

As the welcome spring sunshine shows up every smear, crack, chip, stain, mould spore and dust particle, it's time to give your home — which has sheltered you through the long, hard winter — a spot of TLC. You may not be sprucing it up for selling, and you may not have the energy for decluttering, but homes are like living organisms. Bits fall off or go wrong; cracks open up, damp insinuates, veteran piping groans, or it all, frankly, just looks a bit tired.

Yet there are plenty of inexpensive improvements you can make, both structural and cosmetic. Here's our guide to giving your home a spring MOT.

1 Renew bathroom seals

After a while, the sealant between baths, shower trays, basins and tiled walls becomes discoloured, infested with mould or even a source of leaks. Restoring seals is an easy weekend job, says Steph Bron, co-founder of the DIY Doers Club (thedydoers.com). "Remove all the old sealant using a Stanley knife, taking care not to make holes in the bath or shower tray. Clean the area, then apply masking tape in two straight lines either side of where you want to apply the new sealant.

"A good-quality product can make all the difference. I'm a sealant snob and I use Dow Corning Sanitary Silicone Sealant. It is antibacterial and lasts a long time." Don't forget



Rotating your paintings every few months can make your space feel as fresh as new

to apply the new sealant with the bath full of cold water — the weight will ensure that the sealant doesn't crack.

2 Encourage wildlife, especially bees

Honey bees are under threat due to industrial farming techniques, pesticides and loss

of habitat, so make sure your patch of ground, no matter how small, is bee-friendly.

"Just one square foot of pollinator plants will attract the bees," says Sarah Wyndham Lewis, author of *Planting for Honey Bees* (Hardie Grant £12). "Plant herbs that you, and the bees,



Indoor houseplants tend to acquire dust over the winter so summer is a good time to clean them
ALAMY

can feed off.

“Honey bees will only forage on one type of food, so if you have a small space, don’t plant four different herbs, but four times one herb. The best are chives, oregano and rosemary, which is hardy and a symbol of a happy house.”

3 Hire a drone for a roof and chimney inspection

We are mostly blissfully unaware of what might be lurking on the roof, from broken tiles to peeled-back flashings, chimneys in need of repointing and birds nesting

in nooks and crannies.

Shimmying up a long ladder is dangerous and hiring a cherry-picker for a day is expensive, but technology can come to our aid in the form of a drone fitted with a high-definition camera. You need to follow Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) rules, so it’s best to hire a drone and pilot from a CAA-certified operator.

You’ll also need permission from your neighbours and special consent in city centres. But the benefits are enormous, according to Darren Spinks, director of Drone My Business

(dronemybusiness.co.uk):

“You get high-resolution video from a 30-minute survey costing between £120 and £175. The strength of the camera lens means we can detect even the smallest cracks in chimney pointing.”

4 Damp is a silent destroyer

The main cause is poor ventilation: telltale signs are condensation on windows or pools of water on sills. If you have a more serious problem, there may be a musty aroma or black mould on some windows. Conduct a tour of

your home, checking for culprits such as blocked airbricks and gutters choked with weeds or leaves. Laminate fitted too tightly over wooden floors can stop air from circulating freely around the boards, causing damp and dry rot.

Once the cause has been identified and dealt with, you may need to keep the heating on at a low, constant temperature to dry out the damp. If it is in a cellar, run a storage heater permanently (again at a low, constant heat), to keep the air free of moisture.

5 Locate and inspect your stopcock

It's surprising how many people don't know where their stopcock is, Bron says. "Keeping it in good working order can save you hundreds of pounds of water damage in the event of a burst pipe. Turn it every six months to stop it seizing up." Close it (righty-tighty), then open it again (lefty-loosey), but don't keep it fully open — give it a turn or half a turn to the right.

6 Refresh cushions and other soft furnishings

Replacing a set of sofa cushions or a throw can bring pleasure far beyond the fairly modest outlay. "Adding small decorative touches to a home is following the instinct of prehistoric cave-dwellers when they created wall paintings," says Witold Rybczynski, author of several



Your woodburner will probably need some cleaning too
ANDREW BROOKES/GETTY

award-winning books, including *Home: A Short History of an Idea*. "It marks the place as one's own, as somewhere different from the wild outside. The trick is not to overdo it. Sometimes a vase of fresh flowers is enough."

7 Fix reluctant or jammed wooden drawers

Years of central heating can seriously warp wooden chests of drawers, and after a while they can stick when you try to open and close them. Empty the drawer, pull it out and rub a candle along the base where

it fits into the chest. This should smooth the running. Take care not to yank too hard when you first open it after treatment.

8 Get your boiler serviced now

While most people wait until November or December to get their boilers looked at, it is best to do it just before the summer shutdown, when engineers are less busy. Make sure the service is carried out by someone on the Gas Safe Register.

While you're thinking about the boiler, check the water pressure. Gauges and display panels vary depending on make and model, says Nick Bizley, operations director at Aspect property care (aspect.co.uk), but if the pressure drops below 1 bar, that indicates a possible leak — and it's better to get that sorted when the central heating's off.

9 Give your kitchen an update on a budget

"One of our most common queries is about how to refresh a kitchen without spending a fortune," Bron says. "One household material that has really improved in the past 10 years is tile paint. It used to come in limited colours and fairly poor quality. Now it adheres better to shiny surfaces." Her favourite for colour is Fusion Mineral Paint (£21 for 500ml; campbellscarousel.com). For a durable finish, she likes V33

(£33 for 2 litres; diy.com).

Remember that, if you use tile paint, you won't get the tile/grout contrast. And don't forget to wrap brushes in clingfilm between coats — this saves you from having to wash them and prevents drips.

10 Change up your paintings, photos and ornaments

Most of us keep the same pictures on the walls for years, yet have a host of old photographs, paintings and ornaments stored away in cupboards and lofts. We used to love them once, so why not again? Rybczynski says the Japanese tradition of rotating paintings every few months is a good one. "You get something fresh to look at, and works of art get to be admired."

11 Pack loose-fitting toilet roll and towel rail or hook fittings

Screw-in fittings that are fixed with wall plugs often come loose over time, as plaster and mortar crumble away. Pack the crevice with broken matchsticks or cocktail sticks until the wall plug is firmly fixed again.

12 Refresh indoor plants

Over the winter, your houseplants, particularly tropical ones with succulent leaves, will have acquired a thin coat of dust that prevents them from photosynthesising properly. On a warm day, stand the plants in the shower

(on a cold setting) for a few minutes, then let them dry off outside. They will love you for it.

13 Install a new roller blind in your kitchen

These don't cost much — some are less than £20 — and they can make all the difference in a room where cooking oil, greasy fingers and dead flies rapidly turn a blind shabby. Alternatively, buy roller-blind canvas at a fabric shop and keep the old roller.

14 Clean up your woodburner

With woodburners that pump out too much smoke set to be banned from sale, and new regulations to reduce particulate pollution from stoves, make sure yours is as efficient as possible.

Clear out the ash regularly and have the chimney and flue swept at least once a year — sweeps get booked up fast come autumn, so make your September appointment now. Ensure, too, that the wood you burn is bone-dry. You can test the water content of your logs with a moisture meter such as an Extech pin meter (extech.com; £40-£60 on Amazon).

Ash, horse chestnut and apple are the best types of wood to burn; pine produces a resinous residue. Buy logs now, before the autumn rush, and store them correctly so they don't get damp.

Opening images: Getty ■