



TECH SPOTLIGHT : Better Homes and Gardens Picture Painter takes the guesswork out of redecorating

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Straggler, lagger, procrastinator, call me what you will.

Most homeowners get the itch at the beginning of spring. It's time to clean the garage. It's time to repaint. It's time to make a new garden. It's time to redecorate.

Not me. I get the itch in late spring or early summer. While others are busy not being busy or, better still, vacationing, I'm the schmuck out there in the heat planting flowers, painting door frames or shopping for knick-knacks for my newly decorated living room.

If I was smarter, or less of a masochist, I'd get this itch in early spring with everyone else, when it's not 95 degrees outside. It's especially bad when I complete a task and decide I don't really like it, so I decide to redo it a couple of weeks later.

Luckily, I've found a tool that can help me plan things out better so I only have to do it once. The best part is, I can plan my redecorating and see the results all in the comfort of my air-conditioned home.

The tool is the Better Homes and Gardens Picture Painter Home & Landscape. This lengthy-monikered program combines photos of your home or garden with images, materials and colors to show what the area would look like with a face-lift.

This software lets you see changes before you make them, and it does it both inside and outside the home.

It's a very simple concept. You start by opening a photo of the room you wish to redecorate, or a shot outside of the area you wish to redo or landscape. The software lets you crop your photo and adjust it so it's ready to edit.

Once you've got the background photo, it's time to make changes. I worked with my living room. The first thing I wanted to do was to create an accent wall by painting it a different color from the other three.

The first step is to create a new layer. Each item added to the photo is added in layers, which makes it easier to manipulate each item. You can even hide the layer or layers or remove each layer altogether.

Using the brush tool, I "painted" my future accent wall after choosing my color from

several folders of brand-name paints. In this case, I started with the blue palette from Sherwin-Williams. Using the brush, I was able to highlight the wall and apply the paint color. Sliding bars let me adjust the translucence of the paint, so I could see the wall underneath if needed or make the color stand out more. The first color just didn't look right with the furniture in the room, but that was OK. I had several colors in mind. Would they look all right against the green couch against the wall ?

As it turns out, no, they wouldn't. The next color clashed horribly, another was too pale, the next made the couch stand out far too much. But it was easy to try out different colors. It just took one click. I finally found a smoky blue color that was perfect for the room.

Then I wondered what it would be like if I got rid of the green couch, another ambition of mine. The software offered a wide variety of fabric colors and textures. Once again, I found exactly what I wanted. With more than 6, 000 choices, it wasn't terribly hard. I even found a big, flatscreen television to mount on another wall. That definitely looked nice. Maybe someday....

I like how the software makes it easy to add several of the same item. For example, if you're redoing the kitchen, it might take forever to draw a square for each cabinet. But in this software, once you specify the size and shape the first time, a simple click of the mouse will pop up an identical item elsewhere. It makes it a lot easier to add cabinets to the kitchen.

The software also worked with outdoor shots. With more than 500 trees, plants and shrubs available, you can design a simple flower bed, as I did, or a complex landscaping project for the whole yard. Again, the one-click addition works great here, because you can put the same shrub or plant in different locations without having to draw a location box for each one.

While you could spend weeks combining all the images that come with this program, you're not limited to just those images. The program will let you import your own images and apply them to photos of your home. Let's say you find an adorable end table on the Internet that you think would be great in your living room. Just import the image and plop it down next to the couch, and you can get an idea of how it would look before you actually plop the cash down. This may seem to be too much trouble. Ask yourself this, though. How many times have you loved it in the store, gotten it home, and loved it a lot less ? I've done that plenty of times. Trying it out this way first is bound to save some money.

The only problem with the software is that navigation between the layers can be a bit cumbersome. It's not so bad with only three or four layers. But if you have dozens of changes to one photo, going from layer to layer to layer can get to be a pain.

Still, the software does what it claims, allowing me to see what my projects will look like before I even go to purchase a thing. In that way, it's a time saver and money saver. It also lets me plan all this in my air-cooled home, instead of doing things over and over out in the hot sun. That makes it a lifesaver.

Now that the plans are laid, all that's left is to do the work. Mmm... maybe later. Melissa L. Jones can be reached via e-mail at mljones72@mac.com.

Where it's @ Better Homes and Gardens Picture Painter Home & Landscape requires Windows XP or Vista; 512 MB of memory and 2 GB on the hard drive. There is no Macintosh version available. The program retails for \$ 69.99. More information is available at www.homedesignersoftware.com.

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