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# Home & Garden

A LOS ALTOS TOWN CRIER PUBLICATION • FALL 2024

*IN THIS ISSUE*

## BLOOMING IN SMALL SPACES

*Cultivating Joy in a Container Garden*

PLUS: NOVEL DISPLAYS • USEFUL SCRAPS • FALL GARDEN • RENOVATIONS • PLANTKEEPING

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### EDITOR

Bruce Barton

### MAGAZINE EDITOR

Christina Casillas

### GRAPHIC DESIGNER

Michel Y. Echeverría

### JR. GRAPHIC DESIGNER

Lucy Chen

### WRITERS

Christina Casillas

Emily Ting

Michel Y. Echeverría

Tanya Kucak

Alex Wang

### PHOTOGRAPHERS

Christina Casillas

Michel Y. Echeverría

Tanya Kucak

### COPY EDITORS

Vanessa Connell

Mary Larsen

### MULTIMEDIA ADVERTISING SALES

Maria Crowder

Janice Fabella

Linda Monterrey

### PRODUCTION MANAGER

Melissa Rodriguez

### PRODUCTION STAFF

Michel Y. Echeverría

Lucy Chen

### CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, PUBLISHER

Dennis Young

### CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER, ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER

Howard Bischoff

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### ON THE COVER:

Vibrant *Korde Perfecta* roses shine in a container garden. PHOTO BY MICHEL Y. ECHEVERRIA



# Home Libraries

**ARE MORE THAN BOOK STORAGE:**  
*Create a unique, personalized space*

BY CHRISTINA CASILLAS | STAFF WRITER

**B**ooks are magical. With the flip of a page, one can live a life of fantasy, travel to faraway lands and live lives that seem unattainable to the average person.

For many who enjoy the endless possibilities of books, sometimes having them squared away, hidden from view, isn't ideal. Perhaps an immersive or cozy reading environment is desired, or a reader is interested in creating a bookshelf that displays their book collection properly. Whatever the reason, creating the perfect in-home library can be the most important aspect of creating a reader's perfectly curated collection of novels.

Julie Brown, founder, CEO and lead interior designer at Brownhouse Design, a Los Altos-based architecture and interior design firm located at 164 Main St., said creating home libraries is just a sliver of the jobs she does, but it can be a very personal one.

As an interior designer, getting to know clients before creating whatever they're requesting is crucial. This is also the case when designing home libraries or Zoom bookshelves, which are implemented just as the name suggests.

While home libraries are bigger, more expansive and often construction-heavy ways of creating book storage, Zoom bookshelves can be smaller, more compact ways of storing books that reflect the likes and essence of the homeowner to those who come into the house virtually and physically.

"Before we start any work of any kind, we sit down with clients and understand what, you know, what their goals and wishes are, if they have any input, images that they think are inspirational," she said.

Reflecting personality and interests, Brown said, is the most important part of a home library. She recently designed a home library for an intellectual family, where Ph.D. books were placed among Highlights >



Magazines and other similar books, accentuated by treasures they had accumulated from their world travels.

Most recently, she designed a home library that harkened back to a Mountain View couple's Irish upbringing. They grew up in a very social environment, where reading and other forms of entertainment mingled with family time, and the library reflected that.

"And so their bookshelves were half walls created in their living room so they could be surrounded by books on three sides, but only halfway up, so they could still see into the kitchen. So it was sort of like the Irish open concept, an Irish library," she said. "And then they both had books (they accumulated for) ages and we couldn't give them enough bookshelf space. But again, that's the cozy, reflective (aspect of home libraries)."

A drastic difference, Brown noted, from a home library design trend she's seen grow popular that includes bland bookshelves lined with beige novels

and knickknacks that don't reflect the owner.

Instead, there should be importance placed on what is showcased on a bookshelf; she's noticed most people who come to her for home libraries want to lovingly display what they hold dear.

"I think (the common theme) is sentimentality. I think the things that people are really sentimental about that they've read in the past, or maybe it's a book that reflects something important to them, I think that's the common thread," Brown said. "These aren't just show ponies."

For those looking to create their own home libraries or bookshelves, Brown emphasized the importance of individualization.

"Personalize it to make it as special

*...Creating the perfect in-home library can be the most important aspect of creating a reader's perfectly curated collection of novels.*



Bookshelves should display novels in an interesting way while also reflecting the personality of the bookshelves' owner. PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHEL Y. ECHEVERRIA.

and unique as possible (to make) you happy; whether... you go to IKEA and paint it a color that makes you happy, or add wallpaper to the back, DIY style," she said. "There's all kinds >

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Books, sentimental photos and a cute lamp can elevate even the most simple bookshelves. PHOTO COURTESY OF MARY LARSEN | SPECIAL TO THE TOWN CRIER.

of portable LED lamps right now that are darling and give you a very cozy feel at night.”

But don't forget the overall lighting, she said.

“One thing to consider in a home library is lighting. You need to have lighting to read the spines of the book, but also a very comfortable reading light so you don't strain your eyes,” Brown said. “So I think the furniture and lighting to complement the library is just as important, because if it's not comfortable and practical and functional, you won't use it.” ❄️

*To learn about Brownhouse Design, visit [brownhousedesign.com](http://brownhousedesign.com).*

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# PURPOSEFUL REPURPOSING



## Tips for reusing common household waste

BY EMILY TING

The new school year is fast approaching, and it's clean out time for my household. As I make my way through the collections of items that I have built up over the past year, I am reminded of the many ways we can repurpose common household items to give them a new life in our home or garden. Reusing and repurposing is a key pillar of sustainable living and there are so many great ideas out there to make it creative and fun! Here are a few of my favorites:



### Fabric scraps or old clothing

Old linens and bedding can be repurposed for household rags. Scraps from cotton print fabric and clothing can be used for decorating and wrapping gifts, jars of jam or honey, or gifts of dry mixes in mason jars. Felt or any absorbent cloth can be used for on-the-go clean up kits for traveling with kids in the car or to put in lunch boxes for napkins.

Old T-shirts can be turned into a reusable tote bag with no-sew instructions available online, and jeans can be repurposed easily into bags or aprons.

### Wooden take-out chopsticks

Remember you can always request to receive no utensils with your take out orders, but if you get them anyway wooden chopsticks have so many great household uses. You can use them to label plants in your garden, as stakes to tie up starter plants, or even as cooking skewers. One of my favorite discoveries is making my own reed diffusers out of repurposed glass jars and disposable chopsticks. Just mix essential oil of your choice with sweet almond or

other base oil, add it to the glass jar and insert the chopsticks to keep your room smelling fresh for months!

Another fantastic use is to create your own bag drying rack. Simply find a thicker piece of scrap wood, drill a few holes spaced out well, and insert the chopsticks into the holes. Rinse bags and place them on top of the sticks to allow them to dry quickly for reuse.

### Laundry detergent jugs

Whether you have extra jugs with caps or spigots there are repurpose options for both. For jugs with pour spouts and caps, you can easily cut above the handle and make these into handy scoops for dog food storage bins or soil for your garden. The spigot style jugs can be used for a hand washing station when camping or to keep in your car for easy cleaning of those little hands on family outings. Just fill the jug with water and attach some of your repurposed fabric rags to the top with a string for drying.

Of course, remember you can also always refill your laundry jug with more laundry soap at your local refill store! ➤

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Tickets start at **\$45** and are available through The Mountain Winery ticket office.



[www.symphonysanjose.org](http://www.symphonysanjose.org)





### Mason jars and other glass jars

The magical mason jar has so many uses but my favorite by far is a cup. Pop on a bamboo lid with a straw hole and you have the perfect vessel for your iced coffee, smoothie or to-go cocktail for First Fridays! Remember, you don't need anything fancy,— jam jars, spaghetti sauce jars, olive jars all work great!

The best new glass jar I have found comes from the yogurt packaged in a glass jar now being sold in the dairy sections of most grocery stores. Yoplait makes one version and also a wonderful brand called La Fermière. After enjoying the yogurt, these petite jars can be used for individual desserts like puddings or trifles, as wine or juice glasses, or even for pouring your own candles! I love to use mine to make overnight oats and chia pudding.

### Cardboard egg cartons

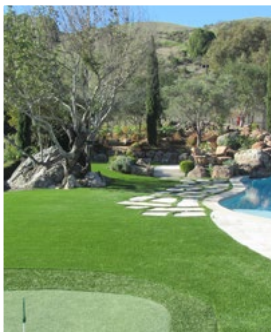
As a household of five we go through a lot of eggs. I do my best to reuse my egg crates at the farmers' market, but I still end up with more than I can use. Luckily, there are many things these are great for including starting seeds and organizing small items in drawers as well as storing small Christmas ornaments in larger boxes. Most elementary schools will also accept egg crates to be used in makerspace or art class projects.

### Prescription pill bottles

These bottles are basically leak proof and air tight so they are handy for travel sized portions of lotion or shampoo, toothpaste tablets or even for making a travel first aid kit to keep in your car. ➤

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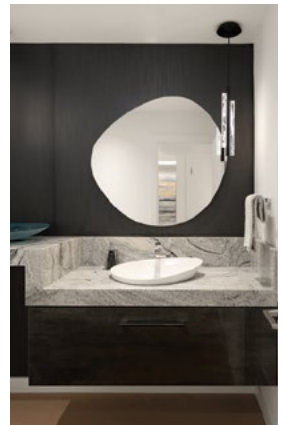
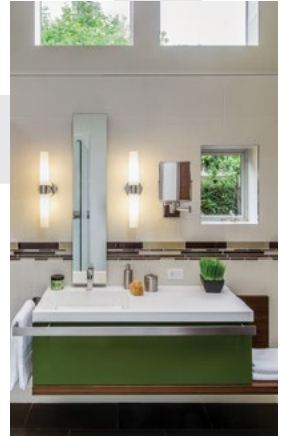
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Reusing and repurposing is a key pillar of sustainable living and there are so many great ideas out there to make it creative and fun!



From a once-used detergent bottle to chopsticks and empty glass jars, the home is the perfect place for some repurposing. PHOTO COURTESY OF EMILY TING.

This list is just the beginning! If you encounter something in your own home that you think you can repurpose, be sure to look for ideas online, or even in your local library. There are so many great websites and books dedicated to this concept. ✨

Happy upcycling!



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# Los Altos Hills County Fire District (LAHCFD) reminds you that Fire Season is here!

California residents are all too familiar with fires. With so many ongoing fires statewide, it's clear wildfire season is underway. LAHCFD urges you to download these mobile apps to help you stay informed of local wildfire activity:

- **PULSEPOINT** sends notifications about local incidents and emergency responders.
- **WATCH DUTY** alerts you of nearby wildfires and firefighting efforts in real-time.
- **GENASYS PROTECT** (formerly Zonehaven) gives evacuation information for your area.

Accessing these applications will help you maintain situational awareness. You can monitor weather, smoke, and air conditions from wildfires affecting the Bay Area. Everyone should pay heightened attention during Red Flag Warning weather.

These websites also provide emergency advisories:

**National Weather Service (NWS) and PG&E.**

Visit [lahcfd.org/prepare](https://lahcfd.org/prepare) for direct links to the resources above.



## LAHCFD is conducting an Evacuation Route Project in September

Focusing on the Altamont Road area, LAHCFD will remove hazardous vegetation and improve fire safety along a major route within the District. To learn more or ask questions, attend the virtual Altamont Community meeting.

Visit [lahcfd.org/altamont](https://lahcfd.org/altamont) for meeting or project information.



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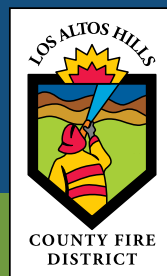
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# Blooming in Small Spaces

Cultivating Joy in a Container Garden

BY MICHEL YEHUDI ECHEVERRIA

As a biologist, I've always had a love for nature. As a graphic designer, I've found nature to be an endless source of inspiration for design, colors and patterns. When I moved into my new house a year ago, I was thrilled to finally have a patio, which had been a dream of mine for years. Though small, it was the perfect canvas to start my gardening journey. The patio already had two beautiful Camellia trees that brought pink tones during the fall and winter months. However, I wanted to create a more diverse and colorful garden. I envisioned this space as not only visually appealing but also a thriving ecosystem, and that's when my green adventure began.

The patio looked nice at first, but it was minimalistic. The wooden floors gave a cozy, natural feel, and some areas were filled with artificial turf that added a green, vibrant touch year-round, though it limited the soil space. I started with a couple of dwarf trees – an apple and an apricot. These were perfect for the small area of soil. Despite minimal space, I was determined to create a vibrant garden, which led me to embrace container gardening. >





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Selecting pots became a fun and essential part of the process; mixing and matching different materials like terra cotta, plastic and wood added visual interest, while the pot colors accentuated the beauty of the flowers and plants.

My gardening journey has also been an opportunity to learn about a variety of plants and their specific needs. Perennials were my plants of choice due to their longevity. Azaleas and water-loving hydrangeas found a home in the shaded areas, alongside finicky fuchsias. Roses hold a special place in my garden, especially Kordes Perfecta and Iceberg varieties. Gardenias, jasmine, lantanas, pentas and tiny lewisias add bursts of color, creating a lively and diverse space.

Additionally, I discovered the joy of bonsai, which involves cultivating miniature trees in containers. Bonsai >





RG

Ryan  
Gowdy

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Lic. #01322889  
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Hi there, my name is Ryan Gowdy. I am a second-generation Los Altos realtor who lives, breathes, and loves everything Los Altos. My children attend our local schools and I am a proud sponsor of LAEF. I still live in the wonderful community where I was raised. I take great pride in providing exceptional service to my clients who trust me for guidance in all things real estate. If there is ever anything that I can do support you with your real estate needs, please don't hesitate to reach out.

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require meticulous care and attention to soil types, watering schedules, and pruning techniques. While many of my bonsai are still in training as seedlings, the recent bloom of my bougainvillea and azalea bonsai were a particularly proud moment. Despite the demanding care, I find the process deeply rewarding.

My gardening journey wouldn't be complete without succulents. I planted Echeverrias (my namesake!), and I was delighted when they bloomed with beautiful red and orange flowers. Aeoniums like Black Rose and the stunning Pink Witch, with their striking pink-striped leaves, gave an exotic touch to the garden.

As my garden flourished, local wildlife started visiting it. I was delighted to see butterflies fluttering around my

flowers. Hummingbirds also visited regularly. They are dynamic and lively elements in my garden that have added an extra layer of beauty to the space.

Over the past year, I have learned a great deal about gardening. Beyond the aesthetic appeal, gardening has strengthened my connection with nature. Growing plants from tiny seeds (and seedlings) to mature specimens has been a rewarding journey. I've learned that patience is the most important virtue in gardening. My patio has become a space for relaxation and inspiration, a place where I can witness how interconnected all living things are. I hope to share my passion with others, inspiring them to create their own green havens, no matter how small. 🌱



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# Spruce Up the Fall Garden with Judicious Pruning

BY TANYA KUCAK

SPECIAL TO THE TOWN CRIER

Late summer and early fall is a good time to give your native garden an annual checkup. What has done well with minimal watering? Which plants have attracted lots of pollinators? How can you improve the view from the window you look out most? Is there an area that needs more shade or screening? Where can you fit in some new plants that you will inevitably find at fall plant sales?

Although a drought-tolerant native garden needs little care after the first few seasons, some plants can benefit from annual pruning. In a talk to native-plant enthusiasts, Carl Hill of Blossom Hill Natives Nursery gave some tips for pruning native shrubs and perennials.

“The plant generally tells you what it needs,” Hill said. “Prune what makes sense for good structure, aesthetics and increased flowering.” Pay attention to the type of plant and its stage of growth. For instance, flowering plants can be pruned after flowering but before new buds set for the following year. The more vigorous a plant, the more likely that you can prune it. Take more care with woodier plants, which are less tolerant to drastic pruning.

Manzanita and Ceanothus shrubs don’t need to be pruned. You can, however, trim them if they are overgrowing paths or to control their size, within reason. Hill noted that one of his Concha Ceanothus >

Though fall is often associated with the beginning of falling leaves, refreshing your knowledge of plant care is important. PHOTO COURTESY OF TANYA KUCAK.



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shrubs has grown naturally to 7-8 ft. tall and 10-12 ft. wide, but he has pruned another one to only 4-5 ft. wide (it is also 7-8 ft. tall). In general, to manage the size or shape of one of these slower-growing shrubs, it's best to prune a little each year, not a lot at once. Avoid pruning them in the rainy season, both to minimize the risk of disease and to maximize flowers that have already budded. Some manzanitas can be pruned to show off their beautiful bark and sinuous branching structure. Dr. Hurd manzanita and Ray Hartman ceanothus are even amenable to being pruned into small trees.

Native buckwheats and lower-growing penstemons need no more than deadheading or removing old flowering stalks. Hill noted that many buckwheats are "very attractive for a long time" after the creamy flowers have faded to rust. Some gardeners like to leave spent flowering stems of buckwheats all winter so that birds can eat the seeds. Alternatively, you can cut the stems and leave them around the plant as mulch so that ground foragers can find the seeds.

Cut back desert plants such as Desert Penstemon "up to 50 percent for best structure and increased flowering," Hill said. He noted that plants from the desert can get bigger in the garden than in their natural range, so can especially

benefit from pruning. Showy Penstemon is another tall species that can be cut back by half after flowering.

Before fall, spring-blooming shrubs such as native salvias (or sages) benefit from being cut back up to 50 percent. "Structure is poor, branches collapse," and flowering is reduced in unpruned salvias, Hill said.

Vigorous plants such as California Fuchsia can be pruned 50 to 80 percent, depending on the variety, Hill said, to "keep foliage fresh and give more flowers." Unpruned, these plants become leggy and woodier, producing fewer flowers. Some low, spreading varieties even benefit from being pruned to the ground after flowering. ✨



Golden-beard penstemons (left), a manzanita tree (top right) and St. Catherine's Lace (bottom right) can all elevate a fall garden. PHOTO COURTESY OF TANYA KUCAK.



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# RENOVATION STRATEGIES FOR REAL ESTATE SUCCESS

## A Silicon Valley Case Study



BEFORE



AFTER

BY ALEX WANG

SPECIAL TO THE TOWN CRIER

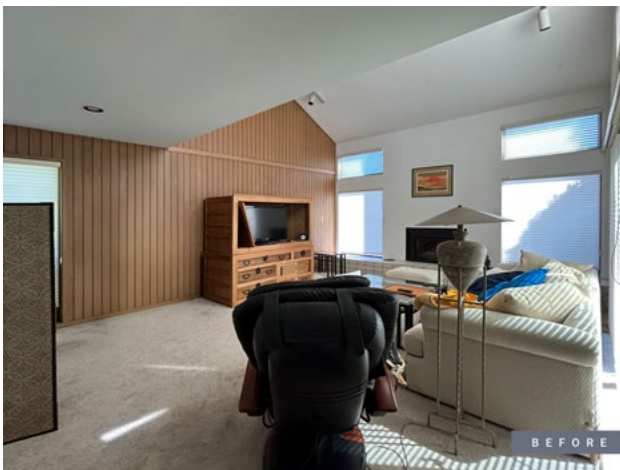
A family hired me to sell their home in the hills. Their father had built the house himself, but now he was getting older, and with the children all grown and having kids of their own, it didn't make sense for him to live in the house all by himself.

The house was a mid-century style home with beautiful clean lines and a wood-paneled exterior, located in a prime location in the hills bordering Palo Alto and Los Altos. A private retreat with proximity to a local country club, Foothills Nature Preserve, and amazing sweeping bay views, it has many attributes that are desirable for a

property in Silicon Valley. The house itself was original and somewhat dated, so my job was to advise the seller on renovating strategically to get the highest possible price during a sale.

Because there are tips and tricks in this process that every homeowner can appreciate – and potentially gain lucrative benefits from when it's time to sell – I am sharing the renovation strategy and choices made in collaboration with the sellers.

Buyers today are scrolling through their devices/screens looking at real estate. The first goal is to get the “eyeballs



BEFORE



AFTER

on the internet” into your house. And you do that with beautiful professional photography and videography of the house. Part of that is the skill of the photographer, and part of it is how the house presents to the buyer; from the moment they pull up on the street to the entire walkthrough experience in and out, we want to manage the buyer’s emotions to feel a sense of spaciousness, consistency and lightness. So, the first step is focusing the budget on aesthetics and what is pleasing to the eye rather than renovating or repairing something that a prospective buyer may not appreciate.

**KEY AREAS TARGETED FOR RENOVATION:**

- **COLOR.** Color is, by far, one of the most impactful elements on a buyer’s emotions when they enter your property. I’m not a color expert, but color theory is crucial to presenting the house in the best possible way. A new coat of paint with a smooth finish provides a fresh look for the interior. Adding a neutral color palette will help appeal to the widest audience. Try to stay away from extreme and bold colors that may speak to some buyers but not to others. Yes, buyers can always repaint, but it’s the initial emotion and feeling that we are trying to grab.

For the exterior, focus on the appearance of trim around the windows, entry, and garage. We had some black windows in this house, and the trim around the >

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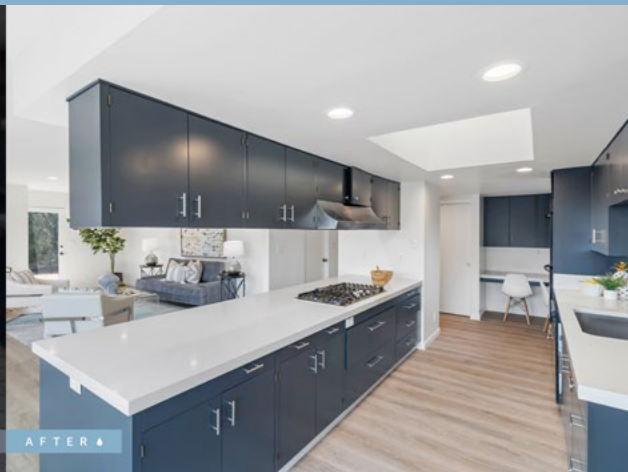
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windows looked dated. We replaced the trim and painted it black to match the window frames. The garage doors showed the original wood grain that had been re-stained over the years, bringing out an almost reddish color. We opted to paint the garage doors a nice darker gray and the trim surrounding the doors black. Simply painting the garage doors helped give the house a more contemporary look.

• **CANNED OVERHEAD LIGHTING.** Canned lighting was already in the house; however, it was the older style, with the incandescent bulbs visible. Home Depot, Lowe's, or your local hardware store have kits to easily replace the lighting with LED lighting with trim that gives a much softer and more consistent look. We replaced all twenty-two canned lights with new LED lighting.

• **LIGHT SWITCHES AND OUTLETS.** The house had various colors of older-style toggle light switches and outlets, some brown, some beige, some white, some operational, and some not. We decided to replace all the switches and outlets to make them consistent throughout the house. We used the Decora lower-profile light switches and outlets to add a more updated look. The last thing you want the buyer to see is an old two-pronged outlet from the '60s.

• **FIXTURES AND HARDWARE.** Replacing fixtures brings the house a cohesive and consistent look. These fixtures can be purchased on Amazon or at your local hardware

store. Take note of the finish – is it brushed nickel, chrome or bronze? What matches best with the house interiors? A good rule of thumb is to be consistent throughout, including door knobs, handles and hinges.

• **FLOORING.** We started with some original white floor tile throughout the kitchen, surrounded by dark grout lines, a beautiful slate tile in the entryway and carpeting throughout some of the other rooms. Flooring is essential to attain a consistent look and feel. We opted to keep the slate entryway and replace the remainder with lovely oak wood flooring. There are many variations to flooring in terms of costs and styles; choose one that doesn't look like cheap laminate and has a bright, neutral color.

• **REGLAZING.** Reglazing is essentially painting tiles. It's common to see many bathrooms built in the 1950s-'60s with light blue, avocado and pink colored tiles. Though these pastel colors were popular back then, they give a dated feeling today. Reglazing these tiles, countertops and shower stalls to neutral white or off-white will work wonders on a buyer's mood, preventing buyers from constant visual reminders of a dated original bathroom. Reglazing can be relatively inexpensive, and the turnaround time is just a few days to reglaze the bathroom areas in a house. There will be some off-gassing, so be prepared to leave the house to allow it to air out.

• **EXTERIOR LANDSCAPING.** Providing a consistent ground cover works

wonders. There are various types of mulch in terms of size and color. In our case, the roof was a dark composition shingle, so we thought having a black mulch would help "sandwich" the presentation of the house nicely. Drought-friendly plants are popular; adding flowers around the perimeter is always nice. Be mindful of the fact that plants need regular watering. If you don't have an existing system, installing a method like a sprinkler system can increase your costs.

In the end, our efforts paid off handsomely. We transformed the house into a stunning and appealing property that attracted numerous potential buyers – 14 to be exact – and sold it for over a million dollars above the appraisal value obtained just a few months before. We presented the property in its best light by focusing on strategic aesthetic improvements and ensuring consistency throughout the home. The updates modernized the house and created a cohesive, inviting atmosphere resonating with buyers.

This case study underscores the critical role of strategic renovations in real estate success. Attention to detail, presentation uniformity, and bright, neutral colors and tones can significantly enhance a property's appeal. ♦

*Alex Wang is a Los Altos resident, Realtor, and founder of Rainmaker Real Estate. For more information text/call (650) 800-8840 or visit [AlexWang.com](http://AlexWang.com).*

*Learning and Growing*

# TURNING THAT BROWN THUMB GREEN

BY CHRISTINA CASILLAS  
STAFF WRITER



I thought I had a brown thumb for a while. Despite my best efforts, every houseplant I brought in seemed to meet the same sad, untimely fate as those that came before it. Leaves would grow brown and crumble between my fingers, their death resulting in the familiar crunch of a plant that I wasn't sure if I under- or over-watered.

But over time, I learned that the only way I could overcome my (unintentional) plant-killing ways was to

research, research and do even more research. Something I noticed I was doing was not accommodating to what a plant's needs were, but that was because I didn't know what they were. Plants often have different requirements to thrive, and once you bring a plant into your home, it's important to know what they need to do well.

Here are some aspects of plant care to keep in mind that can help turn any brown thumb, green:

· **WATERING SCHEDULE:** Not all plants are the same when it comes to watering. Some plants like to be watered once a week, while others like to have their soil drenched once a month (most of my succulents prefer being drowned occasionally). Watering can also vary by temperature, sunlight exposure and season; when it gets hot and the sun is strong, watering may have to be increased as moisture evaporates quicker. I've seen this happen with my pothos, which though hardy, get droopy quicker during the summer. It's also important to know how sensitive a plant's root system is when thinking about watering; if a plant is prone to root rot, water slowly to avoid overwatering.

· **SOIL:** Some plants need more acidic, alkaline, porous or mulch-like soil to thrive. It's not a one-size-fits-all situation. Succulents, for example, often do best in soil that's more porous and pumice-heavy, allowing for easier drainage because their drought hardiness also makes them more susceptible to root rot when they're overwatered. Some plants, like my aforementioned pothos, seem to "drink" a bit slower and enjoy having soil that holds water for longer.

· **LIGHT:** All plants need light, but some need it more than others. I have two ZZ plants about 10 feet away from my east-facing window, and they're thriving. While they don't grow as fast as the plants closer to the sun, they still do well. Other plants, like succulents and string of hearts, need to be in a windowsill or somewhere close to sunshine. If a plant isn't doing well in a specific area, maybe move it closer to the window; if a plant is looking like it's getting too much sunlight, maybe move it somewhere farther away. Do some experiments and see where in your home a plant does best.

Bloomscape, a site that sells plants and provides care tips and other helpful tools, >





*“...once you bring a plant into your home, it's important to know what they need to do well.”*

While I've gotten better, I still kill plants (and now completely avoid ferns), but that's the challenge of keeping them. I've had some plants that have been in my room and home for years; I even brought a rubber plant from home to my desk in my first months at the Los Altos Town Crier office, and it's been thriving for almost two years.

I could go on for hours about what can contribute to a plant's thriving or dying, but some issues can be solved by simple research. Sometimes things go well, sometimes things fail, but it's all trial and error; the joy of plant-keeping can be found in the adventure of it all. 🌿



has a website you plant lovers can visit to learn more about a plant's requirements. The site also has a helpful guide, [bloomscape.com/plant-care-guides/](https://www.bloomscape.com/plant-care-guides/), that itemizes care by plant name.



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