

## **At home: Make your house the 'hottie' on the block**

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I want a T-shirt that reads: "Don't judge me by my curb appeal." Or maybe a tattoo. I'm tired of making excuses for my front yard.

Last month, Lisa LaPorta - that gal on HGTV's "Designed to Sell" who makes a BIG DEAL out of how a home should look when you drive up - came over. I almost got hives. This week a local TV producer stopped by to talk about my doing a home improvement segment. I think he really wanted to scout out my house to see if I knew what I was talking about.

If I haven't made this clear, just because I know what to do doesn't mean I do what I know. (Another T-shirt I need.) I mean, if everyone did what they knew they should do, the world would be full of vegetable-eating, sunscreen-wearing, physically fit, nonsmoking, kind people with good hygiene who floss daily.

I know curb appeal is important. And I will get to it, after we fund college, pay off the cars and finish helping the orthodontist pay for his curb appeal.

Meanwhile, I feel I should come home wearing a stocking cap to avoid ugly rumors.

"Isn't that where that home columnist lives?"

"Can't be."

"A shame."

I almost had curb appeal once. Last summer, my husband, Dan, and I finally had some money for landscaping. I lobbied to fix the front yard. He lobbied for the back.

"But the front yard is what everybody sees," I argued.

"The backyard is what I see."

This only begins to cover the many different ways we view the world.

However, early in our 20-year marriage, we made a pact. Whenever we don't agree on a home improvement, I get the last word on the inside; he

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gets the last word on the outside. So the backyard looks better, but - sorry neighbors - the front has to wait.

I confess all this to Mike Aubrey, a Realtor for Re/Max Metropolitan Realty, in Gaithersburg, Md., and co-host of HGTV's "Real Estate Intervention." He put the whole mess in perspective: "A house is like a marriage. It requires constant work to keep the romance between you two alive."

"Man, have I let things slide."

"You have to continually re-evaluate what you can do to make the relationship better, and rekindle the feeling it inspired when you first moved in."

"How does this relate to curb appeal?"

"First impressions! To attract a mate, you have to put your best self forward. Especially in today's market, buyers can be really picky. Many won't get out of the car if the house doesn't grab them within eight seconds."

"What if your home isn't for sale?"

"Pride of ownership - or its lack - is always absolutely evident."

"Honey," I say to Dan, after spritzing on some perfume. "I want to spice up our marriage."

His eyebrows make a teepee.

"Starting with our front yard."

According to the National Association of Realtors, boosting curb appeal is one investment you're almost guaranteed to recoup. Here are Aubrey's top 10 curb-appeal tips:

- **Take a fresh look.** After living in a house, it's easy - and convenient - to stop noticing what needs fixing. For sellers in denial, Aubrey, known for his tough-talking approach to real estate, shows the seller pictures of competing homes, and says: "Buddy, if I were a buyer picking which home to see, yours would come in last."

- **View your house as a portrait.** Create a composition where everything - hardscape, softscape, entryway, exterior walls and roof - works together. Have the big picture before you proceed.

- **Green up the grass.** If it's brown, or has bald spots, fix it. While you're at it, prune, weed and clean up the rest of the yard.

- **Fill flower beds.** Plant flowers and shrubs that will look good now and later. That is, after summer annuals go, have something in planters that will bloom or change color in fall. Tier planters so taller shrubs are in back, smaller ones in front.

- **Refresh paint.** If you can't afford to paint the whole house, at least repaint the trim. Make doors and windows pop. "If a buyer walks up to a door that's beat, they think, 'This is a project house.'" That can kill a deal.

- **Color it carefully.** Pick a palette that conforms to the neighborhood yet sets your house apart - a fine but critical line. "Neutral isn't the same as boring," says Aubrey, adding, "Don't be that house where people drive by and say, 'What happened here?'"

- **Revisit your approach.** Design a welcome path from street to door, which should be the focus. Punch up walkways and driveways. If replacing them with good-looking pavers is out of the budget, add a stone or brick border. Fix or replace uneven or boring walkways.

- **Add polish.** If your outdoor light fixtures look weathered, or your door handle looks worn, repaint or replace them. Shiny, new metal makes people say, "Oooo."

- **Tend to the little small stuff.** Simple details like new address numbers, a new doorbell, a handsome mailbox and a fresh doormat say you care.

- **Add an element.** A pediment over the entry, an upgraded front door, a cover over the porch or some columns can add major drama for less money than you'd think.

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