

LEARNING MADE EASY



3rd Edition

Home Maintenance

for
dummies[®]

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Keep the lights on
and the water flowing

Protect your home
from long-term problems

Find step-by-step tips for
projects inside & out

Tom Kraeutler

Host of *The Money Pit Podcast* &
Home Improvement Adventurer

Home Maintenance

for
dummies[®]
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Home Maintenance

3rd Edition

**by Tom Kraeutler
and James Carey and
Morris Carey, Jr.**

**for
dummies®**
A Wiley Brand

Home Maintenance For Dummies®, 3rd Edition

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Introduction

Your home is like a superhero in your life, the caped crusader against decay, pests, and everyday wear and tear. It's your fortress, and it deserves all the love and protection you can give it! It's also the largest investment that you'll ever make in your life. So, it makes good sense to do everything you can to maintain it.

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.

Get ready for a rollercoaster ride of home-maintenance fun. Buckle up as we dive into the world of preserving your castle's integrity, boosting comfort and energy efficiency, and standing tall in the neighborhood with a well-cared-for abode.

Home Maintenance For Dummies, 3rd Edition, is your trusty sidekick, packed with tips and tricks to keep your home shining like a beacon of pride and satisfaction. Enjoy the adventure!

About This Book

Like most *For Dummies* books, *Home Maintenance For Dummies*, 3rd 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, consider it one of the most important reference tools in your home-maintenance arsenal — like your prized hammer or power drill that you pick up and use whenever necessary.

Each chapter is divided into sections, and each section offers instructions on a different 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 at once
- »» How to decide whether to do it yourself or hire a contractor

Who needs this book? Everyone — no matter if your home is new or, like mine, was built in the last century! 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, I've set up a few conventions:

- »» *Italics* are used for emphasis and to highlight new words or terms that I define.
- »» **Boldface** indicates the actionable part of numbered steps.

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

What You're Not to Read

This book is written so that you can easily find information and easily understand what you find. And although I'd like to believe that you want to pore over every last word between the two yellow-and-black covers, I 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, I'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 the tools 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 drill/driver 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 1: 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, I 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 2: 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. For you to be comfortable inside your home, its exterior must be secure and in sound condition. Turn to this part to discover how easily you can maintain your home's exterior.

Part 3: Key Systems — Plumbing and HVAC (Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning)

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 4: 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 most of the tasks contained in this part, you'll be light-years ahead of the home-maintenance curve. Part 4 helps you patch walls, quiet floors, unstick doors, cure cabinet woes, and fix fireplaces. And, as an added bonus, you'll find out 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 5: Out in the Great Wide Open

If Part 4 contains all the stuff that you see everyday *in* your home, Part 5 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. For-

tunately, Part 5 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 6: The Part of Tens

In this part, you'll 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. You'll also find out about the ten home-maintenance skills you need to keep your home in tip-top shape, plus ten smart home products that I think will add value and convenience to your home ownership experience.

Icons Used in This Book

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



REMEMBER

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



TIP

The Tip icon represents your basic good idea or trick-of-the-trade. It's what you wish somebody told you before you found out the hard way. I'm that somebody.



WARNING

Kidding aside for this icon. I use this icon to steer you clear of things *not* to do! It points out dangers and health hazards you should be aware of.

Beyond the Book

In addition to the pages you're reading right now, this book comes with a free access-anywhere cheat sheet that offers a number of home-maintenance-related pearls of wisdom. To get this cheat sheet, visit www.dummies.com and type **home maintenance for dummies cheat sheet** in the Search box.

Where to Go from Here

This book is organized so that you can go wherever you want to find complete information. Did your roof spring a leak? 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 can start with Part One — 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!

1 Home Maintenance and You

IN THIS PART . . .

See why maintenance matters to your health and your wallet.

Get a handle on how your house systems work, and how to keep them working.

Put together a workable home maintenance plan.

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

Chapter **1**

Home Maintenance: What It Is and Why It Matters

I grew up in a house that was built by my great-grandfather way back in 1886, and I'm proud to say that it's where my wife and I raised three children and still call home today. Luckily for me, my ancestors must have been pretty handy over the years, taking on painting, plumbing, roofing, 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. Home maintenance needs shift by house age, and modern building materials perform better than those used in years past. In this chapter, I 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.

Personally, I find home maintenance projects to be good therapy, minus the therapist and comfy couch. Completing always leaves me with a sense of accomplishment. If that's you, pull up an empty spackle bucket and sit yourself down for an enjoyable read about the world of home maintenance.

From little to big

As you approach maintenance, you have to stay on top of your to-do list to keep little problems from becoming big trouble. It's smart to keep everything looking good, and keeping your home's systems working efficiently also makes financial sense.



REMEMBER

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 \$15 brush, and a \$5 paint roller. 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. My 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. You'll also build skills as you go and become more empowered to take on larger jobs.

Medium-size projects — like 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, leveling a floor, or 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. You may think you know how to build a deck, even if you've never done it before. However, 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 the folks who listen to my *Money Pit* radio show or podcast are homeowners who've taken on projects that are way beyond their expertise, require the purchase of expensive tools, and take 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.



TIP

I once had a caller to my show ask for help with a plumbing project — after his fifth trip to the hardware store. He figured if he could get a project done in less than five trips, it was worth it before calling a pro! While I don't share his viewpoint, the key takeaway is that your time has a value, and you can waste a whole lot if a seemingly simple project gets the best of you!

The chapters in Parts 2 through 5 contain many of the most common small and medium-size maintenance tasks that you can tackle yourself. And when a task really should be left to a pro, I 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 2, 3, and 4.

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 I devote entire sections of Chapters, 5, 6 and 16 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 poorly maintained furnace can leak deadly carbon monoxide gas, a leading cause of poisoning deaths in the United States.
- » A smoke detector with a dead battery doesn't work — it's literally playing with fire.
- » A clogged gutter can lead to cracked foundations, flooded basements, and the growth of toxic mold.
- » 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.
- » 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.

Simple home maintenance can prevent these disasters and make your house a safer place to live for you and your family. For example, replacing your smoke detector with a new ten-year model that never needs a new battery takes 15 minutes and could prevent you from losing your home, a pet, or a loved one, not to mention years of those annoying low-battery chirps!