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HOMEOWNER'S UPDATE

Host a Patriotic Party

This year marks the 250th anniversary of American independence, and there's no better excuse to go all out with a star-spangled celebration. Here are some tips to help you host a patriotic party.

Food

Keep the menu "American classic" with a laid-back cookout. Fire up the grill for some tasty burgers, hot dogs or chicken. Throw on some corn, veggie skewers or peaches for healthy, grilled side options. If you have a smoker, slow-smoked barbecued ribs are sure to be a crowd-pleaser.

Ask guests to bring summer side dishes and desserts. If they ask for ideas, potato salad, baked beans and watermelon are traditional favorites. Plan a fun snack for the kids, like red or blue fruit-juice frozen pops or a Betsy Ross fruit pizza, and make sure someone brings a good old-fashioned apple pie.

Festivities

For party decor, stars and stripes are an easy option, but you can use anything red, white or blue. Tablecloths are both pretty and practical. If you're dining outside, add a festive centerpiece with a citronella candle or some mint plants to keep the bugs away.

Make an all-American playlist to set the background vibe. Classic yard games, like cornhole, Wiffle ball, touch football, or a water balloon toss, are fun for all ages. For the younger ones, plan a craft like American-themed friendship bracelets or set up a cookie-decorating station with patriotic frosting colors and sprinkles. Glow sticks, confetti poppers and bubbles are always a hit.

For the grown-ups, plan a few low-key activities, such as trivia or card games. For the more daring, karaoke or Jenga Giant will keep the whole crowd entertained.

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The Front Porch

The Original Social Network

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A welcoming front porch is a classic piece of American life. Beyond a practical home feature, it creates a space for connection, relaxation and experiencing everyday moments with the people and world around you.

It's more than a spot to leave muddy boots or wet umbrellas. A front porch offers guests room to linger and neighbors a place to stop and chat. Time spent on a porch lets you enjoy the sights and sounds of nature, providing a calming retreat from the stress of daily life.

Having a place to sit back and enjoy your neighborhood invites more face-to-face interactions with your community and opens the door to stronger relationships with the people around you. A friendly wave today could become a lasting friendship tomorrow.

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Refresh Your Landscape for Less

You don't need a big budget to make your yard turn heads. Try these wallet-friendly ideas to make your property the envy of the neighborhood.

- Fill window boxes with colorful flowers for a striking display.
- Disguise unsightly areas with tall grasses that also add texture and curb appeal.
- Choose perennials that will come back year after year, such as hostas, Russian sage and hydrangeas.
- Replace sections of your lawn with native plants and shrubs that require less upkeep.
- Consider xeriscaping — water-conscious landscaping — with drought-tolerant greenery to reduce watering.
- Swap traditional fertilizer for compost. Purchase it or create your own in a simple compost yard bin.
- Reduce lawn maintenance with ground cover, such as creeping thyme or clover.
- Plant trees with long-term focal points in mind to increase property value over time.
- Install raised flower beds to improve drainage, maintain soil quality and limit the spread of invasive weeds.
- Add mulch to give landscaping a uniform appearance, retain moisture and keep weeds at bay.
- Update your mailbox to reflect your home's style.

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Prepare To Save Time

Meal prep doesn't have to take longer than the meal itself. The right kitchen gadgets can cut down on chopping, blending and storing, turning time-consuming tasks into a quick, easy routine. Here are a few tools to help streamline the process.

- Shred vegetables, puree sauces or prep large batches of ingredients with a **food processor**.
- Slice and dice raw vegetables with a **veggie chopper or mandolin** for uniform results.
- Blend soups and sauces directly in the pot with an **immersion blender**.

- Toss your favorite roast into a **slow cooker** and return home hours later to a ready-to-eat meal.
- Organize and keep portions fresh for the upcoming week with **meal prep containers**.

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Betsy Ross Fruit Pizza

Ingredients

1 (16.5 oz.) pkg. refrigerated sugar cookie dough
1 (8 oz.) pkg. cream cheese, softened
2 cups heavy cream
1 cup powdered sugar
2 tsp. lemon zest
1 cup blueberries
2 cups raspberries

Directions

Preheat oven as directed on cookie dough package. Roll dough into a flat rectangle on 9x13-inch baking sheet. Bake until golden, about 10 minutes.

Beat cream cheese in a medium bowl for 2–3 minutes until smooth. In a separate bowl, whip heavy cream until peaks form. Gently fold whipped cream into cream cheese. Add powdered sugar and lemon zest. Mix until creamy. Cover and chill for 30 minutes.

Spread chilled mixture over cooled cookie pizza. Arrange blueberries and raspberries to resemble the American flag.



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