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## QUESTION OF THE WEEK

**Q** Two years ago, I bought a refurbished Victorian terraced home that had been converted from two flats back to a house. We were the first people to occupy the property and the work had been completed about six months before the purchase.

We asked our conveyancing lawyer if we should have a clause protecting us against "snagging" problems. (In our experience, a retention of 10% is normal after a large building project.) He said no, because it was a refurbishment, not a rebuild.

We have suffered from eight serious faults, two of which the vendors, who are developers, have agreed to put right. We've also had 10 minor problems: appliances, plumbing, electrical and joinery fixtures that are inaccessible, incomplete or faulty. We believe these were caused largely by poor project management. Even the building-control officer missed a cloakroom extractor that had no ducting.

Could we have taken out protection that required the vendors to correct these faults? Until a property is occupied, many problems do not arise, so they are not covered by a property survey, and warranties may have expired by the time you move in. In the event, we have had to rely on the vendor's reputation and goodwill to trace tradesmen, organise a central-heating redesign and replace leaking french doors, but they were not legally obliged to help. Everything else we have repaired at our own expense.

ER, London

**A** First of all, with regards to the contractor's warranties, it may be beyond the scope of a conveyancer to check them and arrange for them to be transferred to a buyer.

Second, with such building conversions, even when the required statutory consents are obtained, it is advisable to instruct a surveyor to inspect the property. They can review the refurbishment and compile a snagging list that details any further works required.

If the refurbishment was substantial, then it is almost inevitable that snagging issues will arise after completion. Ideally, these should be identified prior to an exchange of contracts; then provisions can be agreed obliging the vendor to deal with required remedial works, preferably to the buyer's satisfaction.

In the absence of any specific snagging contractual obligations on the seller, they may argue "buyer beware" if they are asked to fix a problem, and refuse to accept responsibility. This highlights the importance of instructing a surveyor to identify any issues prior to exchange of contracts.

You mention that the vendors have assisted with some of the problems, which is encouraging. As for the unresolved issues, you should consult a solicitor, who can take full details from you, inspect the relevant paperwork and explain any other options that are available.

*Donall Murphy is a partner at Russell-Cooke Solicitors; russell-cooke.co.uk*

**Q** A few months ago I bought an oak flatpack wardrobe. I have recently noticed small holes and little piles of fine dust at its base. Is this caused by woodworm?

TL, Colchester

**A** The small holes and fine dust suggest that the powderpost beetle (*Lyctinae* or *Bostrichidae*) is causing the problem. These pests originate in sawmills, where they infest the sapwood (young wood) of wide-pored hardwood before it is converted into furniture, plywood, flooring or construction timbers. The powderpost beetle larvae feed on the sapwood, creating small holes and a talc-like dust. (Traditional woodworm infest timber after it has been in a property for several years, and produce a grittier dust.)

Powderpost beetles found their way to our shores after the First and Second World Wars, when North American hardwoods such as oak were imported after being stored for years awaiting shipment. Improved storage and hygiene standards have reduced the risk, but the growing popularity of imported hardwood flooring and flatpack furniture, as well as ply, green oak and willow



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wickerwork, has led to a noticeable increase of beetle numbers in Britain.

Most homes are constructed with softwoods, so powderpost beetles are unlikely to cause serious structural damage to your home. They also require very specific environmental conditions, so are unlikely to spread throughout the house. Typically, they do damage to one item and die once the sapwood has been consumed.

Primarily, powderpost beetles need to be treated at the sawmill or timber yard. Treatment in homes is difficult because of the nature of the infestation and the short life cycle. The removal of the sapwood, a process known as "defrassing", is often the only quick fix for construction timbers. Where finished products are concerned, it is often easier to negotiate with the supplier to replace the item. Failing that, fumigation is the best alternative. A gas containing sulfuryl fluoride is used effectively to eliminate all life stages of wood-boring insect infestations.

*Berwyn Evans is UK product manager at Rentokil Property Care; rentokil.co.uk*

**Q** An acquaintance recently told me that he used his electric immersion heater to provide hot water in the summer, instead of his gas boiler. He claimed that this was more economical. Is he right?

Colin Sim, Vale of Glamorgan

**A** The amount of energy it takes to heat a given volume of water by a given temperature is the same, whether you use gas or electricity. The unit price of gas, however, is about a quarter that of the unit price of electricity, so it is cheaper to heat your water with gas than electricity.

There are inherent inefficiencies when heating your water with gas: for example, the hot water needs to be pumped through cold pipes to the hot water cylinder. Nonetheless, it is widely agreed that gas heats water at about a 90% efficiency rate, so there is no chance that electricity is cheaper. We have an online guide on how to save money with heating and the best heating controls.

*Which? Energy Team; which.co.uk*

**Q** I live in a terraced house in east London with a tiny walled garden – about 15 ft square. It faces north, is shaded by tower blocks, is damp and cool, and only gets a bit of sunlight. I would like to create a lush and colourful garden with dense foliage. What should I plant?

LP, Bow, London

**A** Despite all of your garden challenges, there is one advantage to the shade cast by surrounding buildings: shelter. Small, enclosed spaces like yours might not have much direct sunlight, but the lack of leaf-ripping winds means lush and tender plants will thrive. Perhaps the most interesting for you would be Japanese banana (*Musa basjoo*), a plant that will grow to 10ft tall, forming an umbrella of pea-green leaves. At ground level, 'Garden Angel Plum' begonias make a lush carpet of foliage, as will bulletproof and slug-resistant bergenias (elephant's ears).

For flowers, *Phlomis russeliana* is fabulous, even in dry shade, bearing yellow pompom blooms that fade in autumn into attractive russet-brown towers, which will hold right through winter. As for evergreens, box balls combined with the bronze-leaved *Anemathele lessoniana* (pheasant's tail grass) add architecture and colour, as would the bright, strap-like leaves of *Phormium tenax* (New Zealand flax).

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



Illustration: Russel Hemman

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### WINNER

**Hayter Harrier 41 Autodrive VS, 97/100; £559; [hayter.co.uk](http://hayter.co.uk)**  
Cutting width: 41cm. Seven cutting heights: 13mm–60mm. Grass bag capacity: 53 litres. Cut grass cleanly without flattening it, and performed well even on long, wet grass. A foldable handle means it's straightforward to store, but the handle height is not adjustable.



**BARGAIN BUY**  
**Wolf Garten 1400W A340E-UK, 88/100; £100; [wolfgarten-tools.co.uk](http://wolfgarten-tools.co.uk)**  
Cutting width: 34cm. Six cutting heights: 25mm–75mm. Grass bag capacity: 30 litres. Performed well on shorter grass and on slightly wet grass. Easy to manoeuvre and lightweight, with a fabric grass collector rather than a plastic one. The handle folds for easy storage, but the short electric cable was restrictive.

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

# Home help

If you have a household problem, whether it's snagging issues in your new home or a dingy urban garden, our experts are here to offer advice