

Renovating in December



As you probably would have guessed, December is not the most popular month to start a home improvement project, such as remodeling, decorating or renovating.

Yet, there are many good reasons why you should consider it.

- There are a lot of sales at home improvement centers in December. It's a low-activity month and stores are often eager to sell off inventory before the new year.
- Contractors and other professionals may be more readily available to consult with you and even start the job. Their busy season is the spring and summer, so they tend to have more time available in the winter months.
- If you have remaining work vacation days available, you may have more time this month to get a project started. (Of course, you might want to use that time for a vacation or for time with family and friends instead!)
- Getting a project started now gives you a head-start. You'll complete it in the earlier part of 2012 and therefore enjoy the results – new hardwood floors, a renovated bathroom, a redecorated office – sooner.

Do a Financial Scavenger Hunt

Say you incurred a minor medical expense last spring. Would you be able to find the receipt quickly if you needed it?

When it comes to financial paperwork – receipts, insurance policies, bank statements, etc. – some people are more organized than others. But all of us can benefit from an end-of-year “scavenger hunt” to make sure we know where all our financial records are located.

After all, you never know when you will need to quickly locate an important document. Plus, most of us have had the frenzied experience of rummaging through drawers and files trying to find an important receipt during tax season.

Just as May is the ideal month to clean out



the garage, December is the perfect month to locate all your receipts and documents.

Doing this in December also gives you the opportunity to replace lost records if need be. You don't want to wait until the tax filing deadline to try to get a company to replace a missing receipt!

Dealing with documents isn't fun for most people. But if you think of it as a holiday season scavenger hunt, it might make the task seem a little easier.

The 2 Keys to Achieving Your Goals in



It's a tradition to set goals and make New Year's resolutions during the month of December. Unfortunately, it's also a tradition to let those goals slip away by spring.

There are many books, programs and other resources on setting and achieving goals – many of them are very good. However, according to recent studies by social scientists, there are two goal achieving strategies that have the highest likelihood of helping you succeed.

In fact, according to the research, if you don't use these two strategies, your

chances of reaching your goal go down significantly.

Key #1: Set a project goal, not a dream goal.

Want to quit smoking in 2012? Do you dream of the day you can go to a party and not crave a cigarette? That's a typical dream goal: “On May 1, 2012, I'll be a non-smoker.”

But a project goal has a much greater chance of success. A project goal is focused on what you'll do rather than what you'll achieve. If you want to stop smoking, for example, a project goal might be: “Complete a 12-week smoking cessation program.”

Key #2: Don't go it alone.

The evidence is overwhelming. If you have the support of a friend, group, or professional, your chances of accomplishing your goal go way up. Getting support can be as simple as finding a friend who has the same goal as you; hiring a coach or other professional; joining a group; or taking a course.

Protecting Yourself From Charity Fraud

It's evening, you just sat down for dinner, and the phone rings. It's a call from a charity asking you to make a holiday season donation for the needy. You want to be generous, but something about this call doesn't seem quite right. You're suspicious.

You should be.

“Charity scams” – people pretending to be charities to get your money or steal your identity – are most active during December.

In fact, according to a recent study commissioned by a credit card company, 18% of people have been a victim, or know someone who has been a victim of charity fraud.



While you may want to support legitimate charities during the holiday season, how do you ensure your money is going to a worthy cause, and not into the pocket of a scam artist?

Here are some recommended guidelines.

- Be suspicious of high pressure tactics. Few, if any, legitimate charities will try to “hard sell” you to make a donation.
- If you're solicited by phone or at the door, always ask for the charity's legal name and registration number.
- Ask for a receipt. Check that the charity's registration number is on it.
- Make your payment to the legal name of the charity and no one else. If using a credit card, check that the charity's name is printed on the slip before you sign it. Avoid cash donations.
- To check if a charity is registered (and therefore legitimate) go to www.irs.gov or www.cra-arc.gc.ca. Do a search for “Charity Listings” and follow the instructions.