

The March Break buff

Sydney Loney, **National Post**



illustration by Julie McLaughlin

If you're not planning to join the throngs of sun-seekers at the airport, but still need a diversion from the last desolate days of winter, consider adding "home makeover" to your March Break to-do list.

"March Break is a great time to give your home an update," says Pam Tower, interior designer and president of Tower Interiors in Halifax. "Spring fabrics and colours have just come out, so it's the

perfect time to get inspired."

Sure signs your winter-weary home needs a seasonal face-lift include: dark, grayed-out colours, heavy window treatments, clutter and insufficient lighting, Ms. Tower says.

But whether you choose to chip away at a project over the course of the week, or tackle it weekend-warrior style, it's not about undertaking a \$100,000 reno.

"Make it manageable," says Janise Saikaley, owner and lead designer of Uproar Design in Ottawa. "Have some fun, but be organized. You probably don't want to use the whole week up - and you definitely don't want to go back to work with a ladder left in the middle of a room."

Her advice? Attack the winter blahs one room at a time.

Bring spring to your living and dining rooms

"Change your interior the way you change your wardrobe at this time of year - think lighter, brighter, fresher," says interior design consultant LeAnne Bunnell of Calgary's Elle Design. "Taking away more than you add makes a room feel open and bright."

March Break is the perfect time to pack, purge and donate. "If your closets are already jammed, now is not the time to cram more in," Ms. Saikaley says. "Imagine everything gone." Get rid of everything reminiscent of Halloween or give it to Goodwill, or sell it on Kijiji.

And if you're relying solely on overhead lights to illuminate a room, add a lamp or two, adds Tracy Kundell, owner and principal designer of Avalon Interiors in Toronto. "Light needs to come from various levels - low, middle, and high - so combining overhead lighting with table lamps and uplights

on the floor will create a brighter, more comfortable room."

If the room still feels closed in and cave-like, create breathing space by rolling up carpets. "I remove my winter rugs and replace them with sisal and seagrass to make the whole space feel lighter," Ms. Kundell says.

Other lightening techniques include taking down drapes and replacing the knick-knacks and magazines on the coffee table with a single, low flower arrangement, or placing a tall vase of tulips on your dining room table. "Flowers bring instant life to a room," Ms. Bunnell says.

She also recommends removing dark, heavy, cozy accessories and replacing them with bright reflective items. More mirrors, for example, will add light and movement to the room, especially when strategically placed across from a window.

Once you've opened the room up to the possibility of spring, get your whole family involved and play with the fresh new space you've created. Geele Soroka, principal designer for Sublime Interiors in Vancouver, likes to rearrange the furniture.

"Every living room usually has up to three layouts," she says. "A lot of people put furniture in a room one way, then leave it that way forever. Instead, start with your biggest piece and see how many homes you can find for it. Everything else will just fall in around it."

Changing paint colours is another family-friendly project that's perfect for March Break. "Putting on a fresh coat of paint is the fastest way to change the look of a room," says Ms. Saikaley, who thinks the next hit on the colour horizon will be English greens. (She likes Farrow & Ball's Saxon and Folly green.)

Blues, especially turquoise, are also big this year, adds Laura Stein, an interior decorator in Toronto. "We're seeing more bright, tropical, juicy colours, such as lime, coral and fuchsia." Just don't go overboard. Use trendier spring hues as an accent, or bring them in with pillows, throws and vases. "You don't want to feel like you're living in a bowl of Fruit Loops."

If it's the furniture that needs a facelift, crisp, clean slipcovers are the way to go. And dining room chairs do well when reupholstered with a fresh spring fabric; something you can easily do yourself with a staple gun if the seats are screwed in, Ms. Stein says.

The Bedroom

The easiest rooms to make over during March Break are bedrooms because there are no major renovations necessary, says Kate Cannata, owner of New Leaf Interior Design in Vancouver. She recommends taking an eco-friendly approach by refinishing or painting existing furniture with a water-based finish, or a no-VOC paint. "Another trend is adding wallpaper to an accent wall, or using grass cloth or linen papers in the entire space."

Painting an accent wall is also an option. "Painting the headboard wall and changing linens to white

gives immediate contrast and provides a crisp, clean spring look," Ms. Soroka says. For a fresh finishing touch, switch up your lampshades in a subtle, contrasting colour.

Lightening up window treatments is another way to prep your bedroom for warmer weather. Replace heavy silk, velvet, or canvas curtains with breezy linens or soft sheers. "I like to add new pillows to freshen up stale corners," Ms. Bunnell says. "Bright toss cushions on the bed change the whole room; perhaps put a co-ordinating throw on the foot of the bed to really make it shine."

Repeating an element at least three times makes it feel intentional, she says. So if you're adding a new colour, have it on a pillow, a decorative object and a book cover. "And don't forget a small cachepot of flowers or an orchid on your bedside table."

The Kitchen

The kitchen is the hardest room to update because of the fixed elements, Ms. Stein says. But for hard-core DIYers, she favours a new backsplash.

"There are some really amazing mosaics and you can get into interesting shapes and materials, such as glass backsplashes that look like bubbles." But give yourself three to four days to chip out old tile, patch the wall, sand it smooth and lay the new tile and grout.

Replacing tired cabinetry is another worthy Spring Break project that requires planning. "You can do one of two things: replace the doors, hardware and hinges, or paint the doors," Ms. Cannata says. "Make sure you sand them completely, use a no-VOC primer (AFM Safecoat has a good one) and choose a fresh, new, eco-friendly paint colour from Benjamin Moore Natura."

Shopping for spring fashions is a seasonal pick-me-up that can easily extend to your kitchen. Pretty new drawer pulls add interest, or splurge on a fancy faucet. Ms. Soroka favours faucets with character or curves. "It's the jewellery of the kitchen and something you can update immediately."

For the less adventurous, simply clear everything off the counters and spring for vibrant new canisters, or countertop appliances in bright colours (KitchenAid's new "Cook for the Cure" stand mixer is pretty in pink).

The Kids' Rooms

If the room has become a shrine to Dora the Explorer or Thomas the Tank Engine, it might be time for a complete makeover. "You don't have to play up kiddie things or stick to primary colours," Ms. Soroka says. "Ask yourself what the next five years will be for your children - and what are they going to become? Then do something that will inspire them."

A week is plenty of time to make cosmetic changes that can have a big impact, says Kim Anderson, designer and owner of Home Reworks in Vancouver. She suggests starting with an inspiration piece, and getting input from the room's resident makes for a fun March Break project.

"It might be a piece of artwork they've made, some fabric they love, or even something as simple as a favourite colour," Ms. Anderson says. "You can then build your design around this piece by adding paint, bedding or drapes to complement it."

Not only can kids help with the planning, they can also experiment with the decor. Stencils and inexpensive vinyl wall decals are a great way to add a wow factor to bare walls.

"The great thing about wall decals is that they can easily be repositioned if a mistake is made, or removed when your child has grown tired of the design," Ms. Anderson says. (Tip: Loosen them with the heat from a blow dryer so they won't peel the paint.)

Whatever space you choose to transform into a spring retreat, make sure you address every aspect of the room, Ms. Saikaley says. And if you find yourself feeling overwhelmed, hire a designer for an hour or two, she says. From paint consultations to advice on new lighting, they can take the pressure off the planning stage.

"Sometimes, it helps just to bounce ideas off a pro," Ms. Saikaley says. For the price of a new pair of spring shoes, you can get some professional help to get your March Break makeover off to a good start.

Finally, make sure you leave yourself a day to enjoy your new spring space, she says. "When you've finished cleaning, decluttering and revisiting the space, take a moment to walk back into a room that is refreshed and beautiful."