



Converting garages into livable spaces

Many people decide to upgrade from their apartments or condominiums out of a need for more space. But even after moving into a new home, homeowners may soon begin to outgrow the room they have.

Rather than looking for a new home, some homeowners consider expansion. Expanding a living space can be expensive, and a more affordable option may be converting existing basement or garage space into something more livable. Garages already are built on a foundation, have four walls

and a roof overhead, so a garage-conversion project is merely a matter of turning this utilitarian area into a living space.

Before beginning the renovation, homeowners should consider the benefits versus the cost of converting the garage. For those who are planning to grow old in a house, a garage conversion can be a worthy investment. But those who intend to sell their homes rather than retire in them may learn that a converted garage can affect home value and make it less desirable at resale.



Compare your home to others in the area and see what your neighbors have done. If converted garages are the norm where you live, your own renovation may fit in with others.

Always apply for the proper permits and learn the zoning laws to see if a garage conversion is acceptable in your town or city. It's best to go by the book so that work can be done in a proper manner and be inspected for safety.

Many homeowners hope their garage-conversion projects will make their garages seem like a seamless part of the rest of the house. To do so, you will need to remove evidence the space was once a garage. Slab floor will need to be raised and insulated. Walls also will need to be insulated and finished to improve comfort and sound-proofing. Many garages do not have windows, so for the garage to function as a renovated space, windows may need to be added.

One of the biggest transformations will come by way of modifying the garage door entry. Some homeowners prefer to leave the existing door so that the home still has the appearance of a garage from the curb, while others remove the garage door and rebuild the exterior wall so that it has a window or another architectural element. An architect can help suggest design elements that

will camouflage the original garage look and make the space seem like it was always part of the main living area of the home.

Landscaping work also can minimize the appearance of an old garage. Rather than having the driveway end at the wall of a home, shrubbery, pavers and other techniques can blend the garage renovation into the rest of the yard design.

Transforming a garage into a living space can add several hundred square feet to a home. Hire a reputable contractor and follow the municipal guidelines for modifying the space to ensure the job is done right.

Tips to finding the right contractor

Home improvement projects tend to be costly. Because of the considerable financial investment homeowners must make when improving their homes, it's important to find a contractor you can trust and feel comfortable with.

The vast majority of professional contractors are trustworthy and willing to work with homeowners to help them design the homes of their dreams. But there are still some tips homeowners can keep in mind as they begin their search for a contractor.

- Work only with licensed contractors. Licensed contractors have been verified as legitimate by your local governing body, removing much of the fears homeowners have with regard to finding trustworthy contractors. Unlicensed contractors may not be insured or bonded, and their estimates may be lower than their licensed competitors' because they do not contribute to unemployment. Licensed contractors often are subjected to criminal background checks as well, calming homeowners' fears about inviting strangers into their homes.
- Ask for recommendations. Word-of-mouth is great when looking for contractors. Oftentimes, a contractor's best friends are his past clients. Ask friends or neighbors for recommendations on local contractors, inquiring about prices as well as each particular contractor's demeanor and openness to suggestions. Contact your local Office of Consumer Affairs to check each contractor's complaint history.
- Get written estimates. Before hiring a particular firm, get written estimates from several contractors. Some contractors will charge fees for the estimate, but they must inform you of those fees before the estimates are provided. Compare estimates so you can get a better grasp of how much your project will cost. While cost is important, try to avoid choosing a contractor based on cost alone, as a good rapport with a contractor who may be more expensive might make

■ **CONTRACTOR,**
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End-of-summer checklist

After a few months of blue skies and warm temperatures, summer revelers will soon bid adieu to the sultry days of this beloved season. Summer is often a season filled with vacations and recreation, but as the warm days dwindle and work and school commitments begin anew, there is additional work to be done in preparation for the months ahead.

- * Stock up on pool equipment. Homeowners who have pools can take advantage of end-of-season sales to purchase a few more gallons of pool chlorine or other pool equipment. Store them after you have winterized the pool, and you will be ahead of the game in terms of supplies for next year.
- * Plan your garden harvest. If you have a backyard garden, pick your tomatoes and other vegetables before the weather starts to get chilly. Herbs can be washed and frozen in zipper-top baggies so they can be used when cooking over the next several months. Boil tomatoes for sauce and freeze or jar them. Begin to clear out residual stems and plant debris from the garden.
- * Clean patios and furniture. Scrub and hose down outdoor furniture, cushions and living areas. Clean and dry items before storing them for the winter, so everything is ready to go when the warm weather returns next year.
- * Purchase spring bulbs. Buy bulbs for spring-blooming flowers and map out where they will be planted for beautiful flowers next year. Wait until temperatures start to dip before planting the bulbs, otherwise they may begin to produce shoots prematurely, zapping the bulbs of energy.
- * Check the heating system. Although turning on the heat may be the last thing you're thinking about, it's a good idea to test it and, if necessary, have the system serviced prior to the arrival of cold weather.
- * Tend to the deck and other repairs. Make repairs to outdoor structures now, and they'll be more likely to survive the harsh weather that's just over the horizon. Apply stain or sealant to further protect wood structures in advance of snow and ice.
- * Examine the roof and chimney. Winter is a poor time to learn you have missing roof shingles or a leak. Furthermore, ensure the chimney and venting to the outdoors is not obstructed by abandoned animal nests.
- * Check your closets. Go through clothing and remove any items that are damaged or no longer fit, donating them if possible. Clean out kids' closets as well, as pants that fit perfectly in May will not necessarily fit come September.
- * Stock the shed. Once the weather has cooled down, move outdoor flower pots, hoses and lawn ornaments you no longer need into the shed or garage while ensuring items needed in fall and winter, such as rakes, snow shovels and snowblowers, are more accessible.



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