

# beginner's guide to elegant design

## **table of contents**

<b>the basics of interior design .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>10 common design mistakes.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>choosing the right contractor .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>design inspirations for your new home .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>top 6 trends in kitchen design .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>bathroom design basics .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>designing the perfect bedroom.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>designing the perfect nursery .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>home office design tips .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>gardening and landscaping for beginners .....</b>	<b>19</b>

## the basics of interior design



Interior design seems easy enough: choose a color, buy a few pretty pieces, move some furniture around. But if you've ever had to do a real home, you'll know it takes more than that. For one thing, you have to keep functionality and budget in mind with each decision. Remember, it's your living space, and unless you can afford to redesign every month, you

have to make sure you can live with your choices for a long time.

According to Gregory Lipke, author of the ezine *Your Luxury Guide*, the three main guidelines of interior design are function, mood, and harmony. As long as these three are present, you can consider your design project a success. So how do you introduce all three into your space? Read on to find out.

***Plan, plan, plan:*** It's never wise to go blindly into a task, especially if you're spending a small fortune on it. Planning helps you determine a goal (or set of goals) for the entire project, which takes care of the first step. The first thing you should ask yourself is: what do you need the room for? Is it a place to relax, work, or have fun? Will you have kids running around the room all day? If you do, go for wood, plastic, or other non-breakable pieces. Remember, if the room doesn't do what it's supposed to, the most expensive furniture in the world can't make it a success.

***Choose a theme:*** A lot of homeowners go shopping for furnishings without knowing what they're looking for. They either end up buying all the wrong pieces, or changing their minds even before it's out of the box. To avoid this, decide on a general theme or mood for your room during the planning stage. There are several themes to choose from, from sleek minimalist styles to rustic country and Asian ones. Plan every detail so that they all fit into your motif, so that you don't buy anything unnecessary.

***Define your focal point:*** The focal point is the first thing a person sees upon entering a room. Your entire area will be built around it. It doesn't have to be anything elaborate—it can be a clock, a piece of furniture, or an interesting rug. What's important is that it catches attention and leads the viewer's eye where you want it. If you have a big room, for example, you can emphasize the size by placing your focal point in a far corner, drawing

attention to the expanse of floor below. If it's small, draw the eye away from the walls to more interesting items in the room, such as a nice bookshelf or coffee table.

***Keep it all in balance:*** Keep your design 'balanced' by following the quadrant rule. Draw an imaginary axis at the center of your room, dividing it into quadrants. Each square should have an equal amount of decoration; don't put everything in one corner and leave the rest bare. Think of your most important pieces (furniture, paintings, wall stands) and distribute them equally between the quadrants.

## 10 common design mistakes



There are few things worse than finding out your whole design plan has flopped—after having put blood, sweat and tears into the project. It happens to almost anyone who tries to design a home for the first time. Not only does it waste your time and

money, it also entails a long, stressful period of redesigning and repairs. That's why it's important to plan ahead and bring in some professional help, especially if you're designing your first home. Here are 10 of the most common design mistakes made by homeowners—and how you can avoid them.

**1. Wrong flooring:** Most home design projects start from the floor up, so if you mess up your floor design, your entire project can't work together. Because floors are the most abused part of the home, function and durability should be your top considerations. Wood floors may be attractive, but they won't hold up if you have kids coming in from the pool all the time. The carpet may have seemed nice at the store, but you'll think twice when you start getting stains and vacuuming enough hair and dust to make a new carpet.

**2. Bad paint job:** This is one of the most common design mistakes, but also one of the easiest to repair. Often, the color turns out a shade darker than it was at the shop, a product of the drying process and the reaction with the

wall material. For really bad paint jobs, painting over is usually the best solution. However, adding an extra color for texture can be easier and may cover up mistakes better. Use a sponge or rub to apply the paint in an abstract pattern over the original layer.

**3. Bad lighting:** Lighting can make or break your home design project. Even with an excellent layout and impressive furnishings, all your hard work can be put to waste if it's not illuminated properly. The first rule in household lighting is to make good use of natural light. Create lots of open space with large windows and doorways. Reflect the sunlight with large wall mirrors and glass surfaces. When you do use artificial lights, go for warm ambient lighting instead of bright daylight. Warm white shades usually work best.

**4. Lack of focus:** When you enter a room, your eye should be drawn to a single point of interest. If it isn't, you probably don't have a good focal point. A focal point is the first thing that catches attention, such as a fireplace, wall decoration, or a unique piece of furniture. Decide which of the things in your room are of most interest and draw attention to them. You can do this by positioning them in the center, or arranging the rest of your things so that they lead to a single spot.

**5. Over-furnishing:** It happens to a lot of new homeowners. They get so excited about furnishing their new home that they end up buying more than they need. Not wanting to waste any money, they try to cram everything into the home, even if it means having two identical couches, three different wallpaper patterns, and carpeting every room including the kitchen. Avoid this by planning your purchases ahead of time. Bring a list with you when you shop. If you find something you like that's not on the list, see if there's something you can cross out to accommodate it.

**6. Bad plumbing and wiring:** Designing may be a major job, but remember that your home should be first and foremost functional. Before laying out that expensive flooring or ceiling treatment, make sure all your pipes and wires are in place and working properly. If you're designing on your own, have a contractor check your designs to make sure it works with your wiring plan. This is especially important with bathrooms, since wiring mistakes can be costly and even cause serious accidents.

**7. Poor ventilation:** Windows have to let the cool air in during hot seasons and retain the hot air when it's cold. Simply drilling a hole in your wall

achieves only one of these things, sometimes none. Have your contractor help you in placing your windows right. Get energy-efficient windows, which are treated with a special coating that reflects heat and light and prevents heat loss in the winter. If replacing or relocating your windows is not an option, install a small exhaust window over your larger ones to help hot air escape.

**8. Misuse of space:** Just because you have a small space doesn't mean you have to give up design and functionality altogether. Sure, there are pieces you can never put in, such as that large statue or coffee table. But there are lots of alternatives that will play up your room's strengths and camouflage its shortcomings. Make the most of your available space by creating an illusion of size. Move everything to the walls, make all your storage built-in, and create lots of open floor space in the center. Use bright colors and reflective surfaces to make the room seem brighter and airier.

**9. Room for clutter:** Clutter is a room's worst enemy, regardless of its size. A home with stuff lying around just isn't warm or inviting. Prevent clutter by organizing storage in every room. Make sure there's a right place for everything, and make your storage areas easily accessible. The main reason that clutter accumulates is that it's too much trouble to reach for the shelf and put something back. If you make the job easier, your whole family will cooperate and there won't be any room for clutter.

**10. Lack of budgeting:** You'd think this is the easiest mistake to avoid, but many people still go over budget when designing their homes. A lot of it comes from impulse buys, which seldom get used anyway. Stick to a budget and don't make any compromises, no matter how tempting. Try working with an interior designer so they can help you stay on track.

## choosing the right contractor



So you've decided your home needs a makeover, and you're planning a major remodel. Before you get busy with buying furniture and choosing color schemes, there's one task you need to get done: choosing a contractor. You can do without an

interior designer, but without a contractor, your plans will never see the light of day.

Your contractor should be able to carry out your design while ensuring the structural integrity of your home. This requires close cooperation on your part, so it's important that you get along and feel free to share your ideas. Contractors aren't hard to find—finding a good one is what makes it a challenge. Here are some things to keep in mind when hiring a contractor for your home project.

***Don't expect answers:*** Not on your first phone call, at least. When you call a company, it's not usually the contractors themselves you'll be talking to. They'll want to know the basics about your project, such as home size, location, and the extent of work needed. Don't get discouraged if they don't seem to know much about the business; wait until you get an appointment and talk to the actual person who will be doing the work.

***Be firm and detailed about your ideas:*** Describe your whole project in detail to your contractor, and be prepared to ask and answer questions. From the start, make it clear what parts of the project you are willing to compromise and which are not. Think of which ideas you absolutely cannot give up, and which ones you'll allow your contractor to move around.

***Have realistic expectations:*** Before you start interviewing your prospects, do a cursory canvass of local companies just to see what the average rates are. Set your expectations according to the market rates. A prospect can charge higher or lower than the average, but they shouldn't deviate too far. Be wary of contractors who bid suspiciously low—it might be a scheme to get you into a vague contract that lets them cut corners and charge unfair fees.

***Insist on a time frame:*** When comparing bids, the time frame for completion should be as important as the price. Don't accept vague answers such as "a week or two." A contractor with enough experience should be able to estimate the time frame at a glance. Don't hesitate to pay a few extra dollars for a shorter time frame. Remodeling puts everyone in the family at an inconvenience, so the sooner you get it over with, the better.

***Write it all down:*** Make sure everything you've agreed on is written on paper. Otherwise, your contractor can break that part of the deal and legally claim not to have made the agreement. Keep a record of all your correspondence so you'll have something to fall back on in case they back out. It also lets you contest anything they do out of contract. Let them know you're keeping track of everything, so they don't try anything in the first place.

## design inspirations for your new home



Some people have always known what they want their homes to look like. Others fumble with several ideas and have trouble settling on one style. If you're one of the latter, don't worry—there are lots of ways to create your own style while keeping to basic design rules. The key is to

find a style that's all your own, one that reflects your personality and interests.

Of course, that's where many people stumble. Finding your personal style can take some time, especially if you have varied tastes. But it's certainly not difficult—after all, it's just a matter of knowing what you want. Here are some great sources of ideas for creating your personal style.

***1. Your favorite items:*** Obviously, you tend to buy more of the things that you like. Look around your home and find things that appear more than once. If you have wooden vases in the living room, kitchen, basement and bedroom, there's only one conclusion: wooden vases are your thing.

If you're using multiples as a basis, there's usually a risk of overstuffing your house. Just because you like wooden vases doesn't mean they have to be in



every room. Just make them the focal point of your home: they should be the first thing you notice when you come in and the last thing you forget when you leave.

**2. Your color preferences:** Some colors may represent or fit in with a certain style. If you like the stark contrast of black and white, a minimalist theme may be perfect for you. This style favors straight lines and a play of contrast, such as a sleek black couch against a spacious white wall. If you're drawn to brown, green and yellow shades, you may like a country or traditional style. These themes play on the use of wood and natural materials. Pastel shades are associated with Asian design, and bright colors suggest postmodern and avant-garde styles.

**3. Your art and décor:** Your choice in art is very personal. You choose to hang something on your wall simply because you like it, not because it's functional or convenient. That makes it the best indication of your personal style, as well as a great takeoff point for building your theme. Designer or original art might mean you prefer a rich, classical look; a small oil painting may indicate a taste for vintage styles. Once you've identified your artistic style, you can build the rest of your décor around it.

**4. Your fashion style:** How you dress is also an accurate reflection of your personal style. Do you like flowery, frilly dresses with colorful prints? If so, a quirky modern theme might work for your home. Are you more comfortable in everyday shirts and jeans? Then you may want a traditional theme with pastel walls and sturdy wood furniture. Make sure you're not just following trends, or your décor may go out of date too quickly. Look into your closet and see which pieces you have the most of—this tells you which styles you can live with for a long time.

**5. Your favorite room:** Even before you decorate your home, there's always one room you'll be drawn to because of its look and feel. Find out what you like most about your favorite room and use it as inspiration for the rest of your home. That doesn't mean all rooms should look alike, only that a single mood should prevail in every room. If you like the calm and openness of your sunroom, that might mean a nature-inspired or Asian theme can work for your home.

**6. Your shopping style:** When you're at the mall, where do you head to first? Do you go straight to the food area and check out the restaurants? That

might mean the kitchen should be your home's focal point. Are you often drawn to the coffee shops for a warm, relaxing drink? If so, you might want to put more effort into your bedroom, living room, or any place you like to chill out.

## top 6 trends in kitchen design



Modern home design puts great value on aesthetics. From your living room to your bike garage, the color and mood have become just as important as practicality and function. But no other room has been as drastically revamped as the kitchen. Once merely

a place for preparing meals, the kitchen is now the focal point of many homes, serving as both workstation and entertainment area. If your kitchen is still the same drab square it was ten years ago, it's time you gave it a new look.

It's not as hard as it sounds—sometimes it's as simple as moving a few things around like you do in your living room. The only difference is that functionality is of more importance; after all, it's where most of the hard work gets done.

So how do you make your kitchen stylish and usable and the same time? Here are some of the most popular trends.

**1. Built-in everything:** Built-in cabinets used to be a staple for small areas, but nowadays, even big kitchens are maximizing floor space by moving everything to the walls. Microwaves are built into cabinets, bread toasters recessed on kitchen counters, refrigerators integrated with pantry cabinets. This is because they're realizing the value of space in a workplace: the more room there is to move in, the more comfortable and productive you will be.

**2. Personalized cabinetry:** No remodeling job is complete without adding a personal touch. Personalized cabinets allow you to store your favorite kitchen items in style, whether it's your wine collection or your set of designer knives. Wall-mounted cupboards are still all the rage, mostly because they're convenient and a major space-saver.

**3. Bold colors:** If you've seen the chefs' kitchens on cooking shows, you'll notice more splashes of color in the background. Colorful kitchens are in; whites and pastels are out. If you're not ready for a full repainting job, try introducing color gradually. Install a bright-colored sink, a patterned countertop, or a row of accent tiles.

**4. Kitchen/office countertops:** Moms like to pore over bills on the counter while waiting for dinner to cook. That's why countertops have evolved into work desks, with a large end designed to hold a laptop or personal computer. Some desks even extend into the family room, so that moms can watch the kids, do the bills, and make dinner at the same time.

**5. Multiple sinks:** It's no longer enough to have a small sink under the back window. Designers are now introducing island sinks as part of a food preparation zone, the modern equivalent of the familiar 'work triangle.' There are now larger island sinks in addition to wall sinks, perfect for tandem cooking and preparing multiple-course meals.

**6. Mini-appliances:** It's not uncommon for a modern kitchen to have a mini-fridge, mini-sink, or even a mini-burner in addition to the regular ones. They're more luxury items than appliances, but they do come in handy for those quick tasks. Mini-fridges often serve as wine or soda coolers for parties.

## bathroom design basics



spa.

Modern design has revamped practically every room in the house, but none have been as drastically reinvented as the bathroom. Your bathroom is no longer just a place to shower; it's a place to relax and be comfortable. From the strictly utilitarian toilet-and-bath setup, designers now prefer large, luxurious bathrooms just a few notches below the home

Needless to say, this trend doesn't come cheap. If you want to revamp your bathroom, be prepared to spend a small fortune and pore over designs for hours with your contractor. You may also want to brush up on design basics

to keep your bathroom functional. Here are some things to consider if you're planning a bathroom redesign.

**Flooring:** Bathroom flooring has to be water-resistant above anything else. Hardwood floors may be attractive, and carpets may be comfortable, but they won't last long in a bathroom. Laminate does poorly as a countertop, but it's surprisingly durable as a bathroom floor. This is because the "wear layer" on top of the wood is strong enough to protect the paper layers underneath (it's made from layers of printed kraft paper). If you want the look of wood, however, you can go for engineered wood. This consists of a plywood base which absorbs moisture well, and a real wood top for a realistic finish.

Quality-wise, stone and ceramic tile are the best options. Both wear extremely well and can withstand decades of water exposure. The only downside with stone floor is that it can get really cold in cold weather, and it can get slippery if you don't have the right finish.

**Walls:** Walls also have to be water-resistant, but they don't have to be non-slip like bathroom floors. If you're using ceramic tile flooring, you can simply extend the tiles to the walls, maybe with a row of accent tiles higher up. Tiles withstand water well, but you have to clean the seams regularly as mildew can build up on the grout.

Pre-fabricated walls are ideal for those who like it quick and easy. Some are even available pre-fitted, although this only works for bathrooms of standard size and shape. If you want pre-fabricated walls, look for those that come in separate pieces and can be assembled on-site. Solid surface walls may be better if you have an odd-shaped bathroom. These are a mix of wood and synthetics, offering a sturdy but not very natural look.

**Lighting:** Bathroom lighting has to fit into the spa-like feel you're trying to create. Large white lamps have been replaced by smaller fixtures with a dimmer, more dramatic glow. To understand lighting styles, let's go over the basics of household lighting. The light provided by a central fixture is called ambient lighting. It takes the place of natural light in the bathroom, and often works well on its own. However, you can spruce it up with accent lighting, which are the smaller bulbs that light certain objects or areas. It can be a wall feature, a painting, or anything of interest.

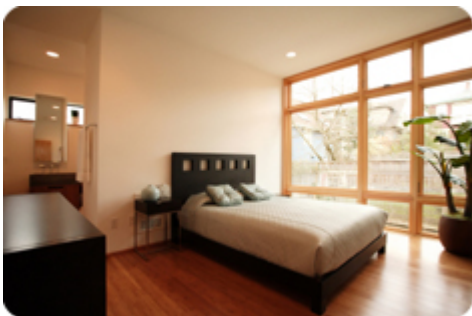
Task lighting is often the trickiest lighting feature. It is mostly used in the vanity and sink areas, where you do your daily grooming and makeup. It's important to evenly illuminate your face; the wrong angle or placement can cast odd shadows and make grooming rather difficult. This is best achieved by a column of lights on both sides of the mirror, or a large overhead light at least six feet over the vanity.

The shower is also a key area for task lighting. You may not need a dedicated fixture if your ambient lighting provides enough illumination. Otherwise, recessed lights (where the fixture is level with the ceiling) are the best option.

***Bathroom fixtures:*** When you've finished designing the area, you can start deciding what goes into it. Do you want a premade shower enclosure or a personalized area? How big should your bathtub be? Where should you place the toilet? Your answers should be based on your flooring and lighting choices, as well as the available space. If you have a small bathroom, your best bet is a corner enclosure with sliding doors. The corner location helps free up floor space at the center, and the sliding door eliminates the need for swing-out room.

The tub is the focal point in most modern bathrooms. Built-in tubs work great for space-saving purposes, but if you have room to spare, consider getting a freestanding tub. These are more stylish and fit in better with the home spa theme. Place it in the center, beside your shower enclosure, or at an angle from an empty corner.

## designing the perfect bedroom



The average person spends a third of his life in the bedroom, most of it in bed. So why not make your room the best it can be? Your bedroom isn't just a place to sleep—it's a place to rest, relax and relieve yourself of the day's pressures. A bed and a closet don't make a bedroom; they make a sleeping quarters. If you want a real personal sanctuary, you should think about redesigning your bedroom.

The word “redesign” can be daunting. Most people immediately think of hauling heavy furniture, repainting all your walls, rewiring and reinstalling. But sometimes all it takes is a little tweak to give your bedroom a whole new look. Here are some things to keep in mind when designing the perfect bedroom.

***Space:*** The first thing you need to do is take stock of your available space. Design concepts vary greatly with size. If you have a small room, your goal should be to maximize the space you have; if your room is large, the challenge is to make it cozy and efficient. Decide which items you really need (bed, closets, dressers) and those you can do without if there’s no room, such as a vanity table. If you have a clear idea of your own space, you can easily size up new pieces before buying them.

***Colors:*** Your bedroom is the one place where you’re free to choose your own colors. But some colors are naturally gloomy, and you don’t want that mood in your bedroom. If you like dark colors like blue or purple, try lightening it up by a few shades. Or you can paint two of your walls with the color you want, and paint the rest with a contrasting color.

***Storage:*** A bedroom could always use more storage—it reduces clutter and makes it easier to organize your things. A more important question is what type of storage to get. If you have a large room, you can afford a fancy closet or shelf for all your collectibles. Otherwise, you can save space with built-in cupboards and wall shelves. Make use of “waste space” such as below the sink or under staircases.

***Lighting:*** Lighting is more important in the bedroom than anywhere else in the house. Your choice of lights will set the entire mood of the area. One thing that most people overlook is the source of outside light—they’ll install a set of fancy lights only to have it ruined by a streetlamp by the window. Since you can’t move them away, just adjust your lighting around them. Instead of lighting the entire room, light key areas such as your dressing table, closet, and small areas along your wall.

***Ventilation:*** Even if you have the best HVAC in the market, nothing beats cool fresh air. If your room has two external faces, try installing windows on both walls to maximize the air that gets in. If that’s not an option, place a ventilator over the existing windows to let the hot air out and let cooler air circulate.

## designing the perfect nursery



Decorating your new nursery can be fun, but it also takes a lot of work and planning. You want it to be cute and stylish, but there's also safety and functionality to keep in mind. Many parents are intimidated by the amount of planning involved, from the flooring

to the type and size of the crib. Others don't plan at all, and end up with an odd mix of elements that often doesn't work.

So how do you design the perfect nursery? The best approach, like in any other room, is to work from the bottom up. That means you start by planning your flooring, then working your way up to the walls, ceiling, and other details in between. Here's a quick guide to help you get started.

**Flooring:** Your nursery floor is where your baby will take his first steps. But before that, it's also where he will crawl around, play with his toys, and spill his drinks (perhaps more often than you'd like). So you want a flooring material that will accommodate all these, and hopefully, live to see your next baby.

Carpeting is a popular option for nurseries because it makes a great playing area. When your baby learns to walk, it also gives him a firm grip and provides a cushion when he trips or falls. The downside is that the fibers can invite dust mites and other pests, which is often the cause of asthma and baby rash. Cleaning up spills can also be a hassle.

Wooden floors have easier cleaning and lower maintenance requirements. They're also more likely to last until your baby grows out of his crib. However, they don't provide the cushioning of a carpet, so your baby is more likely to hurt himself. For the play area, try placing an area rug or soft carpet in a corner with his toys.

**Lighting:** Nursery lighting usually involves a main ambient light and a nighttime lamp. Bright lights can irritate a newborn's eyes, so dimmers are a must for both fixtures. Ambient light are designed to replace natural light—a warm white fluorescent lamp usually does the job. Night-lights should be much dimmer, just enough to see by when you come in at night. Plug-in



lamps are convenient, but make sure to install them above toddler height to prevent accidents.

***Color scheme:*** It used to be simple: pink for girls, blue for boys. But many parents are now opting for neutral schemes like beige, yellow, and pastels. This helps your baby's eyes to adjust more comfortably to seeing color. If they're overwhelmed by a surge of color as soon as they can see, they may have trouble identifying colors as they grow up. On a more practical note, neutral schemes go well with most furnishings, which eliminates the problem of trying to fit in your baby shower presents. And if you're planning another baby, you won't have to redo the décor if they're opposite sexes.

You may also want to think of a theme for the room. Flowers, sailboats, and teddy bears are some of the most popular nursery themes. Character themes are also nice, but they're usually more expensive. Look for a theme that you can live with for the next few years. As with color, themes should be kept as neutral as possible for easier adjustment when you have your next baby.

- ***Furniture:*** The only baby furniture you really need is a crib and dresser. Changing tables and rocking chairs are nice to have, but they're not absolute necessities. When you shop for cribs, you'll come across several different types, such as the following:
- ***Standard:*** This is a mostly utilitarian crib with no features or fancy details. This is great if you're on a budget (they start at \$100 or so) or if you want to add your own decorations.
- ***Round:*** Round cribs are one of the newer trends in baby bedding. They're more of a fad than a type, but they do have a few advantages. For one thing, they fit nicely into corners and work well in odd-shaped rooms. Their biggest drawback is their price—a standard round crib can cost as much as \$1,000.
- ***Canopy:*** As the name implies, a canopy crib is one with a built-in canopy. It comes in round and standard rectangular models. If you're getting a canopy crib, you'll also need to buy bedding sets that include a canopy cover.
- ***Convertible:*** Convertible cribs can expand from infant size to a toddler bed, then to a daybed or even an adult bed. At about \$300,



they offer great value for your money as there's no need to buy new beds as your child grows.

- ***Portable:*** If you're after convenience and cost, a portable crib may work for you. Portable cribs are smaller than standard cribs and can be folded up for storage or transport. However, your baby will outgrow it fairly quickly and you'll have to buy a standard crib eventually.

***Safety features:*** Lastly, you will need to childproof your nursery. Babies are naturally curious and as they grow, they'll want to touch everything in sight. Make sure all the hazards such as power sockets, light bulbs, and electrical wires are out of reach, or at least protected with a childproof cover. Pad table corners, install safety gates near staircases, and put slam stoppers on your nursery doors.

Baby monitors are also becoming a staple in nurseries. They allow you to watch or listen to the nursery while in another room, so you don't have to keep constant watch. Install monitor screens in rooms you frequently use such as the bedroom, kitchen, or living room.

## home office design tips



Many successful companies started out as home businesses, often with no more than a computer and working desk. But you can be sure that most of them later invested in a proper home office. Starting out small can be hard, but that doesn't mean you can't have a good place to work. After all, it's not just a workspace—it's also where you'll be entertaining potential clients.

According to Galvins Workspace Furniture, three things should be considered in home office design: your working style, the available workspace, and the equipment you'll be using. Here are some things to keep in mind when designing your home office.

***Your style:*** Your work style varies from one business to another. Some businesses have you sitting at the computer all day, while others involve a bit of travel. Your home office should fit the way you work. If you need to

leave your office often, you'll need something small and low-maintenance. But if you spend most of the year in, comfort and ergonomics are more important.

You should also consider the way you want to work in the office. Do you need a big desk with lots of drawers, or would a small workstation do? How many file cabinets do you need? Some businesses need ample storage for documents, while others can keep everything in a folder or electronic file.

***Your space:*** Before you buy anything, though, you need to take stock of your workspace. Find out how big your workspace is and how much space you're willing to allot for your furniture, equipment, and other key items. To do this, you need to draw a floor plan to scale to see how it'll all fit together. It's best to work with a contractor or interior designer to make sure all your decisions are viable.

If your workspace is small, don't take it as an excuse to scrimp on equipment. There are several ways to maximize space and find an effective layout for small offices. For starters, move everything to the walls, from file cabinets to your computer workstation. This leaves a lot of floor space in the center, which makes the place seem bigger. Built-in storage and hanging cabinets are a great way to save floor area.

You also need to decide on a color scheme. Unlike your bedroom, your office can't just follow whatever color comes into mind. For one thing, it must look clean and professional, since it's where you'll be entertaining clients. It must also stimulate you to work—some colors are too relaxing and make you feel drowsy. Blue and green have been shown to increase productivity, but too much of them can make it look cold and impersonal. Warm up a blue office with brown furniture or accents of some other color.

***Your tools:*** Once you have a layout in mind, you can go about buying things for your home office. If you're working with a budget like most small businesses, you won't be able to buy everything you need in one drop. And if you have a small office, you can't fit in all your equipment yet. Instead, make a list of all the things you need, and identify those you can't do without and those that can wait until you have a bigger space.

When choosing equipment for your office, put quality and performance before price. You may be saving a few dollars now, but if it's not up for heavy

use, you might end up wasting even more in repairs and productivity loss. Stick to decent brands and best-selling models—they wouldn't have become popular if they were substandard.

## gardening and landscaping for beginners



So you've finished designing your interior, and you're ready to take on your yard. But you don't know the first thing about gardening, and you can't tell a rose from a daisy. It's a common problem among homeowners, but don't let that keep you from trying.

Many people have built their own home gardens from scratch without any professional experience. All it takes is some creativity, and maybe a decent budget.

But that said, it does help to know the basics. Landscaping is a lot easier when you know how it all works and how to avoid the common pitfalls. Once you master the basics, you can easily create your own garden and make the perfect backdrop for your new home. Here's a quick guide to help you get started.

***Prepare your soil:*** This is one of the most common gardening mistakes made by beginners. According to gardening expert Mark Cullen, soil quality is responsible for 90% of your gardening success. Each area has a different type of soil. Some of them are great for growing plants, while others can't even support weeds. Fortunately, you can now buy pre-mixed soil if your area isn't fertile. Look for triple mix—a mixture of compost, peat moss, and top soil—which is the generally accepted mix in most states. Dig out about 16 inches of soil in your garden area and fill it with the mix.

***Start small:*** Many beginners give up simply because they expect too much from the project. Don't expect to create a sprawling green courtyard on your first try. Start with a small patch of land (up to 50 square feet is acceptable) and work your way from there. Stick to simple, easy-to-grow plants like java fern and moss, asters, hornwort, zinnias, and geraniums. Just because they're

simple doesn't mean they can be attractive; it's all in the combination of plants and the quality of growth they achieve.

***Make a compost pile:*** Compost is a mixture of decomposing organic matter, which includes leaves, manure, rotting bark, and coffee grounds. It is widely used as a fertilizer in gardening, and comes in handy especially in bad weather. You can easily make your own from organic wastes in your own home. Set up a small compost pile in a corner of your garden and thinly spread it over your soil at least once a year. Always have a fresh supply of compost for when your plants need some extra attention.

***Keep your soil healthy:*** Besides regular composting, proper handling and treatment are also vital to maintaining soil quality. Try not to walk on the soil, as this will cause it to compact and prevent roots from growing. If it's a large bed, create a walking path that gives you access to all areas for watering and maintenance. Also, avoid working with wet or freshly watered soil. This will cause it to harden into large clumps, which will form a powdery mixture when you try to break them up.

***Mulch your bed:*** Mulch is any organic substance spread on top of the soil to seal in moisture and control weed growth. You can use any plant leftover as mulch, such as sawdust, straw, ground bark, or dried leaves. Plastic sheets are often sold commercially for mulching, although it's best to stick to natural materials. You may need to reapply it once in a while, but take care not to overdo it.

***Garden everyday:*** Spend at least 10 minutes a day attending to your garden, pulling out weeds, watering, or sprinkling a bit of fertilizer. Make it a habit—even in rainy weather, grab an umbrella and check on your plants. This greatly reduces your weekend work and helps you form a bond with your plants. It also helps you catch problems early on, instead of being surprised with a massive infestation one day.