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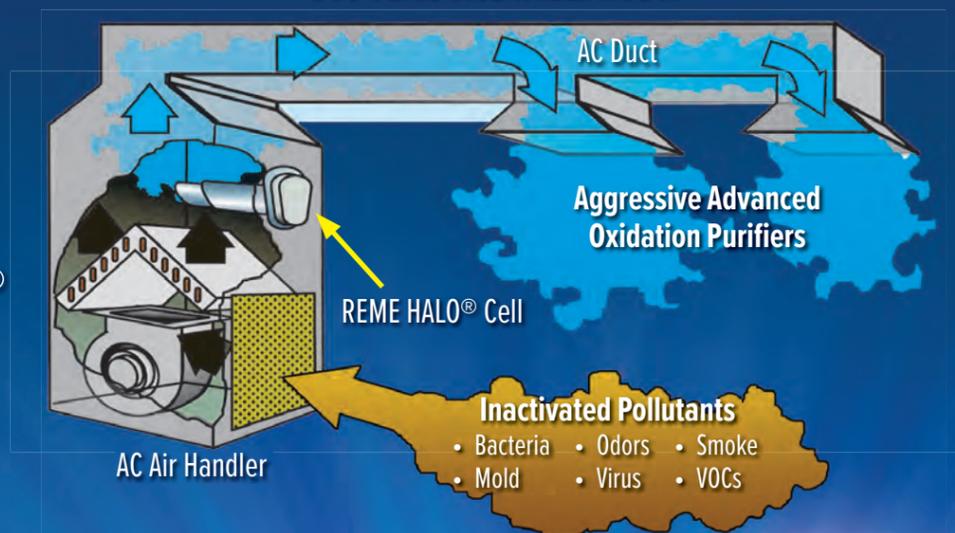
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# Your house is their house

We share our homes with nearly 200,000 species of life, and that's okay

John Burdick

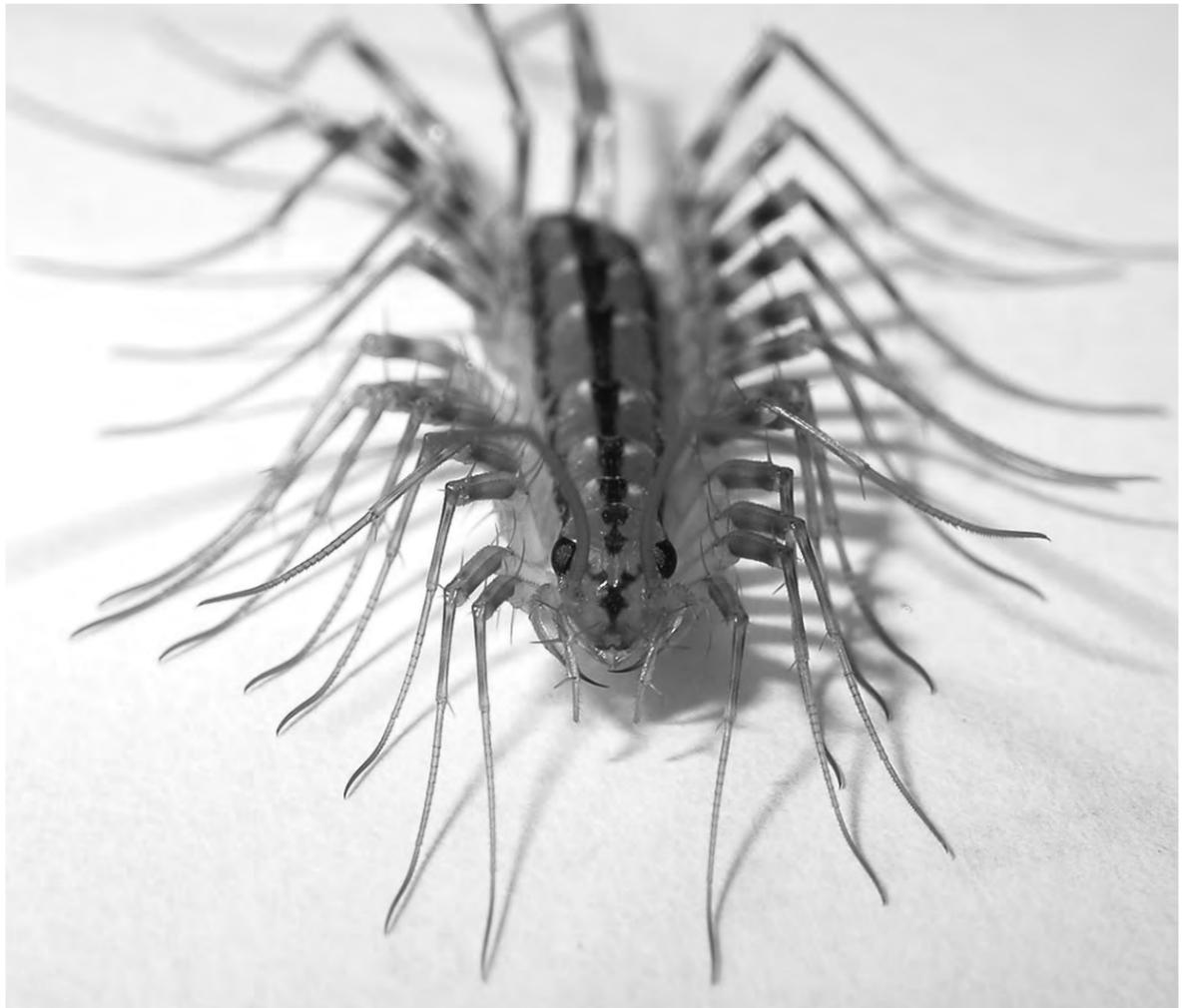
**T**WENTY YEARS AGO, I WORKED ON THE fringes of the pharmaceutical industry as a general-purpose writer and audio producer at a healthcare-focused Web development shop. I had no background in health sciences or medical communications (or general-purpose writing, or audio production, or the Web) and, indeed, probably would have been diagnosed with a cognitive deficit or developmental delay in those tech-heavy domains were such aptitudes measured. Even so, a crawling ticker of clinical trial reports and longitudinal studies became a regular if peripheral part of my days and my work. Over time I learned how to scan medical literature quickly and locate its relevant takeaways efficiently.

I remember the thrill I felt, a sudden and warm feeling of cosmic coherence, when two unrelated clinical reports flashed across my desk in proximity. The first confirmed the amply-documented heart benefits of alcohol — bittersweet news, as it always comes tempered by stern warnings on the liver front. The second, more speculative report suggested the salubrious effects of caffeine upon liver function. Oh, perfect world! Oh, golden bridge from dawn to dark, morning tonic and evening elixir that each doth mitigate the other! Let nature's taps flow freely and let us never doubt again that her code means us well, nor that instinct and appetite are our best guides.

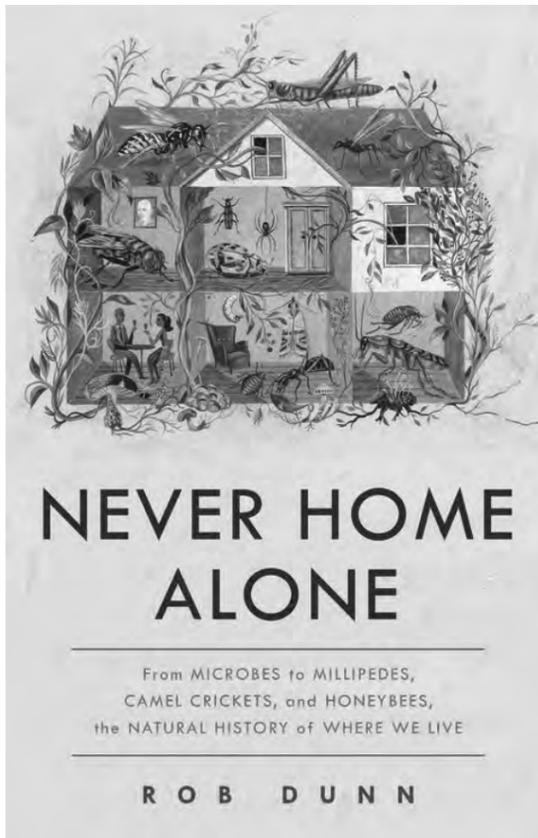
Here I go again, stumbling blindly into truth and mistaking best practices for bad habits. I have now learned that my rather high tolerance for sloth and my keep-it-simple-stupid choice not to sweat the invisible world of the microbial life that surrounds and engulfs is, in fact, virtuous and selfless, if not heroic. Good on me. I discovered this accidental validation reading Rob Dunn's fascinating 2018 book *Never Home Alone: From Microbes to Millipedes, Camel Crickets, and Honeybees, the Natural History of Where We Live*.

The North Carolina applied ecologist characterizes our homes as a kind of last frontier of scientific inquiry, a new rain forest for the indoor age, teeming with previously undiscovered forms of life and complex systems, under-studied, massive in its significance and implications for the future. I wish Professor Dunn luck in convincing his students (several of whom appear as characters in the book) that the romance and intrigue of suburban basements can equal that of the *real* rain forests in which Dunn discovered his own passion for field work in Chapter Two.

In its title, *Never Home Alone* deploys a bait-and-switch rhetorical strategy that I see frequently these days. With its evocation of horror flick paranoia and Macaulay Culkin, the title engages our basest ewwww reflex and seems to promise a gross and literal exposé of ick. To hook you in, it leverages the sensationalism of its core fact: We share our homes with nearly 200,000 species of



"It sure is warm under your pillow," says a house centipede in a popular and skin-crawling meme. Only a true entomophile can greet the sight of one of these skittering across the wall or floor with gratitude, but they actually are a beneficial insect, hunting down pests like termites, bed bugs and silver fish.



life. And counting. Eek.

Once you are in, you won't have to read long to discover that Dunn considers this fact, for the most part and with some exceptions, a good thing, a really good thing. The author is avidly pro-ewwww and pro-ick. Biodiversity is nature's ancient balances in action. The vast, vast majority of living things we share our homes with are benign at worst, and more often beneficial or essential. And—as I am sure you have already foreseen—our ewww reflex, our aversion to and attempted eradication of this largely invisible world fueled by germ hysteria, is the real source of some of the most vexing and portentous health concerns of modern life, which is to say, a life that has, for

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most of the planet, moved indoors. "Absence," Dunn titles chapter four, "As a Disease."

Dunn's narrative mode of choice is the natural history. That form has existed for a long time—it is the poetry division of science—but the term "natural history" is powerfully associated with the work of Diane Ackerman, whose series of deep and substantive popular and personal science books in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century were bestsellers.

The natural history is a multi-strand approach to scientific storytelling based on observation more than theory, rendered in a style that is popular and often poetic rather than academic. Threads in its complex weave include personal field narrative; lavish descriptive evocation, micro-biographies of past researchers and accidental visionaries and summaries of their work; and the reductive, practical presentation of large bodies of technical content. The last may be the essence of the art. The prime challenge facing the natural historian is how to bring the lay reader as close and as quickly as possible to a robust appreciation of the revelations and moral, emotional, and intellectual implications of hard science, without all the math and stuff. At this, I deem Dunn nothing less than a master.

The prophet in Dunn's story is an 18<sup>th</sup> century Dutch noticer of things named Antony van Leeuwenhoek, one of the first to intuit, see, and document the invisible life that surrounds us in our homes and on our bodies, and one, Dunn argues, whose promising leads were left largely ignored and dormant for centuries. Dunn's cautionary premise also suggests that van Leeuwenhoek's eww-free joy over the existence of the germ world was ultimately converted to a violent fear of pathogens, much to the detriment of us all. Dunn's affection for van Leeuwenhoek is palpable.

The pivotal modern figure in Dunn's tale is the Finnish ecologist Ilkka Hanski, who achieved a great many things but, to the point at hand, was one of the central figures in the Karelia project, a profoundly important study that compared the living conditions and health of the residents of old world Russian Karelia and modern world Finnish Karelia. The Karelia Project led to an acute understanding of the causes of the massive spike in inflammatory diseases and allergies in the modern world. Spoiler alert: it's the lack of

biodiversity found in modern, urban, and affluent living conditions. Filth, you see, is good, for the most part.

It would be easy to see *Never Home Alone*, after its strong and purpose-driven start, degenerating into a litany and enumeration of critters, broadly defined. It doesn't. Dunn's vision—a mor-

al purpose, at its heart—is a vivid unifying force throughout this study of pads and those who inhabit them. Although I have been savagely reductive in my representation of it, his message is to welcome life, to let it in. Sometimes, this can be as simple as not feeling that you have to clean everything dead. I stand vindicated.

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# To DIY, or not to DIY

Success can be gratifying, failure costly

Violet Snow

**W**HEN SOMETHING IN MY HOUSE breaks, the first decision to make is: Should I try to fix it myself or hire a professional? It's not just that I can save money. Fixing something myself is extremely gratifying.

Like most girls growing up in the 1960s, I did not pester my father to teach me carpentry. When he built a finished room ("the den") in the basement, it was my younger brother who learned how to put up paneling and lay carpet. Despite this poverty of education, I have, over the years, acquired both skills and tools, and I'm (usually) not afraid to use them.

I can hammer nails. I can drill holes. I can saw wood. I can turn a screwdriver. Anything else I need to know I can look up on the Internet. Whether I'll be able to put that information to use is another question. But I have had a number of successes.

When my husband and I first moved into our house, we had the bathroom redone to replace the shower with a bathtub, that essential of civilized life. Obviously, we weren't going to do the renovation ourselves. My husband has carpal tunnel syndrome and won't even operate a can opener. Plumbing is, to me, one of the most arcane house systems, right up there with electrical wiring. After the plumber and builder were done and paid, one of them promised to return to put on the final touch — a threshold covering the gap between the hallway carpet and the bathroom's new vinyl floor covering. Multiple phone calls failed to summon either of the pros, so I installed it myself. The hardware store had a nice strip of wood, beveled on both sides, expressly for creating a graceful transition between two rooms. I just had to cut it to the right length, drill two holes in the floor, and then screw down the strip of wood. And behold, a



threshold!

This victory encouraged me to take on other adventures. When a stair leading to the deck collapsed, I studied the other steps to see how they were supported and thereby figured out I could just screw in a block of wood under the step. After that, installing a towel rack on the bathroom door was a piece of cake.

Reattaching a loose toilet roll holder was a bit more challenging. It came down from the wall with wall anchors attached — those are the things that hold something up on drywall when there's no wooden stud available to screw into. These particular wall anchors were the metal kind that spring open like wings after they're thrust behind the sheetrock. But once I detached them from the roll holder, I forgot which way they had been oriented. The Youtube video left out important information, like which way to turn the anchor when you insert it into the wall. Trial and error enabled me to figure it out. The whole process took me two hours and left the wall a mess, which I was able to address with a bit of spackle and paint. Sometimes the learning process is frustrating and time-consuming, but what a rush you get when it works in the end!

OF COURSE, THERE HAVE BEEN TIMES I COULDN'T fix the problem myself. The SUDS code that ap-

peared intermittently on my washing machine, for instance, forcing me to run the machine twice through its cycle. The Maytag manual was online, and I got as far as removing the cover of the machine, but I couldn't for the life of me figure out how to expose the drain pump. I prudently called for service on that one.

In the summer heat, a board on the deck warped because one end of the plank hadn't been attached properly, and I kept stubbing my toe on the board. I called the guy who had built the deck, who said flipping over the board and reattaching it would work. I mulled over doing it myself, but without a screw gun to extract the 20 screws and then put them back in, it would have taken me half a day. The generous fellow showed up one afternoon and did it in 20 minutes without charging me.

It's important to consider whether doing-it-yourself will involve danger to humans or property. So far, I have erred on the side of caution, although I did almost destroy the deck when I cut down the willow tree. The tree was an inch and a half in diameter, not terribly tall, and I did my best to make it fall *away* from the house, but something went

It's important to consider whether doing-it-yourself will involve danger to humans or property.

wrong. The top branches brushed the deck railing and didn't do any damage. However, the error was unnerving. Next time I'll do some research before trying to cut down a tree. Especially if I'm using a handsaw and a hatchet. Once the tree was draped over the banks of the stream, I had to borrow a chainsaw to cut it up, and boy, was that fun!

I'll conclude with my biggest triumph — replacing 50 feet of shingles along the top of my roof. Rotted bits of shingle came down with the melting snow this spring, but inspection showed they were all from the ridgeline; the rest of the roof was fine. The Internet convinced me I could replace the shingles myself. The salesman at Home Depot showed me how to trim the sides with a boxcutter before installation. He said the hardest part was getting the heavy shingles up to the roof. After the trimming, I enlisted the help of my friend Becca, who loaded the shingles, eight at a time, into a series of cloth bags and handed them up to me on the ladder. (Problem-solving is often enjoyable.)

Once I started nailing the shingles down, I discovered I had trimmed them incorrectly— too little, luckily, rather than too much. So the job took me longer than it should've, but I got the whole 50 feet done in one day. Even though the shingles aren't quite as precisely straight as the ones over the garage, my brother, who used to be a roofer, looked at my photo and said I had done a fine job. I was so proud.



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# Inspired by nature

Backyard, or recreation, ponds offer all the fun of a pool while blending much more harmoniously with the environment

Melissa Dempsey

**T**HERE'S NOTHING LIKE TAKING A DIP in cool water during a hot summer day. You've likely heard about the surge in popularity of our region's swimming holes, as more people are drawn to the allure of swimming or relaxing surrounded by nature. These beautiful spaces, usually set back in the woods, feature large pools of water surrounded by rocks and plants, offering a peaceful retreat for those who wade in.

Imagine you could have a swimming hole in your own backyard: a quiet space for reflection, wading, or splashing around, with trickling streams that spill into waterfalls cascading over natural stone.

Backyard ponds designed for swimming, typically referred to as recreation ponds, are slowly gaining traction with homeowners around the country who want the benefits of living beside a natural body of water, but with the control of a swimming pool, knowing that the water is clean. Here in the Hudson Valley, backyard water features like Koi ponds, babbling brooks, and waterfalls have been popular landscape additions for decades, but large recreation ponds are a luxury feature just starting to gain a footing.

"The industry standard of recreation ponds is to call them 'natural' because there is no use of chemicals to clean them, and you have the option of using plants for some filtration," says Joe DiLorenzo, owner of Pond and Landscape, Inc., a design and install firm based in Highland. "But it's more accurate to say that these ponds are inspired by nature; they feature a rubber liner, filters to discourage water stillness, and sometimes the use of additional technology to prevent harmful bacteria."

The idea of the backyard recreation pond isn't new. Europeans have been creating natural pools and swimming ponds for decades, made to blend right in with a garden or other thoughtfully designed landscape. Similar to natural swimming pools, recreation ponds don't use chlorine to clean the water, which often kills bacteria but leaves a harsh drying effect on your skin and hair, and can be detrimental to the environment. But unlike pools, ponds are designed in a way that gives a natural appearance with rocks and stone, native plants, hidden filtration to encourage water movement, and minimal disturbance to your yard. If anything, it can enhance your landscape's current ecosystem by attracting songbirds and encouraging native plant growth.

While some smaller ponds are relatively self-cleaning, recreation ponds require a few extra steps to ensure algae and other harmful bacteria get filtered out. "Typically, smaller backyard ponds are pretty easy to maintain: You add some filters, take care of the Koi or other fish, and do some light landscaping around the pond," DiLorenzo says. He suggests designing recreation ponds with waterfalls that flow into settling pools; in these spaces, floating plants like water hyacinth or submergible plants like anacharis and foxtail could grow. They pull nutrients from the water column and aggressively compete with algae. When planted around the edges of the pond, rooted plants like cattail and iris thrive, as well. "Plants naturally filter the water because they eat nutrients that algae would otherwise eat," he explains. "It's basically a biological control using one living thing to eradicate another; it can take a longer time to work, but it helps."

Because recreation ponds are thousands-of-gallons larger and require more filtration than Koi ponds, he suggests adding other means of filtra-



COURTESY DILORENZO'S POND & LANDSCAPE

tion to truly ensure your water stays clean. "Fish help in smaller ponds by cleaning up the pond floor and producing waste that gives nutrients to the filtering plants. But in my opinion, a recreation pond shouldn't have fish—having people swimming and splashing around can be stressful to them, and I think they should be treated with care like pets," he says. To beef up your pond's filtration, he suggests UV light and an external filter.

"Many people think the idea of a recreation pond is to stay as natural as possible, and to them that means strictly using plants and avoiding extra filters or UV light," DiLorenzo says. "I understand that this type of advanced installation doesn't support the holistic rhetoric, but the pond technically isn't natural, it's mimicking nature; so why not take the extra steps to ensure the water is safe to swim in?"

A common belief is that UV light will negatively affect too much of the pond ecosystem, but in actuality, DiLorenzo says it will generally only eradicate harmful bacteria and algae, while the beneficial bacteria stays stable. Because the water is constantly moving, thanks to pumps and recir-

culating waterfalls, the UV light doesn't sit on the beneficial bacteria or plants long enough to kill them. "I've had 23 years in the pond trade, and much of my work has been to repair ponds, water gardens, and other backyard water features that have not been installed correctly, or haven't been properly maintained over time," he explains, "and for the most part, as soon as we add this sort of technology, the problems go away. When it comes to an investment like a recreation pond, it's worth putting in the extra attention to detail. You can get guys who say they'll do it in a couple of weeks, but that doesn't guarantee quality."

Instead, when it comes to designing, excavating, and installing a recreation pond, DiLorenzo suggests it could take one to two months. This allows time for gathering materials, rain and weather delays, strategizing equipment and excavation, and so on. The cost can run from \$50,000 up to \$100,000 for a high-end, 25,000-gallon pond with luxurious features like with decorative boulders, stunning waterfalls, and beautiful plants. For comparison, the average price of a 1,000-gallon Koi pond is \$15,000.



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# How to get good compost

Some tips from a master gardener

Lee Reich

**S**PRING IS IN THE AIR, AND IT'S A TIME when thoughts — mine, at least — turn naturally to compost. After adding dribs and drabs to the compost pile all winter, come spring, now I'll really pile it on: horse manure, hay from last year, and any remaining plants left in the ground from last year. I'll also turn piles I finished building last year.

Compost is a key ingredient in good gardening. It's a witch's brew of natural beneficial compounds that help nourish plants and foster good root growth, and it's teeming with beneficial microorganisms. Compost is the crumbly, sweet-smelling material left after organic materials — things that are or were once living — have decayed. It's one of those things in life that you can't have too much of.

Just how hungry your garden is for compost depends on what plants you grow, how closely you plant them, and how intently you coax them along. Almost any plant, from lettuce and lark-



LEE REICH

**Compost is the crumbly, sweet-smelling material left after organic materials — things that are or were once living — have decayed. It's one of those things in life that you can't have too much of.**

spur to lilac and linden, enjoys a topdressing of compost over the ground — even if they don't really demand it. Like any good mulch, a blanket of compost snuffs out small, newly sprouted weeds attempting to establish a foothold. Again, like any good mulch, that compost layer also keeps the soil cool and moist for plant roots, and loose, so water seeps in rather than seals the surface and skitters across it.

Compost really stands out from other mulches in the way it nourishes plants. It is relatively rich and well-balanced in plant foods, both in concen-

tration and in the range of nutrients offered. In general, an annual one-inch-thick dressing supplies all the food any plant needs.

Compost is not particularly difficult to make. After all, any pile of organic materials, if left long enough, will eventually turn to compost.

FOR GARDENERS LACKING THE TIME, RESOURCES, or inclination to make enough of their own compost, a cottage industry has sprouted up throughout much of the country that recycles "waste" into compost. Generally, the material is very reasonably priced and usually can be delivered right to your doorstep — or wherever else you want it dumped.

I'm not talking about the bagged compost that has traditionally been available at garden centers; usually, it just doesn't pay to buy compost by the bag for the quantities needed. Also, packaged compost is very often dead compost. All those good microorganisms that thwart disease, gobble up foodstuffs to release plant foods, and make the soil nice and crumbly have been killed by sterilization.

A bit of sleuthing before you buy, however, ensures that any bulk compost you get is high-quality stuff. Start your search for bulk compost in newspaper ads and the internet. "Compost" is an obvious starting point, but, depending on what you find, you might want to widen your web search to include such key words as "Topsoil," "Fertilizers," "Mulch," "Manure," or "Mushrooms." Anyone selling these materials may also be selling compost.

Make sure that what's being sold is compost, not just an old pile of wood chips or manure sold under the nebulous term of "black dirt." Some purveyors of compost even combine it with soil and then sell it as a "topsoil," so make sure you're getting pure compost not mixed with various other materials. Unless you're filling holes or depressions, what you need is compost, not "topsoil" under any name. You have soil.

Once you find someone who sells bona fide

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compost, a few pointed questions help you determine the quality of the product. No matter what goes into making different composts, the finished products are all surprisingly similar in nutrient values for major plant foods.

Nonetheless, ask what went into the compost; with all other things equal, a greater variety of raw materials will result in a better variety of nutrients in the end product. You'll want to avoid using compost that contains industrial wastes — especially in the vegetable garden — because of possible toxins like excessive quantities of heavy metals that could contaminate your food. Feedlot manures could be excessively high in salts, which can cause burning of roots. Also ask about the acidity, or pH, of the finished product. The ideal



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compost for most garden plants is slightly acidic, with a pH between 6 and 7. Many purveyors of compost have their product regularly tested, and will offer to give you a copy of their test results.

Many gardeners are bothered by rocks in their soil, so another question to ask is how rocky or stony the compost is. Besides the bother of the rocks, you don't want to be paying for them rather than compost.

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state, it's particularly important that viable weed seeds be few or absent from compost. You don't want the layer of rich, brown compost that you spread on your soil to be transformed, with a little rain and sun, into a carpet of weeds. After all, part of the reason you use compost is to smother weeds below.

Time, temperature, and pile turning all have bearing on the number of viable weed seeds in a finished compost. A carefully built compost pile easily reaches high enough temperatures to kill most weed seeds. Turning the pile gets it cooking again and eliminates any weed seeds near the outside of the pile that may have survived the first cooking. Even when weed-free initially, composts that sit around too long (especially if uncovered) will pick up weed seeds carried in by wind and animals.

Finally, if possible, get a sample of any compost before you get a truckload. Or at least go to the site where it's made and examine it. The material should no longer contain obvious bits of raw materials, but should be brown and crumbly with the pleasant, earthy aroma of a forest floor. M-m-m.

*New Paltz writer Lee Reich, PhD is a garden and orchard consultant, and also hosts workshops at his New Paltz farm. His next workshop will be "Fearless Pruning" on March 28; for more information, go to [www.leereich.com/workshops](http://www.leereich.com/workshops).*

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# Backyard oasis

How to fashion a comfortable, attractive outdoor living space

Melissa Dempsey

**H**AVING AN OUTDOOR DINING AND living space once meant picnic tables and charcoal grills on a sunny afternoon. While this style of classic Americana still brings charm to many yards, today's design-forward homeowners are thinking bigger. No longer are backyard barbecues limited to burgers and dogs eaten at minimally outfitted patios. Instead, backyard living spaces have become extensions of the home: comfortable seating, elegant lighting, fireplaces, appliances—everything plus the kitchen sink, allowing families to enjoy in-home comforts outside.

"An outdoor living space should be an extension of your indoor space," says Ricardo Castro, owner of landscape design and construction company Stone Ridge Landscapes. "That means it should represent a streamlined appearance from what you have inside. For example, if your home has a very contemporary design, your outdoor living room should match. You'll want to have the same comforts inside and out to prevent the need to go back and forth; the idea is to have just about everything you need already within reach."

To create a complementary design that's beautiful yet functional, consider placement of your outdoor room; the seemingly endless options might appear overwhelming, so it's best to start with a clear outline of your needs. For instance, it's nice to be near the house for proximity to bathrooms and other necessities, but it might be smart to ensure your entertaining space isn't too close to baby's window—nothing breaks up a party like an interrupted naptime. To entertain dinner guests around a fireplace, you'll need to plan for ample seating. You can also incorporate TV and other technology, but these investments will need an enclosed space to protect them from the elements; a roof structure or pergola can extend nicely from a back deck.

"Your individual design depends on the type of space you're looking to create," Castro says. "Some people want a tranquil setting to read and relax, so they will typically include water features like a Koi pond or waterfall. Others have kids and want to entertain for parties and barbecues, so they'll create a patio with an outdoor kitchen, but plenty of space to let the kids run by while they grill."

From there, you'll have a wide variety of hardscape options. Hardscaping refers to the type of stone used for your flooring, pathways, constructed furniture, and other accents. A natural stone hardscape complements a variety of décor and provides an organic look that's long-lasting and durable. Natural stone can be used for creating floors, bar and island features, fireplaces or fire pits, seating, and more. Pavers add a variety of colors and textures that can be set into unique designs like herringbone. Bricks add a warm feel ideal for rustic fireplaces or Tuscan-inspired dining spaces. Soften your hardscape with weather-



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resistant carpeting, furniture, throw pillows, and other design accents.

"In this region, we generally recommend in keeping with natural New York materials like bluestone to complement organic surroundings, not stand out in stark contrast," Castro says. "We try to have a minimal impact on your backyard while creating a space that feels right."

When it comes to designing a backyard kitchen, the same rules apply, but now you'll need to consider appliances and plumbing options. The layout of your kitchen depends on your space allotment and needs. You can have a simple space with a prep and grill station, or go full gourmet with appliances, gas cooking hookup, and a sink. Popular layout choices include a straight line, ideal for basic cooking and prep without much storage; an L-shape, which gives a little extra counter space for appliances and sinks; or a U-shape, which offers the most space for a professional-grade kitchen with extra storage, additional prep space, or bar-style seating.

Some kitchens feature a separate island can double as a buffet or bar. You can even add a wine refrigerator or built-in taps for wine and beer. Weather-resistant stainless steel is often the top choice in outdoor appliances; encasing them in stonework pulls the design together and provides a more natural appearance.

"We recently worked on an outdoor kitchen design in Woodstock with the purpose of entertaining multiple guests," Castro explains. "This design included a retaining wall that doubled as sitting space, a kitchen with full running hot and cold

water, electricity for a fridge, and gas hookup for a grill. You can go all-out."

Although, going all out will cost you. According to Castro, the average expense of an outdoor living room runs \$15,000-\$50,000, whereas an outdoor kitchen begins at about \$30,000 and reaches upwards of \$90,000.

"There are always ways to cut costs and have a similar effect to high-end designs without the extra expense," he says. "For instance, instead of having a direct natural gas hookup for your grill, you can use a small tank of gas that's hidden. Instead of having running water, you can avoid having a sink put in and move your space closer to the house for washing or cooking needs."

Once your design has been decided, installation typically takes four to six weeks, depending on the scope of the project.

"If you need some design ideas, I suggest going on Instagram or Pinterest to nail down what calls to you, and then work on a rough draft, maybe spray paint the outline onto your yard to see if it fits for your needs before calling a landscape construction company," Castro says. "Whether you have a small downtown property or acres of land in the middle of the Catskills, your backyard should be your oasis."

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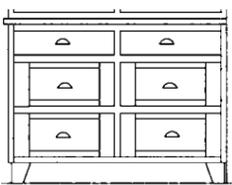
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PHOTOS BY CARL VAN BRUNT

# The fiberglass house

How an artist couple transformed a wayward 1970s housing concept into a 21st-century expression of how to live the creative life

Carl Van Brunt

**S**EVERAL YEARS AGO, ELEANOR WHITE and Karlos Carcamo, along with their real estate agent, drove up to the fiberglass house they now live in a few miles north of Beacon. Glancing at its H-Shaped layout and roofline defined by a set of downward swooping curves, Karlos thought: “I don’t know about this house. It’s kind of weird.” It didn’t help that the original owner had painted the exterior mustard yellow. (Karlos’s parents thought the house looked like a playground toy.) But once he and Eleanor got inside, Karlos, an artist, was captivated by the unique interior arches that define the spatial experience of the dwelling. Suddenly he could look beyond the shag carpeting and dark antique furniture that reflected the interior design sense of the previous owners, and see the possibilities: “Artists are good at seeing the future of something that others might not,” he said.

Located in a neighborhood of mostly ranch houses, the home is nestled behind a small grove of trees on an irregular, 1.3-acre plot. Most of the other houses on the road are on plots that pretty much conform to the rectilinear grid ubiquitous to suburban housing and are placed in clear view. So, partially hidden as it is, the house belonging to Eleanor and Karlos is a bit of an outlier; not typical, but not noisy or obtrusive either.

BUILT IN 1972, ELEANOR AND KARLOS’S PLACE IS essentially a bolted-together set of curved-roof prefabricated fiberglass modules, giving it what must have been considered a home-of-the-future look back in the time when Woody Allen’s *Sleeper* was a hit in movie theaters. The house is the product of an innovative approach to home building brought to market by Polyarch Housing, a division of Rudkin-Wiley, Inc., an ambitious company that was based in Connecticut. The company’s 1973 marketing plan called for the selling of 125 of these Polyarch homes. They ended up selling 12 in Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Georgia, New Hampshire, and New York.

One unique proposition of the original Polyarch sales strategy was that its plexiglass modules were capable of being configured in many more ways than the typical kit building, such as the Sears house. Creativity as opposed to uniformity is built into the architectural concept and is prominently mentioned in Rudkin-Wiley’s Polyarch patent application. The structure’s flexibility, which allows for relatively easy modifications and maintenance as well as the possibility of future expansion, is one of the features that Eleanor and Karlos especially like about the house.

Eleanor, who is also an artist, has used fiberglass as sculptural material and knows how to work with it. Though not a fan of heights, she is the one who got up on a ladder and repainted the exterior of the house a tasteful off-white. Karlos recently took on the task of replacing a set of full-size windows which only vented at the bottom with tilt and turn windows that provide much better air flow. According to Eleanor, “Karlos can fix

anything in the house.”

Some of the structure’s features that were hyped back when it was built did not pan out the way Rudkin-Wiley planned. The curved roof sections, which were meant to replace the need for gutters by expediting runoff from rain and melting snow, did not take into account the weighty vertical drop of H<sub>2</sub>O in its various forms. Eleanor confides that, since she is a light sleeper, “the sound of ice sliding off the roof which sounds like someone skiing down the side of the house” is a bit of a problem for both her and the couple’s three small dogs. Karlos notes that the seams where the modules join are prone to cracks due to seasonal temperature variations. Both mention solar gain as a problem in warmer months, because the ceiling is also the roof and there is no attic or sufficient insulation to mitigate the effects of the blazing sun. However, Eleanor notes that “the air blower downstairs does a great job of blowing cool air upstairs in the summer.” More concerning is the fragility of the structure. During a microburst/tornado in May 2018, nine trees blew down on their property. Fortunately, none damaged the home.

HAVING ASCENDED THE EXTERIOR STAIRWAY, which is gently embraced by Japanese Yew trees tended to with the Japanese Niwaki technique of pruning, one enters the interior of the building directly into the diminutive but welcoming living room. The rooms are all on the small side, but don’t seem cramped because they are uncluttered and highlighted with careful choices of art (much of it Eleanor and Karlos’s own work or that of talented friends), as well as furniture, rugs, color, and pattern, reflective of Eleanor’s love of the 60s and 70s design aesthetic and Karlos’s predilection for minimalism. The living room is graced by an oval white coffee table that echoes the curves of the ceiling; a motif picked-up by the ovoid table lamp beneath Eleanor’s oval art work: an ovalsque grid of meticulously collaged eggshell fragments.

Across the living room, the rear deck can be seen through floor to ceiling windows, sliding glass doors, and translucent light catching white

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Eleanor White and Karlos Carcamo.



curtains. The deck overlooks a spacious enclosed backyard which itself opens up to farmland beyond the tree line. To one end of the living room is a charming office with a five-headed lamp stretching its curving supports—like a plant seeking photons—towards a large window facing the backyard. There is also a bathroom and guest bedroom. To the other end is the kitchen, another bathroom and the master bedroom. A stairway descends to their basement studios accented by Karlos's red abstract painting that suggests movement in relation to geometry. The coherent and engaging sense of interior design and sophisticated art placement carries through each space. Walking through, a discerning eye would catch sight of special gems such as a Knoll, Warren Platner side table, and a Harry Bertoia diamond chair.

Like many artists in our region both Eleanor and Karlos have full-time jobs while also engaged in serious and successful art practices. Karlos has worked in the framing department of MoMA for 13 years. You can spot him working on the reframing of Van Gogh's *Starry Night* in two of the videos that can be found on YouTube covering the prep for MoMA's reopening in October of last year. Eleanor is the first woman ever to be appointed preparator at Vassar's Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center. She regularly exhibits in our region and in

the greater New York Metro area. Karlos has just recently had work accepted into the permanent collection of Spain's prestigious Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid; Spain's national museum of 20th-century art and the home of Picasso's *Guernica*.

Eleanor and Karlos both have compact but sufficiently functional studio spaces and storage areas in the basement. This is important for obvious

practical reasons – significant additional studio rental and art storage expenses are made unnecessary and well-organized places to work are always available – but also for more intangible reasons.

Their house is not just a place to live and make art. It is also an ongoing work of art itself; an exhibition space in an almost perpetual state of transformation. Leveraging their creativity, Eleanor and Karlos have transformed a wayward 1970s housing concept into a 21<sup>st</sup>-century expression of how to live the creative life.

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# Hot and cold

Heat pumps can do the job of your furnace and A/C more efficiently

Violet Snow

“THERE’S HEAT IN EVERYTHING — ground, air, water,” said Donovan Gordon, Director of Clean Heating and Cooling at NYSERDA (New York State Energy Research and Development Authority). Although it seems counterintuitive, air-source heat pumps draw heat even from winter air, and some structures in our area already rely them for both heating and cooling, including the Golden Notebook bookstore, a model green home in Woodstock, and the Phoenicia Library.

As the state works to curb dependence on fossil fuels, NYSERDA has embraced heat pumps, which run on electricity, as a means of addressing climate change. Rebate incentives are available from NYSERDA and local utilities, with the goal of making conversion of a home to heat pump technology both practical and affordable.

New York State’s Green New Deal, passed last April, mandates 100 percent clean power by 2040, with substantial investment in large-scale renewable energy projects upstate and offshore wind generation near the New York City port. Thus devices powered by electricity will increasingly run on clean energy, at least within the state. In addition to promoting the switch to electric vehicles, NYSERDA is encouraging residents and businesses to install heat pumps, to either replace



Air-source heat pump at Phoenicia Library.

VIOLET SNOW

or supplement conventional furnaces.

Instead of burning fuel, a heat pump transfers heat from one place to another. There are two common types: ground-source and air-source. Below five feet from the surface, the ground remains around 55 degrees, even in freezing weather. (A week of subzero temperatures may drive this line to seven feet down.) A heat pump uses a compressor and refrigerant chemicals to draw heat from the ground and into the house. In summer, heat is extracted from the building and sent into the ground. However, installation of a ground-source system is expensive and includes the drilling of bore holes and placement of sub-surface piping, more practical for new construction than for conversion of existing homes.

Air-source pumps can draw heat from air as cold as five degrees. “When the temperature gets down to minus five, a pump will operate more like an electric resistance heater,” said Gordon. “It’s not quite as efficient, but when you look at the

weather data, that’s four or five days per year in our area.” While less efficient than ground-source technology, air-source pumps are more efficient than furnaces run by fossil fuels, and they also function as air conditioners in summer, drawing heat out of the building. An air-source pump can either replace a regular furnace, heating the entire house, or homeowners can purchase a “ductless minisplit,” a unit that may be mounted on a floor, wall, or ceiling. In either case, piping and wiring connect to equipment out outside the house for extraction and transfer of heat.

A minisplit can handle about 750 square feet, which could address two rooms on an open floor plan. Several units would be required to address the whole house. If building an addition, a homeowner might buy a single unit to heat it, or they might purchase one for a frequently used room that tends to be cold in winter.

The cost of a minisplit is about \$3000 to \$4000 per unit. Local utilities and NYSERDA offer incentives that can reduce the cost by up to \$1000. While utilities initially balked at accommodating renewable energy, which threatened their profits, they have come to embrace heat pumps. “A utility designs systems for summer peaks when everyone has their a/c on,” said Gordon. “Having efficient cooling reduces the demand for electricity on those hot days, and heat pumps are more efficient than regular air conditioners. In winter, switching to electricity increases the utility’s revenue.”

After the Phoenicia Library burned in 2010, the renovated building incorporated air-source heat pumps to replace the old oil burner. Trustees estimate the annual energy savings to be 85 percent.

To facilitate the transition to heat pumps, NYSERDA is educating consumers and contractors. Plans are in the works for outreach events at town halls and libraries, where residents can learn about the new technologies. Reduced-cost energy efficiency improvement packages will be available for sealing and insulating the home’s exterior. The property will then be ready for a smaller, lower-cost system when the homeowner is ready to upgrade to a heat pump.

A pilot program has been designed to train contractors in planning for heat pump installation by evaluating a property, doing the work to improve the building envelope, and estimating the heating and cooling needs. Contractors will also be able to recommend the most appropriate type of system, based on the homeowner’s preferences and guidance from Northeast Energy Efficiency Partnerships, a regional nonprofit that supports state efficiency policies and programs.

“Most residents don’t know much about pumps or who installs them,” said Gordon, “so it helps to know contractors who have been vetted for the quality of their work.”

Melissa Everett of Sustainable Hudson Valley commented, “If we are going to have a chance of containing climate catastrophe, we need to shift quickly off fossil fuels. Electricity is far more efficient than combustion for heating, cooling and transportation. But what we need is a massive shift by a large majority of people.”

Explore Hudson Valley Magazine

## Spring in the Valley



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Architect's rendering.

## Best-laid plans

A \$400-million project takes shape in Poughkeepsie

Ken Stier

**T**HE FIRST 134 APARTMENTS IN THE Hudson Heritage live-work-play community planned for Poughkeepsie's former Hudson River State Hospital site should be ready for occupancy by late 2021. The units will be the first of a variety of rentals, purchasable townhouses and single-family homes.

The first commercial operation, a 65,000-square-foot ShopRite supermarket just north of the current Home Depot and right across Route 9 from Marist College, is scheduled to open by this Thanksgiving. A complete buildout of the 156-acre site, expected to take between three and seven years, depending on economic conditions, will eventually result in a community of some 1500 people. The master plan calls for all the major components of a self-contained, highly walkable, inter-generational community – a town center with retail shops amidst a cluster of restaurants, a bank, gym and medical center, a hotel and conference facility, and an arts and educational center. There'll also be a daycare center and senior housing, both independent and assisted. Some 50 acres of the property, its landscape originally designed by Central Park creators Calvert Vaux and Frederick Olmstead, will be left undeveloped, ribboned with eight miles of walking trails.

An adjoining former CSX cargo rail line, acquired by Scenic Hudson, will be integrated into the 13-mile (pedestrian and biking) Dutchess rail-trail connecting to the Walkway Over the Hudson. "How cool is that?" enthused Susan Burke, a key member of Saber Real Estate Advisors, the project 'master developer.' Wake up in the morning and go for a walk, or a bike ride, completely traffic-free, come back, meet a friend for coffee at a Starbucks, which is just yards from your home." Burke

recently gave the first in a series of planned presentations about Hudson Heritage to a capacity crowd at Poughkeepsie's Boardman Library. The former employees of the state hospital in attendance may have been outnumbered only by retirees curious about the planned community, where car use is minimized.

One audience member asked whether jitneys or surreys might be an intra-campus transportation option. The developers responded that they welcomed all good ideas. It was noted that the campus was large enough that the Town of Poughkeepsie was planning three bus stops there.

Hudson Heritage responds to several trends in similar kinds of planned communities around the country. Buyers and renters alike appreciate the convenience of living in a virtually self contained community, where most daily needs can be met within a short walking distance. Swelling ranks of retirees want to maintain an active lifestyle, including participation in the educational and cultural programming available at nearby colleges.

"We're finding that people like this lifestyle and there are a lot of synergies between the uses, and this is why these kinds of communities are a significant trend," explained Martin Berger, who oversees the roughly \$400-million project.

For their part, colleges appreciate a nearby hotel convenient for hosting academic conferences attendees and staffing interviews, as well for alumni and parents coming to see their kids compete in sporting events. Marist College has some 23 inter-collegiate sporting teams, generating overnight housing demand from visiting teams as well. The convenience of an assortment of bars and restaurants – as well as shopping options – stokes higher occupancy rates among business travelers, too.

Berger cited the local medical school in formation as creating additional housing demand. "Both Marist College and Health Quest have made it crystal-clear that in order for them to attract the type of staff, doctors and nurses that they want and need to attract in order to fulfill their employment base, they are going to have to offer the kind of quality housing that we will be offering

– along with all the shopping and restaurants," he added. At One Dutchess, a comparable new riverfront residential development in Poughkeepsie, rents will range from \$1600 for a one-bedroom to \$3000 for three bedrooms.

Saber will be providing all the project's gas, water and other utility lines with the first units. The overall project area, divided into more than a dozen parcels with many specialist operators still under letters of intent responsible for building their parts. "We have reached out to hundreds of operators to find the right concepts," said Burke.

Roughly 100 units will be workforce housing, affordable for staff also working at Hudson Heritage, which altogether expects to generate 700 jobs. At least 200 of the 750 living units will be higher-end condos or townhomes at market rates.

Saber recently completed the 17-acre Rivertown Square in Dobbs Ferry, which consists of 226 apartments, a cluster of retail and restaurants (New York Sports Clubs, Starbucks Coffee, GNC, Smoothie King, Oasis Day Spa and Home Helpers), a gym, a theater and a daycare center.

The former hospital administration building, the most distinct of just six of 150 structures on the site capable of reuse, was envisioned as an arts and educational center. Offering 80,000 square feet with a commanding view of the 18-acre Great Lawn, this building is potentially the soulful center of what Saber hopes will be "an interesting, diverse and close-knit community."

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# A study of doors

## Sparrow

**Y**EARS AGO I READ THE *PENGUIN BOOK of Buddhist Scriptures*. In the table of contents I noticed the title “How to Walk Through Walls.” I turned to that section excitedly, and discovered that it consisted of two sentences:

*Concentrate the mind on walking through a wall. Walk through the wall.*

Since I never mastered this technique, I must use doors.

All the doors in my house have panels. The one I’m looking at now has six: four long ones and two square ones at the top. Why do doors have panels? What possible purpose can they serve? Are they merely decorative? Is it somehow easier to build a door that’s scalloped into geometric pieces?

All the closet doors in our bedrooms are double, with little circular metal “dummy” knobs, no doubt harkening back to some French style of the 1840s (though this is a doublewide trailer).

Here are the parts of a door: the sill, the jam, the hinge, the threshold (or saddle), the stop, the sticking, the stile, the lock, the lock mortise, the first mullion, the second mullion, the panels, the top rail, the bottom rail, the lock rail. And you thought doors were simple!

An open door is a smile. A closed door is a frown. A slightly open door is a grin. A slammed door is a scream.

## Part II

Extensive research has produced a number of reasons for the panels in doors:

1) They’re an imitation of the panes in windows. (Windows have panes because larger pieces of glass are more expensive – and more tragical when they break.)

2) A paneled door uses less wood.

3) The wood it uses is in smaller pieces.

4) Panels reduce the danger of warping and cracking.

5) The lock rail adds strength to the lock mortise.

6) Paneled doors are standardized throughout the nation.

7) At this point, everyone expects paneled doors.

## Part III

An auditorium has exits and entrances. By law, the exits must be clearly marked with red signs. But a domestic house has no clear differentiation between entrance and exit. Any door may be used for either. In our house, however, there is one front door and two back doors. The back doors, which we rarely use, lead to the deck, and are essentially exits. No friend ever visits us through them.

Crime is one reason to invent doors, and privacy is another. My old friend Salisbury was fond of walking around his house naked. He would answer the door *au naturel*, even if the mailman was knocking. The mailman never complained.

Do you know the phrase “radical hospitality”? It’s the spiritual imperative to show kindness to anyone who enters your house.

I studied with the Jehovah’s Witnesses for 3 ½ years because they knocked on my door. I found them interesting, though perhaps I’m a bit understimulated. One point I realized, “I’ll study with anyone – an astronomer, a funeral parlor director – who knocks on my door.”

## Part IV

An old-fashioned suitcase has a kind of door, called a “lid.” This door even latches or locks. Modern suitcases, which are usually on rollers, have zippers instead. (Actually, it would be pos-



sible to construct a zippered door to a room. Or a door that’s fastened with buttons! Or with Velcro! Or with ribbons!

Nowadays in hotels, the clerk hands you a credit card-type object which is called a “key.” At first it seemed weird that a card could be a key, but now it seems as normal as a washcloth. For some reason, we don’t use these yet in houses.

An oven has a door, and the broiler below it has a smaller door. Closets have doors; cabinets have doors. The covers of a book open like doors. In fact, a book has a front door and a backdoor, like a farmhouse. A CD has a plastic door, and certain LPs – like Miles Davis’ *Bitches Brew* – have doors, too. Even a dental floss container has a kind of door on top that clicks shut, just like a bedroom

door. Which reminds me, I’ve lived in old houses where the doors have been painted over so many times that the latches no longer function. And my favorite bedroom of all time, an indentation in a living room on W. 109<sup>th</sup> St., was about twice the size of my bed and protected only by a curtain.

I was a latchkey kid, after the age of 15. My mother had begun teaching school, and I had to come home to an empty apartment. One day I couldn’t get the key to turn in the lock. I tried and tried, and eventually twisted off the key, right in the lock. How humiliating! I still couldn’t enter the house, and once my parents returned home, they had to call a locksmith, at great expense. Maybe that’s why my favorite bedroom had no door.

## Part V

Last Thursday I heard a rapping on my front door at 1:23 a.m., as I was preparing to go to bed. I walked to the door and looked through the pane of glass beside it (which is technically a “sidelite”). There I saw two large young strangers, both men, holding dangerous metal spikes. Through the window, I heard one of them shout: “We got lost.” He looked desperate.

I opened the door, and heard their story. They were hikers on a local trail who lost their way and came down the wrong side of the mountain. Once they saw the sun setting, they found a path out of the woods and walked down Woodland Valley Road for five miles till they came to my house. Exactly why they chose me was a bit unclear. The spikes they carried were connected to canes that helped with slippery hiking.

“Where are you parked?” I asked.

One of them consulted a computer printout. “On Oliverea Road,” he announced. That’s 11.6 miles away! (I just Googled the distance.)

At this point my wife awoke and offered to drive them back to Oliverea. (I don’t drive.) The two guys – who turned out to be cousins – thanked her profusely, then the three of them climbed into our Toyota. Once returned to their car, the cousins drove back to reassuring Montclair, New Jersey.

One reason the lost hikers scared me was that Violet and I had earlier been watching a detective show (*Vexed*). These police procedurals train you to suspect everyone you meet of murder. Don’t let yourself be brainwashed by fear-mongering Netflix comedy-dramas! Open your door to the orphans and strangers of the earth!

## A home improvement mix

**S**TUDIES HAVE SHOWN LISTENING TO FAST, intense music improves your workouts at the gym. Could a similar effect be created by listening to work and home/home-improvement themed music while putting around the house? It couldn't hurt. We put together a playlist you can listen to at [tinyurl.com/home-improvement-mix](http://tinyurl.com/home-improvement-mix). Here are the tracks:

- “Working Man Blues”— Merle Haggard
- “If I Had a Hammer (Hammer Song)— Pete Seeger
- “Our House”— Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young
- “House Where Nobody Lives”— Tom Waits
- “Homeward Bound”— Simon & Garfunkel
- “If I Were a Carpenter”— Johnny Cash and June Carter Cash
- “I’m Working on a Building”— Bill Monroe & His Bluegrass Boys
- “House Rent Blues”— John Lee Hooker
- “The House That Jack Built”— Aretha Franklin
- “9 to 5”— Dolly Parton
- “Sixteen Tons”— Tennessee Ernie Ford
- “Fixing a Hole”— The Beatles
- “Who’s Gonna Mow Your Grass”— Buck Owens
- “This Ole House”— The Statler Brothers
- “Hammer and Nails”— The Staple Sisters
- “White Room”— Cream
- “Dirty Work”— Steely Dan
- “Chain Gang”— Sam Cooke
- “Grandpa Was a Carpenter”— John Prine

## Don't toss it

**F**OOD EXPIRATION DATES DON'T MEAN WHAT many think they do, according to the Ulster County District Attorney's Division of Consumer Affairs (DCA). Most food is still edible after the expiration date but may not be as tasty.

According to the DCA, consumers are surprised to learn that stores are not legally required to remove food once the expiration date has passed. They are strictly “advisory” in nature. Dating is not federally required, except for infant formula. States have varying laws. Most states - not New York - require that milk and other perishables be sold before the expiration date.

The major codes are:

**Sell by-** this is the “expiration date” but does not mean the product must be pulled from sale or that it cannot be sold after that date;

**Best if used by-** Flavor or quality is best by this date but the product is still edible thereafter;

**Use by-** this is the last day that the manufacturer vouches for the product's quality.

In summary, the DCA says “most labels should be used as a guide, rather than a hard and fast expiration date.”

According to the USDA, around 30-40 percent of the American food supply is wasted every year at all points of the process. That's about 218 pounds per person.

*Time* magazine, citing a report by the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and Harvard Law School's Food Law and Policy Clinic, make similar points, concluding that 90 percent of Americans throw out food prematurely. For examples, they give eggs, which can be consumed 3-5 weeks after purchase, and a box of macaroni and cheese, which can be enjoyed an entire year after the “use by” date with “no noticeable change in quality.”



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