

# House work: Jobs in residential upkeep



**F**or many people, domestic bliss does not involve cleaning, home repairs, or yard work. But that doesn't mean that their vision of a happy home involves a dirty, broken-down house with an unkempt yard. It simply means that they prefer to pay others to do the grittier tasks of residential upkeep. And in doing so, they create employment opportunities for the care and cleaning of homes.

This article highlights three occupations—handypersons, maids and housekeepers, and landscaping and groundskeeping workers—that involve specific types of house calls. These occupations may not be at the top of every jobseeker's choice careers, but they offer some advantages. In general, entering these occupations requires little formal education, and paid training occurs on the job. Workers often have the opportunity to work part time, and self-employment is possible.

The following pages describe the job duties, training, wages, and more for each occupation. You'll also find sources of additional information at the end of the article.

## Handypersons

Most homeowners encounter household maintenance and repair projects that they can't, won't, or shouldn't do themselves. Maybe a lock needs to be changed, a porch needs to be painted, or storm windows need to be installed. For these types of jobs, homeowners often rely on help from a handyperson.

Handypersons are fix-it generalists who have a knack for thinking through a problem to find a solution. They are hired to complete household maintenance and repair tasks that are not complex enough to require the specialized training of a licensed tradesperson, such as a plumber or electrician, but that require certain skills and knowledge. They also are responsible for recognizing when a job is above their skill level and requires the expertise of a tradesperson.

Handypersons usually know basic construction tasks. Services might involve both interior and exterior work and require a variety of skills. For example, replacing an outdoor light fixture could require basic

carpentry skills, as well as an elementary knowledge of electrical wiring.

Most handyperson jobs for hire begin with meeting the prospective homeowner-client to learn about the work that needs to be done. Some jobs are straightforward and simple, but others may be complicated. The handyperson explains how he or she will approach the job and how much it should cost. A more detailed cost estimate might be provided when the homeowner hires the handyperson to do the job.

The variety of tasks that a handyperson performs can be complicated by the range of conditions under which he or she must work: in confined or cramped spaces, in all kinds of weather, or at great heights, for example. And because home maintenance and repair runs the gamut from simple to complex, handypersons must be adept at using many kinds of tools and at understanding wiring diagrams, installation instructions, and other informational documents.

Legal requirements governing handypersons vary by State and locality. Some jurisdictions require handypersons to register or file insurance paperwork. In most places, however, there are few barriers to entering the occupation. Many handypersons are self-employed, and others work for small companies.

There is an increasing trend toward large construction companies operating handyperson divisions for home maintenance and repair. These companies generally provide their employees with insurance, tax payments, and assignments.

**Training and skills.** There are few formal training requirements for becoming a handyperson, and specialized training is not required. Although most of a handyperson's duties are not complex or difficult, they may need specialized knowledge and skills. Practical training, available at many adult education centers and community colleges, is helpful for learning tasks such as drywall repair and basic plumbing.

Math aptitude is especially useful for handypersons for tasks involving measuring and calculating areas. They also need

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good interpersonal skills to interact with a variety of clients. And because clients hire a handyperson to do work that they may not be able to be themselves, the handyperson must be able to communicate concepts in a way clients can understand.

**Job market and wages.** BLS does not collect employment and wage data specifically for handypersons. Their duties, however, closely match those of general maintenance and repair workers, an occupation for which BLS does produce data. In May 2009, there were nearly 1.3 million of these workers employed by establishments nationwide, and they earned a median annual wage of about \$35,000. These data, however, exclude self-employed workers, and anecdotal information suggests that many handypersons may fall into this category.

Employment of general maintenance and repair workers is expected to grow about as fast as the average for all occupations over the 2008–18 decade. But prospects should be excellent overall as the need arises to replace workers leaving this large occupation.

## **Maids and housekeepers**

For most homeowners, a happy home is a tidy one. But housecleaning is sometimes considered more chore than cheer. Homeowners who would rather hire someone to do the work than to do it themselves turn to maids and housekeepers.

Maids and housekeepers clean and do a range of other household tasks. Typical duties

include vacuuming, mopping, and dusting throughout the house, as well as sanitizing kitchens and bathrooms. Some maids and housekeepers also empty trash bins, wash dishes, and do laundry.

Almost anything inside a house can be cleaned or tidied by maids and housekeepers. For example, workers might wash windows; clean appliances; wash, fold, and iron clothes or other linens, such as tablecloths; polish furniture or silver; and clean floors.

When cleaning, maids and housekeepers must be careful with clients' possessions. Clients usually pick up clutter before maids or housekeepers arrive, but some general straightening may be necessary. Workers often bring their own cleaning supplies, although sometimes clients prefer to provide certain products.

Work arrangements for maids and housekeepers vary considerably. Some maids and housekeepers are employed by large cleaning companies that service many homes; others are self-employed and have informal relationships with a few clients.

Larger companies handle most administrative tasks for their employees, such as scheduling and arranging payment from the client. Maids and housekeepers working for a company may be required to pass a background check, and the employer often must be able to secure a bond on the employee—a kind of insurance against losses to the client. These procedures protect the employee, the homeowner, and the service company.

Maids and housekeepers who are self-employed usually manage scheduling and payment matters themselves. They also have other responsibilities, including building a clientele. Workers typically gain new clients through referrals from existing, satisfied ones.

Housekeeping is physical work but is generally not strenuous. Bending, standing for long periods, reaching and twisting, and repetitive motion are routine in this occupation. Maids and housekeepers also work with cleaning chemicals, which are sometimes toxic; however, cleaning products that are natural and less harmful are widely available.

Maids and housekeepers must understand what each client expects, such as which rooms are to be cleaned or which linens are to be changed. Because the client is frequently absent from the home while the cleaning is done, details of the job must be explained before the time or price is established. For example, clients might request that additional rooms be cleaned thoroughly for special occasions, such as a family party, in which case workers must adjust their schedules and the amount they charge for that particular day.

**Training and skills.** Formal training is rarely required for maids and housekeepers. But some knowledge, such as how to safely and efficiently use cleaning chemicals and equipment, is essential.

Maids and housekeepers interact with clients and may work as part of a team, so interpersonal skills are important. Basic math and accounting are helpful in calculating and tracking payment, especially for those who are self-employed.

**Job market and wages.** There were about 888,000 maids and housekeepers employed in establishments across the United States in May 2009, according to BLS. These data

include workers in hotels, hospitals, and other institutions, however, as well as residential housekeepers, and self-employed workers are excluded. Data also show that these workers earned a median annual wage of about \$19,000.

BLS projects slower-than-average employment growth for maids and housekeepers over the 2008–18 decade. But prospects should be good because of the need to replace workers leaving this large occupation.

## Landscaping and groundskeeping workers

A beautiful yard helps homeowners present a favorable impression to visitors and passersby. And homeowners unwilling or unable to invest the time and effort to create such an impression may instead invest in the services of landscaping and groundskeeping workers.

Landscaping workers, also called landscapers, create aesthetically pleasing outdoor spaces. Groundskeeping workers, also called groundskeepers, maintain previously established landscapes. Although their duties are distinct, landscaping and groundskeeping workers may perform some of the same tasks and sometimes work together.

Landscapers begin a project by talking with a prospective client about what he or she wants. They take these preferences into account when planning a new design for front or backyard spaces. Then, landscapers measure the area and consider soil types, sunlight availability, and other factors before drawing up plans for the layout.

The work involved in each job depends on the landscaper's vision—and the client's budget. For example, landscapers might lay sod and plant trees, bushes, and flowers to enhance a yard's beauty. By adding edging and mulch around their plantings, landscapers establish sections and help to minimize weeds. Retaining walls, walkways, patios, water gardens, and other structures create ambiance. And to address other considerations, such as safety or convenience, landscapers might install in-ground lights or sprinklers.





After completing installation of their design, landscapers must devise a plan for its upkeep. This plan, which also requires client approval, includes timetables for watering plantings, mowing the lawn, and trimming existing vegetation.

Groundskeepers implement the plan for maintaining existing yards. In addition to watering and mowing, they might apply fertilizers or other lawn products to eliminate weeds or pests. They also trim grass in areas that the lawnmower can't reach and replenish mulch around plants, as needed.

Landscaping and groundskeeping workers use tools such as push and ride-on lawn mowers, clippers, rakes, and shovels. Some lawn-care work may require use of tractors, back-hoes, or other heavy equipment. Repairing and maintaining these tools and equipment is another of their tasks.

Work arrangements for landscapers and groundskeepers vary. Many of these workers are self-employed; others work for landscaping companies. Their jobs are physically demanding and often require working in severe weather, including extreme temperatures.

Except in warmer regions of the United States, landscaping and groundskeeping work is largely seasonal. Workers are usually busiest during the growing seasons, but

opportunities also exist at other times—for raking and mulching leaves in the fall, for example, and for clearing snow or ice from walkways and driveways in the winter.

**Training and skills.** There are no specific educational requirements for landscaping and groundskeeping workers. To advance or specialize, however, formal training in horticulture or landscape design is beneficial. This training is available at community colleges and adult education centers. In addition, professional organizations offer certification based on experience and successful completion of an examination.

Because of the work involved in these occupations, landscapers and groundskeepers should be physically fit. And workers must be able to work with poisonous or allergy-inducing plants and insects, as well as fertilizers, pesticides, and other chemicals.

Some States require that landscape contractors be licensed, and most require certification or licensure—usually acquired by completing a written test—for those who apply pesticides. And workers who operate motor vehicles or heavy equipment must have the relevant driver's or operator's license.

**Job market and wages.** Landscaping and groundskeeping workers held almost 860,000 wage and salary jobs in May 2009, according to BLS. Their annual median wage was

about \$23,000. These data, however, exclude the self-employed, and other BLS data suggest that a significant number of people in these occupations work for themselves. Higher skilled workers are often able to earn more.

BLS projects employment of landscaping and groundskeeping workers to grow faster than average over the 2008–18 decade. This growth is expected to come from both commercial and residential clients. Factors driving residential growth include time constraints faced by an increasing number of dual-income households and physical limitations of an aging population.

### For more information

In addition to the occupations described in this article, other workers serve people’s household-care needs. The *Occupational Outlook Handbook* has descriptions of a wide variety of occupations, including their job duties, wages, training requirements, and more. Find the *Handbook* in libraries, career centers, or online at [www.bls.gov/ooH](http://www.bls.gov/ooH).

Professional associations also offer information for people interested in the careers discussed in the article.

For general information about handypersons, contact:

The Association of Certified Handyman Professionals

[www.achpnet.org](http://www.achpnet.org)

For general information about maids and housekeepers, contact:

The Association of Residential Cleaning Services International

7870 Olentangy River Rd., Suite 300  
Columbus, OH 43235  
(614) 547–0887

[www.arcsi.org](http://www.arcsi.org)

For information about landscaping and groundskeeping workers, contact:

The Professional Landcare Network  
950 Herndon Pkwy., Suite 450  
Herndon, VA 20176

Toll free: 1 (800) 395–2522

[www.landcarenetwork.org](http://www.landcarenetwork.org)



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