

Now's the time to prepare for a spring sale

By Mary Ellen Slayter
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WASHINGTON — Haul away the Christmas tree and hang the for-sale sign.

Homeowners shouldn't dally if they want to sell their houses in spring, the peak season for real estate transactions, real estate agents say.

"If they know they want to move by summer, now is not too early to bring somebody in," said Barbara Nowak, an agent with Long & Foster in Burke, Va. **"Even by mid-January, more houses are listed and more buyers are looking."**

Now — not when the tulips are poking out of the ground — is the time to start de-cluttering, cleaning, making repairs, getting paperwork together and interviewing real estate agents.

Homeowners with a lot of junk can take two to four weeks just to get through this step, Nowak said, meaning now is the time to get rid of any books, videos or toys you don't use. "You can either donate them or put them away."

Jackie Von Schlegel, an agent with ReMax Allegiance in Washington, D.C., advises renting a storage space if need be.

"You want to make it look sparse but not empty," said James Brumfield, a Long & Foster agent in Baltimore. "Boxes should be out of sight. Keep workstations or hobby areas such as sewing machines organized and neat."

When cleaning, pay close attention to the stairs, molding, windows and appliances. Replace any old or missing light bulbs. "We get into many homes and the light bulbs are burned out," Nowak said.

Catch up on all the little fixes and maintenance you've let slide. You need to have someone else over to look at the house, perhaps a home inspector, Brumfield said. "A second pair of eyes can see something you've been purposely overlooking for years."

Homeowners should spend 1 percent to 1.5 percent of the value of the house maintaining it each year, said Chris Kelly, an agent with Long & Foster in College Park, Md. Items that he said frequently need attention: the heating and air-conditioning system, the water heater and carpets.

Painting can be done inside and out as long as it's not raining, Kelly said. "And it's easier to find contractors now, and at lower prices" than in the spring, he said.

Replacing light fixtures and faucets is another relatively inexpensive way to freshen up rooms, Nowak said.

And don't forget the outside, Brumfield said. "Everyone sees the inside of the house; nobody thinks to look at their roof." Sellers should consider having the roof inspected and certified to reassure buyers that it is in good repair, he said.

Though now is not the ideal time for planting, homeowners can research ways to improve the landscaping when things warm up. Mulch can spruce things up, but mainly you should keep the yard clean, Von Schlegel said.

Sellers should start pulling paperwork together. If there are mortgages on the property, call the lender or lenders and ask for payoff figures, including any penalties for paying the loan off early.

Kelly said sellers should list upgrades and repairs done in the past five years and gather warranties for appliances and the roof. Having that information in hand speeds up the process.

At some point, sellers must decide whether they want to bring in a professional agent. Give yourself time to interview at least three agents, Brumfield said. Kelly said two months is "barely enough time" for a busy family to get everything in order at a leisurely pace.

Brumfield, however, said 30 days before the listing date is sufficient: "We're not tea-leaf readers, but the market won't change too much in a month. Two to three months is just a waste of time. It won't help the seller, and the agent won't be too enthusiastic about doing it, either."

Courtesy of JB Goodwin