

**Q** We have lived in our cottage for 32 years, and have maintained the land adjoining ours for the same period. Can we claim ownership of it? We do not have any deeds for this plot. How do we stand legally? Can anyone move us from this piece of land? Is there any way we can get it registered in our name?

Mrs WM Harrison, via email

**A** Under a legal principle called adverse possession, a person who has occupied land belonging to someone else for a very long time can apply to the Land Registry to formalise their ownership. Typically, if you have occupied the land continuously for at least 12 years prior to October 13, 2003, and you can show you used it exclusively and openly throughout that period without the permission of the owner, your application stands a good chance of success. You will need evidence to support your claim and, if the current owner of the land objects, your claim will go before a tribunal to be decided. To assess the strength of your case, you should seek formal advice from a solicitor before making the application.

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

**Q** This spring I planted six dahlias tubers: three in pots on my first-floor roof deck and three in the ground in the garden below. The three in the pots are flourishing, but from the three in the ground, nothing came up. Those in the pots have the same aspect as those in the ground: both get the morning sun. They are cactus dahlias. Why have the ones in the ground not come up?

BH, Clapham

**A** Despite sharing the same aspect, your two plantings of dahlias are subject to different conditions. Being Mexican and Central American natives, dahlias do not tolerate frosts. In spring, the soil in your border is probably well below the temperature required for tubers to break their dormancy. Planting tubers directly into borders is best left until May or even June. If these did grow, their tender new growth could have been subjected to an established slug and snail population.

Conversely, your roof deck should have significantly fewer slugs and snails. Its man-made surfaces should help reflect and radiate heat, quickly warming the relatively small volume of compost in a pot. A feed-rich potting compost, coupled with a tendency to water pots more frequently, would have also promoted growth. For best results, start tubers off in pots, and plant them into borders when plants are established and the risk of frost has passed.

Mark Dumbell is a head gardener at Hauser & Wirth Somerset; hauserwirthsomerset.com

**Q** My brother lives in a five-bedroom house surrounded by a large garden in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. He recently found a snake behind a laundry basket in his children's bedroom. How can he keep them out?

M Tai, via email

**A** I've never had to consider this question before, but am happy to help our overseas readers. Snakes are not "after you" when they come indoors – they seek only shelter or hiding places. To discourage them from entering, close off door gaps with a draught excluder, check floorboards and skirting for holes or cracks, cover ground-level vents or ducts with narrow mesh and repair broken foundations, brickwork or flashings. Long grass or thick herbage close to the house may encourage them, so

**Q** Do you need help from one of our experts? Email your questions to [homehelp@the-sunday-times.co.uk](mailto:homehelp@the-sunday-times.co.uk). Advice is given without responsibility.

maintain a close-mown lawn, and put gravel, patio or flagstones around the building. This creates an open prospect, where snakes feel vulnerable and are loath to venture across. Keep compost bins and wood piles (which they love) far away from the house. Malaysia has about 20 venomous snake species, so get a professional to remove them.

Richard Jones is the author of *House Guests*, *House Pests* (Bloomsbury, £9.99); [bugmanjones.com](mailto:bugmanjones.com)

**Q** The previous owner of my house dabbed paint onto the walls in an effort to smarten it up for buyers. In so doing, he left paint blobs on the uPVC window frames, which I can't remove. I have tried white spirit and nail polish remover. Scraping it off leaves marks. What do you suggest?

Eileen Robinson, Swindon

**A** Use something like Home Strip Paint Strripper (£9.95, B&Q), which can be used on uPVC. Try it on a paint blob on a small part of the frame first.

Steven Zckoll is the director of 0800 Handyman; 0800handyman.co.uk



**Q** I live in a detached two-bedroom brick bungalow built in 1972. I have occupied it since 1987 with no problems. In April 2015, late at night, I was woken by a loud cracking noise from the ceiling, followed by more at differing intervals. I vacated the room fearing a catastrophe.

I called in a structural engineer, then hired a builder to rectify all the items listed by the engineer. During the following weeks, through the summer, the noises abated, but by November, the noises returned, meaning I had to sleep in the lounge.

I called in the engineer to check the builder's work; all areas had been corrected. I then spent many nights sleeping in the lounge. By the end of January this year, all areas of the bungalow were making cracking and popping noises at no logical times. So the builder and I turned our attention to the plasterboard ceilings. He inserted 200 screws in the bedroom ceiling, through the plasterboard and into the joists. This has improved things, with fewer and quieter noises; I can now sleep there with earplugs.

The rest of the house continues to crack and pop – the other bedroom, south-facing, is worse when the sun comes out following a dull period. This points to temperature change. The only previous works were additional roof insulation, installed in 2012. The original insulation was between the joists with top of the joists exposed; they are now covered by additional insulation. I am at the end of my tether, but I can't afford a brand new roof.

BB, Leicestershire

## QUESTION OF THE WEEK

**A** We had a similar situation with a bungalow that we worked on.

The black plastic guttering and downpipes have a tendency to expand, especially on a hot day. The cracking and popping noises happen when they start to cool down in the evening and into the night.

Before spending more money, try to locate the source of the noise. Go into the loft and get as close as you can to the sound. If it is coming from the eaves, that's likely the problem. The best remedy is to change the black guttering and downpipes for white ones, as they reflect the heat. Plastic piping doesn't cost much and is straightforward to replace. Alternatively, use aluminium or cast iron, as these don't seem to suffer the same issues.

In relation to the plasterboard ceilings and attaching them to the joists, lofts are generally insulated just above the ceiling, which leaves the loft space exposed to severe changes in temperature. On a hot day, the heat in a loft can be unbearable. This causes the structure to expand. As the day ends and things cool down, the structure will contract, possibly leading to noises, but it is not common for the noises to be as bad as you describe. Insulating the roof to prevent extreme temperatures in the loft might help, but try to find the cause of the problem first. Otherwise, any of these solutions could be a waste of time or money.

Duncan Macleod is the director of Harrington Grey, a home refurbishment company based in north London; [harringtongrey.co.uk](http://harringtongrey.co.uk)

## TOP TIPS

From cobwebbed lampshades to grimy keyboards, here's how to bust them in every room.

■ **Dusty lampshades** Brush with a lint roller. We like the Flint Lint Roller (£6.99; [johnlewis.com](http://johnlewis.com)), with perforated sheets.

■ **Window blinds** Put a sock over your hand and run it over each slat. Also try Lakeland's Venetian Blind Slat Cleaner (£3.59; [lakeland.co.uk](http://lakeland.co.uk)), which dusts two slats at once.

■ **Dirty keyboard** Use a Post-it note's sticky edge to pick up

gunk between keys. Watch the video at [goodhousekeeping.co.uk/institute](http://goodhousekeeping.co.uk/institute) to see how.

■ **Delicate ornaments** Wear cotton gloves to give them a gentle brush.

■ **Dusty picture frames** Brush with a feather duster, then use an empty squeeze bottle to blast air into corners. Stiff paintbrushes and toothpicks get dirt out of crevices.

■ [goodhousekeeping.co.uk/institute](http://goodhousekeeping.co.uk/institute)



Illustration: Russell Hearn

# Home help

Whether you have a house that goes bump in the night or dahlias that fail to flourish, our experts are here to offer advice