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FOR
DUMMIES®
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by James Carey and Morris Carey



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About the Authors

James and Morris Carey, known as the Carey Brothers, are nationally recognized experts on home building and renovation. They share their 60-plus years of combined experience as award-winning, licensed contractors with millions nationwide through a weekly radio program, daily radio vignette, syndicated newspaper column, and comprehensive Web site (www.onthehouse.com), all titled *On The House*.

These third-generation contractors have had broadcast careers in radio and television for 23 years. They deliver user-friendly, hands-on advice in their radio program, which is carried coast-to-coast weekly, via satellite, to a rapidly growing network of more than 250 stations. The program also is broadcast via live remote from home and building expos nationwide and on the Internet (www.onthehouse.com).

With a long career in television, the Careys have appeared as home-improvement contributors on CBS Television's *CBS New Saturday Morning*. In addition, the brothers were regulars on the Family Channel's *Home and Family* show, hosted by Cristina Ferrare and Michael Burger. They have also appeared as guests on national and local television programs.

Recognized for their efforts in answering immediate and constant structural concerns by the public in the hours and days following the devastating October 1989 earthquake, the Carey Brothers and KCBS radio in San Francisco received the George Foster Peabody Award, broadcasting's most prestigious honor, for their outstanding contributions toward "comprehensive, intelligent, and useful coverage."

Prior to becoming full-time journalists, Morris and James owned and operated a successful home-remodeling and -construction firm, Carey Bros., for over two decades. They have been named to *Remodeling* magazine's Hall of Fame "Big 50," which recognized top achievers in the industry. They have also been honored as one of the nation's top 500 companies by *Qualified Remodeler* magazine.

The Carey Brothers are the authors of *Home Remodeling For Dummies* (Wiley Publishing) and *Cost-Effective Home Upgrades* (Ortho Books) and are contributing authors to *Home Improvement All-In-One For Dummies* (Wiley Publishing) and *Living Well in a Down Economy For Dummies* (Wiley Publishing). They have also penned a monthly column for *The Family Handyman* magazine.

Homeowners can receive answers to their specific home renovation and repair questions by calling the Carey Brothers' toll-free number, 800-REPAIR-IT (800-737-2474), during their radio program, Saturday from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Eastern standard time or via e-mail at info@onthehouse.com and on the Web at www.onthehouse.com.

Dedication

Summer vacation had ended. It was my first day back to school and my first day as a sophomore. The morning air was warm, and I perspired as I anxiously rushed to chemistry class. I was excited and scared all at the same time. I shot into the room and made a beeline for a seat near the back wall. I slouched back in my seat in an attempt to appear relaxed. I wasn't. Not even a little bit.

As I glanced up toward the front of the room, I caught a glimpse of her for the very first time. Suddenly, the anxiety began to disappear. She had taken the first seat in my row. The desks between us were still empty. She was wearing a tight, gray-wool, calf-length skirt and a satiny white blouse. Her hair was sandy colored and she wore it short. She was tall and slender. I hadn't even seen her face, yet suddenly I knew that I had fallen in love. That was nearly 40 years ago.

We grew up, and she became my best friend. She became a woman of character and ambition. Even when she was a girl, she was wise and mature beyond her years. Yet, she has always been easygoing and fun to talk to. She is passionate about everything she does, and everything she does is tendered with great compassion. Our moments together are priceless pearls of happiness filled with mutual admiration and endearing love. In the morning, her smiling eyes get me going. In the evening, her calming voice puts me at ease. She is a loving mother, a sexy grandmother, and my partner in life. She is my wife, Carol.

Without her strength, this book would not have been possible. "Yo, Adrianne, Rocky loves ya baby!"

—Morris Carey

To Carol, my wife and partner for over 28 years: Thank you for the freedom, encouragement, and support to do my life's work. I am so blessed to be your husband.

To Chris, Jamie, and Chase, our three beautiful children; Never take the roof over your head for granted. There are so many people in so many parts of the world, including our great country, who either don't have adequate shelter or are without the means to maintain it so that it is both safe and sound. Always work hard to be good citizens and contribute to the betterment of society. Love, Dad.

—James Carey

Authors' Acknowledgments

We were thrilled when the folks at Wiley engaged us to give *Home Maintenance For Dummies* a new lease on literary life. We are delighted that the book has done so well in the nearly ten years since the publication of the first edition and we hope that this second edition will be equally popular and act as a valuable resource for people looking for help in maintaining their piece of the Great American Dream.

As we write this book, millions of Americans are struggling to survive one of the toughest economic times in modern history — certainly in our lifetimes. We hope that our book will, in some small way, help relieve some of the economic stress that you may be feeling when it comes to your home and its maintenance by empowering you to take on tasks that you might have previously, during more prosperous times, farmed out to a contractor or handyperson. If this is true, then our greatest hopes and dreams will have been satisfied.

There are many people who contributed both directly and indirectly to the success of this book. Although there are too many to list, we would be remiss without naming a few.

This second edition would literally have taken forever — certainly longer than our publisher would allow — had it not been for some very valuable writing assistance that we received from Tim Green and Tracy L. Barr. Tim, our longtime friend and a stellar writer, is an obedient husband, a loving father, and a frustrated do-it-yourselfer. He injects his unique perspective, which add both color and humor to this body of work. We were introduced to Tracy by the Wiley folks. She is a very talented writer and editor who has authored or coauthored several *For Dummies* books, including *Living Well in a Down Economy For Dummies*, to which we contributed. She did a marvelous job of helping us organize and prioritize content and was a pleasure with which to work. Thanks to you both for helping us make this book the best that it can be.

At Wiley, we want to thank Diane Graves Steele and Tracy Boggier for believing in this project and for giving us yet another opportunity to share the better part of our lives' work with you. A special thanks goes to our project editor, Elizabeth Kuball. This is our first opportunity to have had the pleasure of working with Elizabeth. She worked tirelessly to ensure that the second edition would contain the best of the first edition with lots of new and exciting material. We sincerely hope that she again will have the opportunity to transform our journalism into a finished project that is both professional and easy to understand and of which we are very proud.

Publisher's Acknowledgments

We're proud of this book; please send us your comments through our Dummies online registration form located at <http://dummies.custhelp.com>. For other comments, please contact our Customer Care Department within the U.S. at 877-762-2974, outside the U.S. at 317-572-3993, or fax 317-572-4002.

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Introduction

In our first *For Dummies* project — *Home Remodeling For Dummies* — we ventured with our readers down the sometimes rocky road of remodeling a home. Our goal was to prepare people for the many steps and potential pitfalls involved in planning and executing a home-remodeling project, regardless of its size or complexity. Throughout that book, “plan, plan, plan” was our mantra.

For this, our most recent offering, we’ve adopted an old cliché as our credo. In fact, had this not been a part of the best-selling *For Dummies* series, a more apt title may have been *An Ounce of Prevention Is Worth a Pound of Cure*. On the other hand, *Home Maintenance For Dummies*, 2nd Edition, does have a nice ring to it! What’s more, chances are good that by the time you’ve had a chance to sink your teeth into this book, you’ll be anything but a dummy when it comes to maintaining your home.

Your home is probably the largest investment that you’ll make in your lifetime. So, it makes good sense to do everything that you can to protect that investment from deterioration caused by the forces of nature, wood-eating pests, and good, old-fashioned wear and tear. As you’ll soon read, in addition to protecting the structural integrity of your home, regular maintenance will make it more comfortable, safer, and more energy efficient. And don’t forget that a well cared-for home stands out in the neighborhood, and that’s worth something — a bigger price tag when it comes time to sell, or simply the satisfaction of knowing that you’re in charge of your home and not vice versa.

Few undertakings offer the pride and personal satisfaction that a home-maintenance job done well can. *Home Maintenance For Dummies*, 2nd Edition, is so full of information on how to care for your home, we guarantee that your cup of pride and personal satisfaction will forever runneth over.

Finally, if we’ve met our objective, your reading will be peppered with lots of laughter. Enjoy!

About This Book

Like most *For Dummies* books, *Home Maintenance For Dummies*, 2nd Edition, is a reference, meaning that it was written with the expectation that you would *not* read it from cover to cover over a couple of sittings. Instead, we

think that you'll consider it one of the most important reference tools in your home-maintenance arsenal — like your prized hammer or wrench that you pick up and use whenever necessary.

Each chapter is divided into sections, and each section offers instructions on some home maintenance task, like

- ✓ How to fix those pesky floor squeaks
- ✓ What to do when you know you've got a leak but you don't know where it's coming from
- ✓ What cleaning solution is the best for removing mildew
- ✓ How to easily maintain those confusing machines that keep you comfortable, like your furnace, boiler, air conditioner, and water heater
- ✓ How to prevent a flooded basement and how to fix it if your last fix didn't work
- ✓ How to reduce your energy costs while improving your comfort — all in one fell swoop
- ✓ How to decide whether to do it yourself or hire a contractor

Who needs this book? Everyone — unless you're independently wealthy and you have no intention of lifting a finger to care for your home. Even then, this book could prove to be valuable. Who knows? You might just find it handy in rescuing one of your loyal servants. Seriously, if your home is an apartment, condo, single-family house, flat, co-op, cave, or hut; if you rent, own, or borrow; if your habitat is old, new, or somewhere in between, this book is for you.

Conventions Used in This Book

To help you navigate through this book and make maintenance as easy as possible, we've set up a few conventions:

- ✓ We use *italics* for emphasis and to highlight new words or terms that we define.
- ✓ We use **boldface** to indicate the actionable part of numbered steps.
- ✓ We use monospace for Web addresses and e-mail addresses.

In addition to these standard conventions, whenever a task takes more than a few tools, we provide a list so that you can gather everything you need before you start to work.

What You're Not to Read

We've written this book so that you can find information easily and easily understand what you find. And although we'd like to believe that you want to pore over every last word between the two yellow-and-black covers, we actually make it easy for you to identify skippable material — the stuff that, although interesting and related to the topic at hand, isn't essential for you to know. This text appears in *sidebars*, which are the shaded boxes that appear here and there throughout the book. They share personal stories and observations, but they aren't necessary reading.

Foolish Assumptions

You know what they say about the word *assume*. In any event, we've made the following assumptions about you:

- ✔ You care about the appearance and condition of your home and, hence, its value.
- ✔ You're not a home-improvement fanatic, nor are you particularly handy — you don't need to be.
- ✔ You have a song in your heart, a smile on your face, and an insatiable desire to see your home be the best that it can be.
- ✔ You don't have a warehouse full of tools and you're interested in getting only what you need. A few tools are of infinite value when it comes to home maintenance. However, the most complicated tool that you'll need is a cordless driver drill for sinking a screw here and there. The tools that you'll find yourself needing most often are a scrub brush, a paintbrush, and plenty of patience.
- ✔ You're the type who always seeks help when needed and always puts safety first when attempting a home-maintenance endeavor.

How This Book Is Organized

The chapters of this book are divided into the following parts so that you can easily find just the information that you're looking for.

Part I: Home Maintenance and You

This part introduces you to the benefits of home maintenance and to the major systems and components in your home. You can also find a series of lists to help you keep your home-maintenance tasks organized. Follow this schedule, and your home will love you for it.

Even though you don't have to read this book from cover to cover, we strongly recommend that you check out the three chapters in this part so that you have a clear understanding of what parts of your home require maintenance and why you should pay attention to them.

Part II: The Energy Envelope

Your home's envelope consists of all its exterior surfaces and associated components like windows and doors. And don't forget the attic, roof, basement, and foundation. To be comfortable inside your home, its exterior must be in secure and sound condition. Turn to this part to discover how easily you can maintain your home's exterior.

Part III: Key Systems: Plumbing and HVAC

Nothing is scarier than hearing a noise that wasn't there before emanating from mechanical equipment: a popping sound in the water heater, a faucet that suddenly sounds like it's running on a flat tire, or a screeching racket inside the deepest, darkest part of your furnace. If you want to prevent or repair these elements of your home, check out this part.

Part IV: Inside Home Sweet Home

This part contains information on the stuff that you come into contact with on a day-to-day basis within your home, such as the walls, ceilings, floors, interior doors, cabinets, countertops, and appliances, to name a few. If you never venture into another part of this book, and you accomplish a majority of the tasks contained in this part, you'll be light-years ahead of the home-maintenance curve. Part IV helps you patch walls, quiet floors, unstick doors,

cure cabinet woes, and fix fireplaces. And, as an added bonus, we tell you how to keep your home and yourself safe and secure. If this book could be compared to a meal, this part would definitely be the main course.

Part V: Out in the Great Wide Open

If Part IV contains all the stuff that you see everyday *in* your home, Part V is all about what you (and others) can see *outside* your home, such as walkways, paths, patios, decks, and driveways. Think that the interior of your home takes a beating? Consider the abuse that your wood deck, concrete patio, or metal porch railing is subject to from constant exposure to sunlight, rain, wind, and snow. Wood oxidizes, cups, and cracks; concrete expands, contracts, chips, and cracks; and metal can become a full-blown science experiment when covered with rust. Fortunately, Part V is chock-full of money-saving and time-tested tips and recipes that will tame even the most ferocious home-maintenance predator in your great wide open.

Part VI: The Part of Tens

In this part, you find ten cleaning solutions you can make yourself. Not only will these recipes save you all kinds of money, but you'll actually know what's in the products you're using. We also tell you the ten home-maintenance skills you need to keep your home in tip-top shape.

Icons Used in This Book

Some information in this book is so important that we want to emphasize it by placing little pictures (called *icons*) next to certain points. Here's what the icons mean:



When we feel like telling you a little story, you'll see this icon.



We use this icon to highlight products that we've come to know and trust over the years.



This icon flags text that's important and not to be forgotten.



When we go out on a limb to suggest something you should do, we use this icon. It represents your basic good idea.



We use this icon to steer you clear of things that we don't want you to do. It points out dangers and health hazards you should be aware of.

Where to Go from Here

This book is organized so that you can go wherever you want to find complete information. Got a problem with your siding? Head to Chapter 5. Need to replace a toilet? Chapter 8 is for you. If you're not sure where you want to go, you may want to start with Part I — it gives you all the basic info you need, including vital safety guidelines and a home-maintenance plan to follow; plus, it points you to places where you can find more detailed information. You can also use the index to look up specific topics or the table of contents for broader categories. Or simply let your fingers do the walking until you find a topic that inspires you and let the games begin! This book makes for great armor — just don't get it wet!

Part I

Home Maintenance and You

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



"Honey, I thought you checked with the homeowners' association before having the house painted magenta."

In this part . . .

Everyone knows that a bit of caulking or a coat of paint can make a home look better. What many folks don't know is that beauty isn't only skin deep. Both of these maintenance tasks, like most maintenance tasks, do much more than meets the eye.

In this part, we help you see beyond the obvious and show you what to look for when it comes to keeping your home fit. We also provide a home-maintenance schedule that suggests what you should do and when you should do it. Consider this a gentle reminder or two, or three. . . .

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
-

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!

Chapter 2

Getting to Know Your House and Its Systems

In This Chapter

- ▶ Getting an overview of your home and its important parts
 - ▶ Looking at the common maintenance tasks for each part of the home
-

Home maintenance reminds us a lot of the Monopoly board game. Both involve a bit of a gamble with real estate. In the game, dice decide your destiny. A favorable roll can turn you into a real-estate baron with holdings that rival those of Donald Trump. On the other hand, the wrong combination can land you straight in the pokey!

Each time you postpone a maintenance task, you're rolling the dice with your home's structural and aesthetic integrity and value. Plus, although it isn't very likely that failing to keep up your home will have you doing the jailhouse rock, sadly, there are occasions when such negligence can result in tremendous damage for which you can conceivably be held liable — not to mention the personal loss that you can suffer.

In this chapter, we show you that your home is more than just four walls and a roof; your house is actually made up of a group of systems and fixtures, all of which need your loving care and attention from time to time. We introduce you to each of these systems, which we examine in great detail throughout this book.

The Exterior: It's Nice to Fool Mother Nature

Every area of a home needs ongoing maintenance, but some areas require more care than others. At the top of the “needy” list is a home's exterior. The exterior is subject to constant deterioration thanks to the forces of Mother

Nature — the sun, wind, and rain. Consequently, it's no accident that you may find yourself spending a majority of your home-maintenance time on the exterior.

The following sections discuss the elements of a home's exterior that will, from time to time, require maintenance.

Your home's infrastructure: The foundation and floor frame

The foundation, which we discuss in detail in Chapter 4, is a key component of a home's infrastructure. The other key component of the infrastructure is the floor frame, also covered in detail in Chapter 4. Together these two support the walls, roof, and other structural elements of your home.

The foundation

Your home's foundation, whether it's a basement, a crawlspace, or a concrete slab, is the element of construction that helps a home stay put. A level foundation can usually contribute to a level floor, windows and doors that operate smoothly, and the absence of cracks in walls and ceilings. For homes with basements, the foundation also holds back earth and limits the intrusion of unwanted water.

Checking cracks before they spread and dealing with moisture control are among the most common maintenance tasks associated with a foundation.

The floor frame

The floor frame consists of floor joists and/or *girders* (beams) and the subfloor. The joists and girders travel horizontally and rest on the foundation. The subfloor consists of lumber or plywood that's fastened to the floor framing. Finish flooring (carpet, vinyl, hardwood, and so on) is installed above the subfloor.

The floor frame is notorious for the maddening creaks and squeaks that occur when traipsing across it. Aside from the fact that floor squeaks can drive you nuts, they're considered a sign of inferior construction, which can lower your home's perceived value. Although this can be true, the reality is that even the best-built homes can suffer from a squeak now and again. Thus, silencing squeaks is the most common maintenance task when it comes to the floor frame. Not far behind are preventing rot and leveling up an out-of-level floor before it damages the structure of the entire home. You can find all the information you need in Chapter 4.

Roofing and siding: Your home's protective coat

Most people think of *siding* as either vinyl or wood, but we use the term to describe a wider class of materials — whatever can be used as a finished, protective coat on the exterior walls of your home, such as brick, wood, vinyl, stucco, aluminum, or a composite siding.

Siding is, by design, expected to endure forces that simply aren't an issue with interior walls. In the children's story "The Three Little Pigs," the Big Bad Wolf didn't have a chance of blowing down the house with the brick walls. What the story failed to mention was that the Little Pig who lived in the house with brick walls made sure to keep the mortar joints in good condition, the brick well sealed, and all the gaps caulked.

Take a lesson from this smart Little Pig and follow the maintenance routines suggested in Chapter 5 for your siding. You'll discover that exterior wall maintenance is all about preserving the integrity of the siding.

We think of the roof as the fifth wall of the house. Because the roof is a horizontal surface, it's subject to all the same forces that siding is, and then some. Like siding, rain and sun are a roof's biggest enemies. Maintenance on your roof isn't much different from what you do to maintain your siding. So, we combine roofing and siding in Chapter 5.

Keeping a roof clean is one of the most important maintenance tasks. A debris-free roof improves watershed and prevents rot, mold, and fungus growth. Metal flashing at vents, chimneys, skylights, valleys, and other critical areas are most prone to leak, which requires special care. And although not officially a part of the roof, gutters and downspouts are essential to proper watershed and, when well maintained, can prevent everything from a roof leak to sticking windows and doors. Cleaning, caulking, and painting count among the most common gutter- and spout-related maintenance tasks.

Windows, exterior doors, and insulation

Without a doubt, windows and doors are two of the most important elements of a home. They give you access to the outdoors and, when armed with a key, access to the indoors! Windows and doors also provide natural light and ventilation — two of the most valuable commodities a home can have.

ANECDOTE



Keeping your eye on the doughnut

Although we were born 12 years apart, we shared many of the same teachers throughout school. One teacher who has a special place in both our hearts is Mrs. Roxie Gibbs. Mrs. Gibbs was our high school English and journalism teacher. She was your classic eyeglasses-sliding-down-the-nose, beehive-coifed, mid-length-skirted, prim-and-proper schoolmarm straight out of *Little House on the Prairie*.

One of Mrs. Gibbs's favorite adages was "Keep your eye upon the doughnut and not upon the hole." Although these words were initially a total mystery to us, we eventually discovered their meaning. What Mrs. Gibbs was so eloquently stating was to focus on the issue (the doughnut) and not the minutiae (the hole). What does this have to do with home maintenance? Plenty!

When dealing with home maintenance, concentrate on the root of a problem (the doughnut) instead of focusing on the symptom (the hole). For example, people often ask us how to keep a door from sticking. A door sticks for one reason and one reason only: The uniform gap between the door and the frame no longer exists. The gap (which should have been there at installation) allows the door to be opened and closed without interference from the frame.

The sticking door is a symptom of a larger problem, like an out-of-level floor. Accordingly, we don't want you to be stuck on the stick — rather, we want you to chew on what causes the door to stick. Are we making ourselves clear, or are you stuck? (Chapter 6 tells you all about unsticking stuck doors.)

Windows and doors

Unfortunately, windows and doors are frequently among the most maintenance-intensive elements, primarily because, unlike siding and roofing, windows and doors have moving parts that suffer from wear and tear. What's more, in most homes, windows and doors are also responsible for the majority of energy loss.

Water leaks, air leaks, and condensation are a few of the most common window-related maintenance issues. As for doors, a touch of lubrication to hinges and hardware, shimming a hinge, and adjusting a strike plate or door bottom can be the saving grace to any door.

Chapter 6 offers tips on these window- and door-maintenance tasks.

REMEMBER



An out-of-level floor can make doors and windows tough to operate and can be the cause of cracks in walls over windows and doors. If you're tired of patching cracks and wrestling with doors and windows, head to Chapter 4. Out-of-level floors have virtually nothing to do with the floor itself and almost everything to do with the foundation and soil that support it.

Insulation

Insulation is like a nice, warm blanket on a cold winter's night. It can make all the difference when it comes to comfort and energy efficiency. Insulation can