

Enhance Your Home's Drive-Up Appeal

The color photo next to the MLS made the zero-lot-line home look so appealing. Red-brick exterior, large and attractive windows, a two-car garage. I decided to hop in the car and drive by to check it out myself. I'm glad I did. Twenty minutes later, I sat in my parked car across the street from the dream house I'd seen earlier that morning. Funny, it didn't seem so great anymore. I knew that the interior had two bedrooms, new carpeting and new tile, new appliances and some of the other trappings that make homes attractive to buyers.

But I couldn't get past the outside: wilted landscaping, patchy grass and a sad-looking, lonely tree sitting out front. The front door, which for some reason never made it into that MLS pictorial, was a putrid shade of magenta. No, thanks. I sighed, put the car in drive and moved on. Strike out.

It's never a bad time to think about ways to improve your home's image on the outside. But if you're planning on placing your house on the market any time soon, you simply can't afford not to brush up its exterior. In the rush to fill out paperwork, search for a new home, obtain necessary financing, etc., too many homeowners fail to consider how the outside of a house determines in a matter of seconds whether prospective homebuyers out for a drive are going to stop the car and pull out a flyer (if there's one present) or call their Realtors and tell them they've found a home they want to view.

You should certainly conduct your own personal inspection and inventory of your home's exterior before you place it on the market, but the effectiveness of this exercise is questionable. You're too close to the subject at hand, for one thing. And, whether consciously or unconsciously, you're voiding any flaws for which you'd have to cough up a lot of cash to repair. The reality is that some of those flaws probably aren't going to pass muster with a buyer's home inspector, so it may be simply a question of whether you pay now or later to repair them. So don't rely on your own assessment to determine just what needs fixing and improvement. Have your Realtor size up the outside of your home. This is no time for your Realtor to be nice; ask him or her to be brutally honest. Your Realtor's assessment and your willingness to complete those recommended enhancements and repairs will ultimately determine how long your home sits on the market -- a matter of days, or it could languish for months.

The following points outline just some of the areas your Realtor is likely to touch upon during an informal inspection of your home's exterior:

Paint: Chipping or peeling paint is a definite detractor from your home's appearance. Even an inexpensive paint job will enhance your home's appearance significantly. This includes the front door, fence, shutters and any other surfaces in full view.

Landscaping: Mow and edge your lawn, and do it frequently while your home is on the market. You'd be amazed at how a little overgrown grass will cause some drive-by homebuyers to keep going. If you have shrubs and bushes out front, make sure they remained clipped and neat in appearance. Remove old pots of wilted flowers, and keep the front porch as clear of excess clutter as possible. Keep your flower beds well-watered, and remove any overgrowth. Roll up your garden hose, and place it out of sight along with your garden tools.

Sidewalks/driveway: Sorry, kids, but this isn't the time to decorate the sidewalks and driveway with colorful chalk designs. Nor is it a good time to leave toys -- "Big Wheels," balls, roller blades and bikes, for example -- scattered about. Pull stray weeds, and keep the lawn edged along these areas. If you've been in the process of a restoring a historic car, and it's normally placed on stilts in your driveway, move it into the garage. Drive-by homebuyers will be humming the theme song to "Sanford and Son" as your home becomes a distant object in their rear-view mirrors.

Gutters/downspouts: If they're damaged or loose, repair them.

Sagging fences/loose bricks/damaged siding: Call a professional. A fence that looks as if the next strong breeze will cause a collapse is a serious detractor from the perceived value of your home. And loose bricks or damaged siding, often a side effect of excessive hot and cold weather conditions, must be repaired.

Upgrade your outdoor lighting. Making sure you've got warm lighting around your home's exterior will create an inviting appearance for any prospective homebuyer. If you've ever noticed how even modest homes can suddenly appear cozy with the proper lighting, take that lesson to heart with your own home. Keep your porch light on in the evenings, just in case a prospective buyer happens to be driving through your neighborhood drawing attention to your "For Sale" sign.

Finishing touches: Purchase a brand-new doormat, place it in front of the entrance to your home, and add a pot of brightly colored flowers next to the front door. You're saying "Welcome. Come on in."

While these enhancements and repairs may seem like a hassle now, you'll thank yourself when your home spends much less time on the market than it would have without such improvements -- that is, assuming that your home could sell at all in those conditions. A home is like anything else in our society. You never get a second chance to make a first impression, so make it the best one possible.