

Q We have friends who always ask us to remove our shoes when we enter their house. Is this good manners? I wear orthotics in my shoes and find it awkward walking without support. And when my wife takes off her heels – a feminist statement – she is barefoot. Is there a time when this is a reasonable request, and, equally, is there a polite way of declining?

GH, Devon

Do you need help from one of our experts? Email your questions to homehelp@sunday-times.co.uk. Advice is given without responsibility.

A This is one of the great social dividers. Appearing with slippers or 'house shoes' in which to change upon arrival, as if visiting a religious temple, should not be common practice in leafy Pinner. Guests should keep shoes firmly on their feet unless instructed otherwise, and house-proud hosts should avoid inviting people round if they are that worried about their Axminster.

If you are asked to remove your shoes, then naturally oblige, but make a huge performance of losing your balance, having to lean on walls and other guests in order for your host's maddest desire to be fulfilled. (Those who insist on no shoes indoors should make sure there is a bench, seat or handy pouffe for guests to use.) If you are not prepared to remove your shoes due to a medical condition, resist mentioning this until you must – your host will probably then allow you to keep them on out of embarrassment.

William Hanson is a leading etiquette coach; williamhanson.co.uk

Q Does a homeowner have the right to cut and remove the roots from trees (leylandii) that are in a neighbour's garden, but reach into their property, causing paving slabs to rise and creating an uneven surface?

Michael Dewane, Morden

A If a neighbour's tree encroaches onto your land, you are entitled to cut back the tree roots and branches up to the boundary in order to prevent further damage to your property, although strictly speaking you must return the cuttings. You should consider carefully whether this is the course of action you want to take. You must not cut the roots back so severely that the tree dies or becomes unstable. Moreover, if there is a risk of the roots causing structural damage to your house, cutting them might not be the best option. Get advice from an arboriculturist and speak to your neighbour before doing anything drastic.

If damage to your property is likely, you should notify your neighbour in writing of your suspicion. If no action is then taken to prevent the damage, you might have a claim to compensation, but an informal, friendly approach should always be the first step.

Ed Cracknell is a senior associate at Russell-Cooke Solicitors; russell-cooke.co.uk

Q My bathroom basin is chipped. Is there a product available that will repair and disguise the problem?

Jennifer Brennan, via email

A To repair a chip in a porcelain sink, you will need to purchase a two-part epoxy filler found in the adhesives section of a hardware store. Rub down the area with sandpaper to remove any rust, then clean and apply a thin coat of the filler where needed. If the chip is deep, apply in coats to achieve the required smooth finish. When this is complete, apply a thin coat of porcelain enamel paint that matches the colour of your sink with a small paintbrush.

Steven Zockall is the director of 0800 HANDYMAN; 0800handyman.co.uk

Q I planted some pea seeds indoors for my garden, and one of the plants is pure white. How can I nurture it to grow into a proper pea?

N Patel, via email

A Partial albinism is a mutation that breeders look for to differentiate their cultivars from run-of-the-mill green species, so I can see why you'd like to grow this plant on. The green in foliage, as anyone who did biology at school knows, is chlorophyll, a miracle pigment that plants and algae use to convert sunshine into growth-boosting sugars. Leaves with white or variegated edges contain less chlorophyll, so make for more compact, slower-growing and often ornamental plants, which gardeners sometimes want.

Completely white leaves, though, are different. They can only grow by leeching nutrients from neighbouring foliage or, as in the case of your pea, from fuel or starch in the seed. When this is used up, your plant will die, which is a shame – it would be interesting to see what white peas taste like.

Toby Buckland is a garden writer and the host of www.tobygardenfest.co.uk

Q I have just purchased a house where all of the sash windows need replacing. What are my options?

QUESTION OF THE WEEK

AH, London

A Before you do anything else, check whether your property is listed or in a conservation area, in which case planning permission will be required for replacing your windows.

You then need to decide whether you want the windows to be uPVC or hardwood timber. In general, we've found that timber sash windows hold more value, as they're typically more popular than uPVC, but there are pros and cons to both. To begin with, although uPVC doesn't have the traditional look of timber, and some people are put off by its shininess, it doesn't need to be maintained. If you choose timber, you will need to repaint your sash windows every three years or so. You'll pay less for uPVC, too: it costs about £1,000 to replace two windows and a sash box.

If you do opt for timber, there are a number of ways that sash windows can open and close. First, there's the lead-weighted method, which is the most expensive. It involves lead weights that are exactly balanced to the weight of the sliding window within the sash box – a box or casing around the window – thus preventing the window from falling down. While traditional, these windows can be quite noisy in their operation and are difficult to adjust if there's a fault.

How long they will depend on how well maintained they are and how often they are used. A well-made

sash window will last for decades – we regularly replace original sash windows in Victorian houses that are still working. For supplying and fitting, this method costs £1,400-£1,650 for two windows and a sash box.

Sash windows are sometimes made to open on an internal hinge, in the style of a casement window, but a more popular option is to use spring balances. These pull the windows tightly closed, are easy to adjust if there is a problem, and can be repaired without much fuss. They are also more secure and run up and down more smoothly than the clunky lead weights. To have spring balances supplied and fitted costs about £1,300 for two windows and a box.

Finally, you need to decide whether to choose double or triple glazing – go for the latter if you want external noise reduction. Single glazing is not normally allowed, even in a conservation area, as building regulations demand better heat conservation. In the case of double and triple glazing, the sash box will be thicker than your original window, and you will need to consider the fact that the box will sit proud within the room, if you are using the original openings. This protrusion is easily concealed with a casing or an apron – similar to an architrave on a door that essentially covers any edges – but the look often comes as a surprise to some of our clients, so be prepared.

Billy Heyman, managing director of BTL Property, a design and build company in southwest London; btlpropertyltd.co.uk

TOP TIPS

As much as we love them, pets can make a mess of our homes. Try these smart fixes for getting rid of paw marks, bad odours and all that hair.

■ Remove fur on upholstery by wrapping your fingers in sticky tape and applying to the affected areas. On carpets, the Dyson V6 Absolute vacuum cleaner was our top scorer for removing hair.

■ For smelly carpets, use a kitchen staple: bicarbonate of soda. Sprinkle it generously onto the fabric, wait 10 minutes, then vacuum up.

■ If a pet pees on the carpet, treat with a mix of equal parts vinegar and water. Use a small amount, leaving it on for 10-15 minutes before soaking up the liquid with paper towel. Then apply bicarbonate of soda, as above.

■ For mud on carpets, apply White Wonder (Lakeland, £5) for a few minutes. Blot with lightly dampened paper towels, rinse with water and blot dry.

■ goodhousekeeping.co.uk/institute



Illustration: Russell Heyman

Home help

If you're replacing sash windows, or itching to take an axe to your neighbour's leylandii, our experts are here to offer advice

