

Why you should wait to renovate your home

BY RACHEL DEL VALLE
NYT News Service

For first-time homebuyers, there’s a thrill that comes with the opportunity to make a space completely yours. All the unchangeable annoyances that plague a renter become solvable problems in the eyes of a new homeowner. Suddenly you can replace light fixtures, not just light bulbs. You can swap out chipped tiles in the bathroom, transform too-high kitchen cabinets into shelves, or even take down entire walls.

With all those transformations on the docket, starting demolition the day after closing is tempting. But a slower approach can help create a home that not only looks good but works well for you.

“It’s like dating someone,” said Katie Elliott, vice president of design at Schoolhouse, a lighting and housewares company based in Portland, Oregon. “You need to date them before you live with them. Live in your home before you try to change it.”

Without taking the time to learn the qualities and quirks of a house, projects are more likely to be led by assumptions and aesthetics than function.

“You know how you’re going to live in a space based on your last space, but it’s always different,” said Elliott, who lives in a 1950s house in Portland. (She painted and replaced floors before moving in but waited three years to renovate her kitchen.)

Maryana Grinshpun, a principal of Mammoth, a New York design-build company, noted that “you have one pair of eyes when you just walk into a random apartment and a different one when you wake up there every morning, when you bathe there, when you prepare your meals there.” Without some lived-in perspective, she said, clients may approach the design process “like a kid trying to beat a piñata.” They don’t know what they want and “try to appease any whims they might have in the future.”

Grinshpun said her happiest clients are the ones who have been in their homes for a long time, and who come with “really specific gripes” and clear goals. For a recent project on Park Avenue, her clients gained a “pretty



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obscene amount of storage” with minimal changes to the floor plan because their brief was concise and focused, informed by years of living in the space.

The same advice applies to a more DIY approach to renovation. Kathleen Corlett, editor-in-chief at BobVila.com, moved into her Mount Kisco, New York, colonial nearly two years ago

and has been tinkering with the kitchen ever since. Last renovated in the 1970s, the room was outdated but a good size and shape, with solid cabinets.

“That gave us the freedom to take things a step at a time,” Corlett said. She started by painting the cabinets and the walls, high-impact choices that made the rest of the space feel

more cohesive. “We lived with just that change for nearly 10 months,” she said.

“I’m a firm believer in ‘do it once, do it right’ renovations,” said Leonora Epstein, founder of Schmatta, a design Substack, and former editor-in-chief of home-design site Hunker. For kitchens and bathrooms, she advises waiting and saving rath-

er than fixing on the cheap, “especially if you know you’re going to stay in that house for a really long time.”

Epstein has taken that approach in her own home, a Craftsman in Pasadena, California, which she bought 2 1/2 years ago. Since then, she’s painted the interior and exterior, removed “very bizarre chevron cladding around the fireplace” and pulled out a dining room minibar. Bigger projects are planned.

Given current housing costs, many new homebuyers are likely taking a slow approach to renovation whether they like it or not. “Slow renovating and slow decorating are actual movements, or at least the internet likes to coin them as such, whereas people have been doing this for ages, but it’s just called ‘you don’t have the time or the budget,’” Epstein said. Thinking about renovation as a long-term series of projects rather than one monthslong saga can make a house that needs updating more attractive, at least financially.

These days, there’s more opportunity to buy a fixer-upper at a discount than there has been in recent years. A recent report from Zillow noted that before the pandemic, listings with terms like “fixer,” “TLC,” “needs work” or “good bones” were more likely to sell than those without. But today, with rising mortgage rates and renovation costs, move-in ready homes are popular again, while fixer-uppers are selling for 7.3% less than similar homes, the largest gap in three years.

A slow-motion, room-by-room renovation doesn’t have to mean denying yourself creature comforts. On the contrary. Elliott always starts by putting up art, changing out lighting and putting down rugs -- small, impermanent changes she calls “building blocks for a room.”

Similarly, Epstein recommends customizing the details of a space, like swapping out switch plates and outlet covers, stripping and polishing paint-laden hardware on doors and windows, and painting doors and trim.

The compressed time scales of HGTV shows and TikTok posts can make it seem like fixing up a house is a one-and-done, before-and-after experience. But in reality, a house is more like a living organism, always changing. And that’s a good thing.

“It doesn’t ever have to be done,” Elliott said. “And maybe that’s overwhelming, but that can be freeing too because nothing has to be precious.”

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You’ve heard of raised beds - now meet ‘keyhole gardens’

BY ASHLEY ZLATOPOLSKY
Dengarden

Raised bed gardening is often a go-to choice for gardeners seeking to reap the benefits and convenience of building a planting structure above ground level and with enclosed walls, but the latest spin on the traditional raised bed is quickly making waves in the gardening world.

Meet keyhole gardens, the newer, hipper version of the standard raised bed. Keyhole gardens are a specific type of raised bed with a keyhole-shaped opening and a central compost bin, hence the clever name. The opening is designed to give gardeners easier access to the bin.

If you’ve never seen a keyhole garden before, chances are you can picture it now thanks to its distinct shape. Yet why is this particular type of raised bed so popular amongst gardeners, and what benefits does it offer aside from its unique look?

Here’s what experts have to say about the pros and cons of keyhole gardens, as well as how to build a keyhole garden that’s structurally sound, drains properly and helps plants thrive.

PROS OF KEYHOLE GARDENS

A keyhole garden is essentially a circular raised bed (or aboveground garden) with a notch

like a keyhole. A compost bin sits in the center of the garden to feed all of the surrounding plants.

“The central compost basket in the design of these gardens continuously nourishes the surrounding beds to create a built-in natural recycling system,” says Tammy Sons, a third-generation plant expert and founder and CEO of TN Nursery.

Keyhole gardens are a functional option for people with poor soil or limited space in their gardens. They also have a retaining wall that helps trap moisture within the bed, as well as a bottom layer typically made of rocks and debris that allows any excess water to drain away.

This, in turn, helps prevent a soggy garden, which can ultimately lead to root rot and plant stress (or even plant death). Pests such as mosquitos also like to breed in wet conditions.

Yet keyhole gardens are elevated off the ground, which helps promote drainage. This can boost soil quality, nutrient levels and reduce the need for watering thanks to great moisture retention.

“Keyhole gardens perform exceptionally well in regions with scarce water supplies,” Sons says of their benefits for gardeners who live in areas prone to drought. In fact, keyhole gardens are found worldwide in natural desert communities and were

developed in sub-Saharan Africa.

Their elevated build is also a pro for gardeners with back pain or injuries that make it tough to bend down to the ground. Plus, they’re a space-saving option that usually doesn’t require much square footage (most experts will agree keyhole gardens shouldn’t exceed six feet in diameter).

Perhaps most appealing to sustainably-minded gardeners is the keyhole shape, which makes it easy to access the compost bin without stepping all over your garden (and ruining your plants).

The composter can be filled with everyday kitchen scraps like coffee grounds or fruit peels. This helps take some of the stress and planning out of how to keep a garden healthy and alive.

“The fact that you’ve already got a raised bed is a big bonus, especially for labor-intensive vegetable gardening,” says Ben Ashton, landscaping expert and CEO of Rocky Mountain Turf. “This is also a quick, low-effort way to dispose of your compost, especially if you have a small yard that doesn’t generate much yard waste.”

CONS OF KEYHOLE GARDENS

The good news is that keyhole gardens come with few cons, especially if you’re willing to put in the effort. “Building these beds requires initial hard work before they become functional,”



Clem Rutter, www.clemrutter.net, Wikimedia Commons

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Sons says of constructing a retaining wall and bottom layer, which may be a labor-intensive job.

Ashton echoes that most keyhole gardens can’t handle large amounts of compost due to their compact size, so if you’re looking to build an expansive garden, a keyhole garden probably isn’t it. They can also create odors and attract pests, especially if they aren’t draining properly.

Read on for expert tips on how to build a keyhole garden that drains correctly.

HOW TO BUILD A KEYHOLE GARDEN

First, you’ll want to find a level piece of land upon which to build your keyhole garden.

Outline where your keyhole garden will be, leaving a space for a “keyhole” notch.

Then, construct a strong outer wall from stone or bricks. Sons says a sturdy outer layer is essential for your keyhole garden to drain properly. Once your outer layer is built, you can start layering branches, rocks, debris or cardboard for the bottom layer, followed by a layer of soil.

Sons says don’t be afraid to use different materials, which can help promote better drainage.

You’ll also need a composter, which you can build by yourself or purchase pre-made.

Once your structure is complete, you’re ready to begin planting and enjoying the many benefits that keyhole gardens have to offer. “These structures provide functional gardening solutions,” Sons says, “while maintaining an attractive design that’s self-sufficient.”