

No matter how long your home lingers unsold, you can comfort yourself that at least you're not Mark Twain.

The celebrated author put his Hartford, Conn., home on the market for \$60,000 in 1901, according to biographer Fred Kaplan. Despite repeated markdowns, the elaborate house failed to attract a buyer until the price was finally slashed to \$25,000 two years later.

What was once a much-loved home -- in which Twain estimated he'd invested more than \$100,000 -- became a painful albatross.

"I would rather go to hell," Twain wrote the friend who was helping him sell the place, "than own it 50 days longer."

If you want to avoid Twain's agony, you'd be smart to do some work up front to make sure your house sells fast.

9 tips from the experts...

Finish the "honey do" list.

Just about every homeowner has a string of little repairs that never quite get done. Now's the time. Fix the screens, oil that squeak, patch the cracks, paint the trim. Stuff that you've long since stopped noticing could be shouting "Deferred maintenance!" to every potential buyer.

The cost: A few bucks if you're handy, a couple of hundred or so if you hire someone who is.

Get inspected

A pre-sale inspection can help in two ways, says real estate columnist Tom Kelly. Professional inspections can identify problems that could thwart a sale in time to fix them. And if there are no major problems, he said, an inspection can publicize that fact to skittish buyers.

"Having an inspection (report) right on the counter during the open house . . . shows the buyers that the seller's got nothing to hide," said Kelly, author of several real-estate books, including "Cashing in on a Second Home in Mexico."

The cost: Around \$400. Pack up the clutter. "Clutter eats equity," said real-estate broker Barb Schwarz, CEO of StagedHomes.com and a pioneer of the concept of professionally preparing houses for sale.

Say to no clutter

Too much stuff makes rooms look smaller and focuses buyers' attention on your possessions rather than the home you're trying to sell. That's why many professional stagers recommend removing as much as a third of your things to better show off rooms and closets.

"Since you're going to have to pack it up anyway, do it now," advised Schwarz, who said she has staged more than 5,000 homes. Buyers "can't imagine themselves living there if they can't see the space."

The cost: \$150 to \$300 a month for three months' storage.

Depersonalize and neutralize

The first items that should go in those packing boxes: family photos, collections and just about anything else that says "you." Streamline your artwork and consider toning down bold decorating statements, said Ilyce Glink, author of "50 Simple Steps You Can Take to Sell Your Home Faster and for More Money in Any Market." That means neutral shades if you need to repaint walls or replace carpets.

"Buyers have a hard enough time envisioning how their stuff will look on your walls," Glink said. "By neutralizing your decor, you can help give them the blank canvas they need to imagine your house as theirs."

The cost: \$10 and up for paint; \$500 and up for new carpet.



Be a "Clean Freak"

Clean like a fiend. "I mean Q-Tip clean," said Schwarz, who recommends taking a cotton swab to faucets and fixtures, scouring fingerprints from all the switch plates, shining windows until they're spotless and vacuuming up every last dog hair from the baseboards. "You should be able to eat off the kitchen floor, the bathroom floor."

You'll need to banish suspect smells as well; you don't want your house to become known in real-estate circles as "the cat pee place." If your pets have had one too many accidents, you may need to replace the affected carpet and padding and have the underlying floor sealed. If you're not sure how your place smells, get your least tactful friend to take a few whiffs and tell you the honest truth.

The cost: \$10 or so in home cleaning products, if you do it yourself; \$75 and up if you hire help.

Stage the rooms

Stand in the doorway to find each room's focal point, and use furniture placement to highlight that. The back of your sofa shouldn't block the view of the fireplace, for example, and the dining room table shouldn't be sharing space with a stair climber.

You should remove any extraneous pieces of furniture, but you may be able to "repurpose" them in another room. A wingback chair that's crowding the family room might help create a nice reading nook in the master bedroom, Schwarz suggested. The cost: Nothing, if you do it yourself; \$1,500 and up if you hire a professional stager.

Tend to the floors

Keeping them spotless won't help if they're dated, worn or impossibly stained. You shouldn't spend a fortune installing hardwood or tile, though, since you're unlikely to recoup the cost. Look for compromises that can improve the home's appearance without busting your wallet.

Carpets should be steam-cleaned to see if they're salvageable. If not, you may be able to reduce the costs of replacement by offering to do some of the work, such as removing the old carpet and moving furniture.

And banish scatter rugs, Schwarz advised. Little rugs add to the visual clutter and can be dangerous besides.

The cost: Anywhere from a few bucks to a few hundred bucks.

Kick up the curb appeal

By now, you probably realize the garden gnomes are a no-no. But you may not realize how many sales you're losing before potential buyers even get to the front door.

"Most people will start their search for a home on the Internet. If your house's Internet photo doesn't 'wow' them, they might never call for a showing," Glink said. "That's why your front landscaping needs to be in perfect condition." Given the pressure to make a good first impression, you'll need to do more than trim back the hedges and plant a few pansies.

"Hire a professional landscaper to clean up the leaves, plant some fall flowers, trim the bushes and trees, and really manicure your lawn," Glink suggested. "If your front walkway is cracked, now might be the time to replace it."

The cost: \$300 to \$500 for the landscaping, more if you need to fix walkways or driveways. Pick the right publicist. If you're working with an agent, you'll want one who can really sell. That means somebody who knows your neighborhood intimately and who's enthusiastic about your home. That also means someone other agents want to work with; someone who's too abrasive or who isn't trustworthy won't help your cause.

Set the right price

A seller may think she's just testing the market with a high price tag, assuming buyers will at least make an offer, but buyers may assume she's unreasonable and move on.

Your goal should be a fair price -- something that's reasonable given the price of other homes in your area.

"Buyers who are actively searching for a fairly-priced home," Glink said, "will pounce on what they perceive is fair value."

Courtesy of MSN Money