give plants the best chance of surviving the winter, pot them in a container at least 4 inches taller and wider than the root ball. You can transplant them to your yard from spring until fall, says *This Old House* landscape contractor Roger Cook.

2. Add shine to dull wood floors

No time to get those lackluster boards screened and polyed before company comes? Put down a refresher. Look for a waterborne formula that will fill in tiny scratches and add shine but won't interfere with having your floors refinished in the future. Flooring pro Charles Peterson recommends Bona's Pro Series Hardwood Floor Refresher (\$25; sears.com), which goes on with a microfiber mop, dries in an hour, and keeps floors gleaming for a couple of months.

3. Quiet a creaky bed frame

Don't let overnight guests toss and turn on a bed that squeaks. Remove the mattress and box spring and tighten any loose nuts, bolts, and screws, then lubricate metal joints with WD-40. Sprinkle talcum, baby, or graphite powder between the joints of a wood frame to help reduce friction.



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4. Sweeten a stinky disposer

Rather than blades, garbage disposers have a ring of tooth-like shredders that tear into food particles. To keep this appliance working through big holiday meals, give the shredders a good cleaning beforehand. Combat odor-causing bacteria with cubes of frozen white vinegar. Toss a few down the drain, and, with the cold tap turned on, run the disposer for about a minute to remove built-up food and grease residue. Mix in a few citrus peels to leave the disposer smelling fresh.

5. Get those pictures up on the wall—finally

If you've been procrastinating about hanging artwork and family photos, try this trick to take the guesswork out of nail placement for picture backs with two D-rings. Place a piece of masking or painter's tape across

the back, marking the rings' placement with a pen. Peel off the tape and place on the wall, using a level to make sure the marks are straight. Hammer picture hooks right through the tape, then peel it off and hang your frame.

6. Update a chandelier

Here's an instant improvement: Replace a cheap-looking hanging chain with a jute-wrapped pole that hides the cord—and looks a lot less fussy than a cover sleeve of bunched fabric. Available in three lengths, from \$39; ballarddesigns.com

7. Dress up a plain mirror

Adding a nice wood-finish frame to a plain plate-glass mirror or medicine-cabinet front instantly makes a guest bath feel more furnished. Streamline the job with a made-to-measure product that adheres directly to the glass with super-strong adhesive strips. MirrorMate, from \$107; mirrormate.com

8. Remove old stains from carpet

A set-in stain isn't always a lost cause. Attack the spot with a powerful homemade stain remover: Mix 1 teaspoon OxiClean with 2 cups



water in a spray bottle and spritz the stain liberally. Cover with a damp white rag, then apply an iron on MEDIUM-LOW heat and let the steam do the work. Check frequently to see if the stain is transferring to the rag; repeat if necessary and rinse with warm water. No luck? See how to patch the carpet at thisoldhouse.com/novdec2013.

9. Add a doorbell

No time to fish wires? A mechanical-twist model mounts directly to the door or casing and adds a welcoming dose of old-house charm. Installing it is easy. Working from outside, drill a hole through the door or casing material and make sure the metal rod is long enough to connect with the bell inside. If the shaft is too short, pick up a square bar at a hardware store and cut it to length. Woodworth antiqued-brass twist doorbell, \$70; signaturehardware.com

10. Stop a leaking showerhead

A showerhead that continues to drip even after the water is off likely indicates a dry or damaged washer. To replace it, turn the showerhead counterclockwise to remove it from the arm. Just inside the nozzle, there should be a small plastic or rubber

washer you can swap out. Rewrap the arm tightly with plumber's thread-seal tape, working clockwise, covering all the threads to help tighten the fittings. Replace the showerhead.

11. Fix a tear in a vinyl or linoleum floor

Grab a hair dryer or a heat gun to repair a gouge in resilient flooring. Use it to warm the area around the rip, then stretch and smooth the material back into place. Squeeze a thin, even layer of acrylic glue underneath the tear (and on the subfloor, if visible). Weight it down so that it lies flat; let dry. Any remaining gaps can be filled with layers of nail polish in a color close to that of the flooring, say the Vinyl Ladies, an interior restoration and repair company. The polish will seep into and bond with the flooring.

12. Neutralize pet odors

When you bring home a Fido or a Fluffy, you take the good with the bad (good: loyalty and affection; bad: eau de fur ball). Before guests arrive, nix any odors with plain old baking soda. Liberally sprinkle it over upholstered furniture and rugs and leave overnight to absorb smells before vacuuming. Use the



upholstery and crevice tools on the cushions to get deep into nooks and crannies. If you're cleaning a litter box, put a layer of baking soda in the bottom before refilling with litter for extra defense against stink.

13. Light up your entry steps

Welcome guests with the warm glow of outdoor candlelight that won't blow out in the wind. Pepper the front steps or porch with glass-paneled lanterns in a mix of sizes and fill them with outdoor-rated battery-operated LED candles. Opt for ones with built-in timers so that they'll come on and turn off automatically for an even more low-effort display. Red brushed-metal lanterns, \$15–\$30, and outdoor LED candles, \$14–\$20; pier1.com

14. Rid the tub of rust

Pick up a pumice stick—the kind with a handle designed for cleaning toilet bowls—to remove those rusty stains without scratching your porcelain. Soak the pumice stone in warm water for a minute, then start scrubbing gently. To prevent scratches to the porcelain, keep the surface and the stone wet; also, steer clear of metal fittings that can be damaged. Pumie toilet-bowl-ring remover, \$14; amazon.com

15. Set an easy-care fire

Sure, roaring flames may set a cozy scene, but having to excuse yourself to tend the fire can interrupt the festivities. Instead of burning logs, add a low-maintenance glow to your fireplace with a large-scale candelabra. Use dripless pillars, and you won't be stuck cleaning up spilled wax when the party's over. Nine-candle candelabra, \$64; homedecorators.com



16. Spruce up a worn threshold

Make your entrance look like new by painting over scuff marks. Apply two coats of latex enamel formulated for exterior floors, which resists scuffing, fading, cracking, peeling, and mildew. Behr Premium Porch & Patio Floor Paint, \$28 per gallon; homedepot.com



17. Add reading lights

To prep for overnight guests who like to read in bed, hang decorative plug-in pendants—no hard-wiring required. Simply swag the cord up and over a ceiling-mounted hook to provide light that won't eat up precious nightstand space. Plug-in light adapter with 10-inch drum pendant, \$79; ballarddesigns.com

18. Fix a balky sideboard drawer

A bar of soap can unstick a drawer that has wood guide blocks instead of

glides. Remove the drawer and rub plain soap along the guides on the drawer's bottom and on the center and side guide blocks. If that doesn't get the drawer moving, use 80- to 100-grit paper to lightly sand down the bottom edges, testing often, until the drawer glides easily again.

19. Clean up the cooktop

Getting rid of scorch marks on stainless steel is tough. Surprisingly, an excellent eraser can be found at your local auto-body-supply shop. Fine abrasive hand pads meant for prepping vehicles for paint can actually remove those marks from your range. But it's an off-label use, so proceed with caution, working gently with the finish's grain. 3M Scotch-Brite general purpose hand pad, \$2; at auto-body-supply shops

20. Tighten a loose interior doorknob

Lovely old glass or brass knobs often loosen over time from constant use. To tighten them, remove the setscrews and pull off the knob. If the spindle's ridges show signs of extreme wear, wrap a piece of plumber's thread-seal tape around it before replacing it to tighten it up. Brush Loctite around the setscrews' threads to help hold them in place, and screw back in tightly. Loctite Threadlocker, \$6.50, and plumber's thread-seal tape, \$1.18; at home centers

21. Skip making house-key copies

Hiding the spare set under a rock or having multiples floating around leaves your house vulnerable to thieves. Replace your lockset with an electronic touch pad and hand over the code to guests instead of a key. Some keyless entry sets can even be programmed with temporary codes. If the high-tech look doesn't mesh with your front entry's style, install it

on a side or back door. Kwikset SmartCode Electronic Deadbolt, \$99; homedepot.com

22. Outsmart mice

You may joke about the in-laws, but rodents are the real unwanted guests this time of year. Mice can squeeze through an opening the size of a dime, so stuff Xcluder, a steel-wool-type material that won't rust, into any openings (\$10; buyxcluder.com). Then set a better mouse trap; put out six snap traps in each room where mice have been spotted and position them perpendicular to the wall, with the bait closest to the wall. Bait the traps with a tiny bit of peanut butter or bacon, but don't set them—yet. Wait a couple of days to trick the rodents into thinking the traps are a safe source of food.

23. Give kitchen hardware a new look

Replacing a kitchen's worth of old knobs and pulls can be costly, but you can transform standard metal pieces into antique-looking bronze or aged copper for the price of a can of spray paint. Remove the hardware, spray several light coats over the pieces, and let dry before reinstalling. Tip: To ensure even results, screw knobs and pulls into sturdy cardboard before painting. Rust-Oleum Universal Metallic and Krylon Rust Protector Metallic Finish, \$7–\$9 for an 11-ounce can; at home centers





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24. Fix a chip in a bathroom sink

A color-matched porcelain repair kit makes unsightly nicks in porcelain or enameled cast iron virtually disappear. Look for a two-part formula that contains resin and a bonding agent for the longest-lasting results. Brush off any loose material, then clean the spot with an alcohol-soaked swab. Mix the ingredients and apply it to the nick with a small paintbrush. Let dry 24 hours before using the sink. Porcelain repair kit, \$28; refinishingonline.com

25. Light up your address

Here's a bright idea: Make finding your house in the dark a breeze with an easy-to-install solar light. Hang a solar spot above existing house numbers, or simply stake a solar-powered address marker in a clearly visible place on the front lawn.

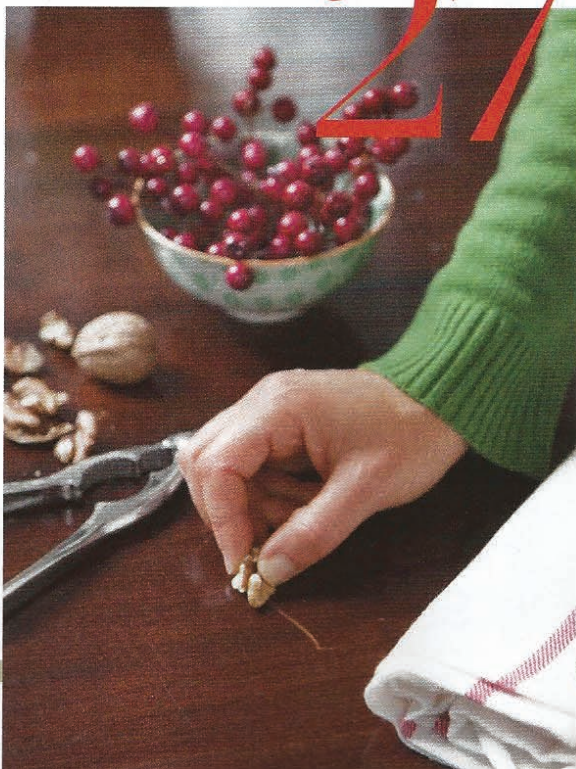
PHOTOS: (PENDANT LIGHT, PAINT AND HARDWARE, WALL PAPER) TED MORRISON

26. Replace a missing skeleton key

Veteran locksmith Tom Rubenoff says you can bring an old mortise lock in and have a key made for about \$30—or make one yourself from a skeleton-key blank (\$6; antiquekeys.net). Remove the lock from the door, and unscrew the lock case to expose its interior workings. Note the wards—the bumps on the case beside the keyhole—and the locking lever and bolt directly above it. For the lock to work, the key's bit has to turn past the wards, lift the lever, and engage the bolt. Put the key in a vise and use a warding file to cut notches into the key. Start small and test often until the key works the lock.

27. Hide scratches on a wood dining table

If eating, studying, mail sorting, and even light DIY projects take place on the table where you gather, the surface likely has more than a few nicks. For scratches that penetrate beyond the finish, rub a shelled walnut gently across the marks, then polish with a soft cloth. According to antiques restorer Christophe



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Pournry, the nut's oils naturally conceal the blemishes. To blend the fix in with a high-gloss finish, follow up with a fine paste wax for wood, and buff to a sheen.

28. Shine and seal brass hardware

To brighten up tarnished doorknobs, knockers, and hinges, first remove the hardware from the door. Apply a brass cleaner, such as Noxon (\$3.98; lowes.com), rubbing the pieces with a soft cloth until the tarnish disappears. Prolong the shine by using a clean, soft cloth to apply a thin coat of a nonabrasive, polymer-based car wax (try Mother's Synthetic Wax, \$10 for 16 ounces; at auto supply shops), then buff out the haze.

29. Add polish to a powder room

Give boring bathroom walls a dose of color and pattern with peel-and-stick wallpaper. No wetting or paste needed—just remove the backing as you smooth it onto the wall. The adhesive isn't affected by humidity but easily pulls away when you're tired of the style. From \$75 per roll; tempaperdesigns.com ■