

Sell Your Home In Any Market!
A Guide for Preparing Your Home for Sale

By
Monica Murphy, Preferred Staging LLC

In partnership with
Margo Lockard, Associate Broker
ERA Elite Group, Realtors

Preferred Staging the art of home
preparation



Preparing Your Home: Common Knowledge is Only Part of It

Common knowledge has it that sprucing up your home prior to putting it on the market is a wise investment. What is less understood by home sellers is what “sprucing up” entails for the current real estate environment. Unless you understand buyers’ requirements today, your home will take longer to sell and may sell for less than its potential. This means thousands – or tens of thousands of dollars – lost!

So, what is different today than 10 years ago? First, in today’s market, there is a surplus of homes for sale. The competition is intense and buyers can be VERY selective. Second, with the dramatic increase in the cost of homes over the last decade, the vast majority of buyers are two-income families. These buyers do not have the leisure to repaint, have new carpeting installed or remove wall paper. They want their new home to be in move-in condition, and they have sufficient options on the market to find what they are looking for.

The good news is that it is never too late to begin. Even if your home is already on the market, you can make simple changes that will dramatically improve your home’s market potential. If you have more time, then more can be done. No matter what your situation, this guide will help you identify where to start and what to do.

Here’s the Evidence

Before we begin the home preparation discussion, let’s take a look at some evidence:

- Properly preparing a home for sale provides a 343% return on investment [HomeGain](#)
- Prepared homes sell 4 times faster [Kiplinger](#)
- When a home is well prepared, it spends 50% less time on the market [Quicken](#)
- Home preparation results in faster sale [USA Today](#)
- Few shoppers get beyond their first impression [Money](#)
- Prospective home buyers form an opinion about your home in 15 seconds [MSN](#)

Approach the Process from the Buyer’s Perspective

Let’s pretend that you are in the market to buy a home. You visited two houses on the same street. The homes were exactly identical in terms of price, finish materials, view, etc.

One home had personal collections displayed in several rooms, one of the bedrooms was painted purple and there was so much furniture, it was hard to find someplace to stand back and take in the whole room. The other home was free of personal items, had neutral paint, and just enough furnishings to get a feel for the room’s size without being overwhelmed.

Question: Which home would be tops on your list?

Most home buyers will say the latter home; the home with neutral décor, just enough furniture and not too many personal items. You see, when a buyer enters a home, they need to be able to *imagine how they would live* in the home. Many homes on the market today have too many personal elements and overcrowded rooms to allow a potential buyer's imagination to wander. Put simply, if the buyer cannot picture themselves in the home, they will not buy it!

Preparing the Home for Sale

Preparing your home for sale may be the best money you spend this year! It does not cost much to place special touches on a home prior to sale and the returns can be significant.

Preparing a home for sale is the process of decorating your home for the buyers, not for yourself. There are distinct differences between how you live in a home and how it must be prepared for sale. A properly prepared home will show better than similarly situated homes in the area, increasing the chance for a fast sale.

If your home is currently on the market, appropriately priced, but not generating interest, or if you are thinking of selling your home in the future, this guide can make the difference.

So let's get started! This guide is constructed with three distinct types of home owners in mind:

1. Those who are planning on selling their home in the distant future – say six months or more
2. Home owners who are preparing their homes to be listed within one or two months
3. Sellers just weeks away from listing their homes or with homes currently on the market

Along the way, we will discuss different areas of buyer interest and opportunities to make your home more desirable to the largest number of home buyers. You are encouraged to read all the sections and recommendations. The recommendations certainly carry over from one category to the other.

Now, let's get your home ready!

Six months before listing your home...

If you have decided to sell your home and have six months or more, you need an action plan. Many would determine that because they have time, they do not need to start right away. Our advice to you is to start immediately and do a little every week to prepare for

your sale. After all, this will be one of the biggest financial transactions of your life. Small things now may generate significant returns later.

Curb Appeal: Curb appeal is a potential buyer's first impression when they drive up to your home. The curb appeal of the home can say one of two things, "Come on in, you will like what you see," or "Hey, I may need a little work." We definitely want the former.

Start your project by taming any unruly trees or shrubs. If you have overgrown plants or trees, they will block buyer's view of your home. There is an old adage in real estate, "If you can't see it, you can't sell it." With months to go, prune or remove plants that are blocking the view of your home from the street. Pruning or removing plants now provides ample opportunity for the pruned plants to recover and new plantings to settle into the landscape.



Add plantings to the front of the home to build focus on your front door if you have a centered entrance, or to balance your home if the entrance is on a side. You do not have time to wait for the plants to mature, so buy mature plants and plant them as close together as practical. Tiered plantings (lower to higher) create a dramatic effect as they draw the eye up the lawn and onto the house. Seed the lawn and water

liberally. Nothing shows off a home like a lush green lawn.

Walk all the way around your home and look for faulty lumber and chipping or peeling paint. Keep an eye out for loose gutters or downspouts. Inspect your deck, patio or any other exterior structure for signs of weathering. Now is the time to spruce up the exterior!

Inside the Home: The first priority is to finish any lingering projects. Don't start any new construction projects if you are the type that takes a while to complete them. The one exception here is if you know there is something that might block the sale of your home, like a basement moisture issue or leaky faucets – get those done. This is not the time to learn new skills, so bring in professionals if necessary.

Buyers today want lots of light in their home. Look at your **window treatments**. Do they block most of the light? Have they been up for more than 10 years? You may want to

replace them. Don't go for anything elaborate. Simple and neutral is the order of the day. Inexpensive treatments are widely available. Make sure they allow maximum light into the home.

Now let's consider **paint and wall coverings**. A fresh coat of paint is one of the least expensive ways to improve the marketability of your home. The biggest mistake home owners make when they are preparing their home is to put on a fresh coat of whatever color was currently there. Maybe the paint color is fine, but you need to objectively ask yourself: is the paint on the wall what 90% of potential buyers would like? Or, did we select this color because it really felt like the right personal decision? It is hard to be objective on this, as paint is not only very personal, but it grows on you over time and blends into the background. Take a look at some home design magazines – try to find your colors in the photos. If you can't, better find a new color.



Wallpaper will almost certainly need to be removed or painted over. Wallpaper is always a very personal decision and it is highly unlikely, no matter how nice, that someone else will have the exact same taste as you. Get rid of it. Some wallpaper can accept paint, but the surface needs proper preparation, so please consult a professional.

Summary: With several months before you list your home, you have plenty of time to tackle the bigger tasks, such as painting, repairing the inside and pruning and planting on the outside.

Two months before listing your home...

Two months away from listing your home for sale... What to do? What to do? First, relax. You have time, but we definitely want to pick up the pace of activity. We suggest doing something small EVERY day. If you miss a day, don't sweat it, but you need consistent activity at this stage to maximize your home's market potential.

Maximize your **curb appeal** by lightly pruning shrubs. Don't get too aggressive here; an overgrown bush looks better than one that has been pruned to within an inch of its life. Removing the worst offenders and replacing them with smaller plantings can take as little as a day, and will be well worth the effort. Put down fresh mulch and plant some flowers

that will retain their blooms for the next several months. Even in the colder months, you can plant winter pansies.

If you have not read the section on **paint and wallpaper** in the Six Month Plan above, please do so. This is still your first priority inside.



After the appearance of the walls, your next priority should be to **de-personalize** your home. This may be the most difficult part of the home preparation process. It is time to put your emotional attachment to your treasures aside and start packing for your move. Box all or your collections and, remove family photos from tables and walls.



Clear your refrigerator of all decorative magnets, etc. Look around each room. For *every* visible item, ask yourself, “Would a model home have this?” If the answer is “No,” it needs to go.

We go through the same process with what we call “clutter”. **Clutter** is loosely defined as objects that distract buyers from focusing their attention on your home. Clutter might be overstuffed bookshelves, pantries that are full of goodies, garages that can no longer accommodate cars, even closets that could not accommodate another article of clothing, etc. Once again, view this as a start to packing for your move, so de-cluttering is a very positive step in your preparation!

By the time that you have de-personalized and de-cluttered, you will probably have a lot of stuff that needs to be **stored**, sold, or given away. For storage, consider having a portable storage unit delivered to your home. That way, as you pack a box, you can walk it right into the unit. The unit can usually be delivered directly to your new home for easy unpacking.

Holding a yard sale is always a great way to get rid of your excess possessions, but please keep the big picture in mind. If a yard sale will take one weekend to plan, and another to execute, our opinion is that you would be better off giving your things away and taking the tax write-off. The few hundred dollars you **MAY** produce from a yard sale may cost you a few thousand dollars if the time could have been spent on additional home preparation activities.

While you are packing up your personal effects, consider how much stepping around furniture you are doing. If you constantly have to watch your step as you are moving

around the house, you may have too much furniture. **Excess furniture** in a room will make the room appear smaller.

Find another location in your home for excess pieces of furniture. Maybe you can store some of your older furniture and move some of the nicer pieces throughout the home.



Summary: With two months to go before your listing date, curb appeal and walls are still the number one priorities. After that, start to pack for your move. Box up all of your personal effects, collections and clutter and put it into storage outside of your home.

My home is just about to go, or already is, on the market...

Congratulations! You are on your way to selling your home. Even if your home is already on the market, it is not too late to prepare your home for the next visitors! At this stage of the game, we focus on cleanliness and presentation, and then we work backwards into the two month and six month strategies.

Start with the all important **curb appeal**. Keep the grass watered and mowed. Mow twice a week during the fast growing season – we want buyers to think country club! Add some potted plants near the door for color and to make the front entrance more inviting. Be sure to have a new mat at the front door. If buyers see an old and worn mat at the door, what is that telling them about the interior? Also, a new mat will help to keep dirt from entering your house, which will help in keeping it clean.

Your first order of business inside the house is **cleanliness**. Your home needs to look like no one has ever lived there. This is especially true for the kitchen and bathrooms. Nothing personal here, but if your home is not clean, it will not sell. Nothing will turn off a buyer faster than dirt. It raises all sorts of questions as to how well the home was maintained and whether the buyer will ever be able to get the images of the sink full of breakfast dishes or the mold in the shower out of their heads...buyers will move on to a home that leaves them with pleasant thoughts.

Next, make sure that all **personal care items** are put away in the bathrooms. A countertop full of makeup and deodorant or hair gel prevents the buyer from imagining

this very personal space as their own. The counters must be IMMACULATE – I mean nothing on them at all! Make sure clean towels are neatly folded on the rods.

Make beds and put away laundry every day. Again, we are going for the “**no one lives here**” image. Buyers need to imagine them living there, not imagining what you are like. While we are on the topic of bedrooms, if necessary, upgrade your **bedding** in the master bedroom. Inexpensive bed sets are readily available; try to keep the colors neutral and avoid busy patterns. The master bedroom should be an oasis of rest and relaxation, so get rid of the exercise equipment, work things and the TV.

If painting is necessary, you are better off doing it and doing it quickly. Hire some painters – make sure they will show up with a team and can paint an entire home in a few days. Do it during the week to minimize the chance of interfering with potential buyers.



After you have cleaned and are making your everyday existence invisible to potential buyers, start working backwards on the plans above. Start with the Two Month plan and improve your curb appeal, then move inside and de-clutter and de-personalize.

Summary: If you are just about to list your home, or if your home is already on the market, it is not too late to improve its sale potential. Increase your curb appeal, and then move inside. Start with cleanliness, remove all personal hygiene and cosmetic products and make your master bedroom an oasis with plush bedding. These improvements take just a few days and will dramatically improve the impression your home will make on potential buyers.

About the Author: Monica Murphy is an expert in preparing a home for sale. As an Accredited Home Stager (ASP) with a Masters Degree in Art and Architectural History, Monica brings a unique perspective to her clients as she guides them through the various steps of preparing to sell their home.

As President of Preferred Staging (www.preferredstaging.com), Monica and her team focus on an integrated marketing strategy with the home owner’s listing agent. Preferred Staging serves the entire Washington DC metro area, including Northern Virginia, Washington, DC, and suburban Maryland.

If you need guidance or assistance in preparing your home, Monica can be reached by phone at 703.851.2690 or email at monica@preferredstaging.com.