

Spring FEVER

Spring signals the season of investment movement, writes **Liesl Johnstone**

SPRING IS BOON-TIME for property investors. It's not so cold you need layer up jerseys. And somehow, with the sun and flowers comes additional energy, absent over winter.

Maybe this is nature's way of putting a metaphorical bomb under us. And rest assured renters are also stirring.

It's action time at your investment properties. Seasoned investors are urging you on. In the same way you suddenly notice dirty windows when higher-intensity sun streams through, your tenants will be feeling down if the property they're in isn't being maintained.

It's also when those who were renting to save for a deposit may be looking to buy and move out, allowing you (hopefully not much) time to upgrade, and upscale your rental returns. Don't be taken by surprise. It pays to be ready, so when your tenants say they're going, swing into quick renovations.

Kim Willems, the managing director of Ruby Housing in Christchurch, believes there's huge value in a post-winter clean-up at all rental properties, not least because extreme weather events often happen during spring.

"One really important thing to do around now is to clear out all drains and gutters which can become full of leaves relatively quickly," Willems says. "Strong spring winds and the odd heavy downpour can push water in blocked gutterings which abut walls, inside the wall linings. A back-flow of water is created by the blockage. So that's easily avoided."

The same goes for chopping foliage back to avoid coming into contact with exteriors. It's the ideal time for a garden prune and tidy-up, before the fast-growing months of summer.

Mark Trafford, owner of MaintainTo Profit in Auckland is a realist when it comes to tenants and gardening.





Whites and neutrals give fresh appeal

“Even if keeping the garden tidy is not in the rental contract, if your tenants’ lives are just so professionally busy they can’t do it, it pays to face facts and have nothing but lawns and slow-growing trees.

“A chat to the tenants might prove they’re happy to pay a little extra to have lawns mowed; just to have the responsibility removed and the prospect of a neat, tidy landscape. And spring is the ideal time to make such changes.”

Kim Willems favours planting Hebes and other natives for a low-maintenance, attractive exterior to rental properties. Her company’s maintenance staff water-blasts paths, decks and pavers for a totally clean incarnation, and to keep edges sharp and weed-free.

On the financial side, she says spring is also a good time to flag a rental review, even if only a minimal rent rise is to take effect 60 days later. The tenants then know the rental manager/landlord isn’t letting anything slide.

HOW IS THE PLACE LOOKING?

A simple question, but one which, after winter, may be answered with a litany of newly discovered horrors.

While in the garden, if you spy mould and mildew on the curtains, it probably means your tenants haven’t adequately vented the house. You then need a better, bigger fan installed on a timer, in both bathroom and kitchen. Make it automated, to come on with the light.

IF THE SPRING COINCIDES WITH A GAP BETWEEN TENANTS OF SEVERAL DAYS, EXAMINE YOUR PROPERTY FOR WAYS OF ADDING STORAGE, OR MORE AMBITIOUSLY, ANOTHER BEDROOM

– MARK TRAFFORD

And it costs very little to buy ready-made drapes at a sales table. Carry the measurements of windows with you, to allow canny spur-of-moment purchases. (End-of-line bargains may not appear online, but you might happen to drive past a curtain sale sign and spot them.)

Mark Trafford recommends investors go the extra mile to achieve extra-clean, tidy homes which attract great tenants, rather than sit idly collecting sub-optimal rents.

His top tips for achieving healthy rents are to have your properties painted internally in whites (which need not look cold and clinical – see the huge Resene range, for example) and to ensure heat pumps are installed. If the flooring isn’t pristine, replace the carpet or put down some classy linoleum. None of these interventions needs cost a huge sum.

“If the spring coincides with a gap between tenants of several days, examine your property for ways of adding storage, or more ambitiously, another bedroom,” Trafford says.

For example, a smallish office could become a cute, ‘boutique’ bedroom with a small bed and a large mirror and perhaps some wall shelving to create storage without visually reducing space.

Trafford talks about tenants’ busy lives more than once. On a psychological level the need for bright, light uncluttered spaces becomes more intense as our lives become more clogged with to-do lists. Would-be tenants can see at a glance that their own possessions will look good in light airy rooms which flow seamlessly into the next.

Mark Trafford uses large mirrors to reflect sun and light, and visually increase perceived space. Externally, the same principle applies. Cut-back grass and bushes from pathways and driveways to make an address seem welcoming and generously proportioned.

“What you want is a bit of a contest for the tenancy. Get the house, gate and letterbox presented perfectly, including chem-washing exteriors. If it looks



Consider allowing pets for a higher rent

beautiful you normally get at least one prospective tenant saying he/she’s prepared to pay another \$20 per week to secure it. As property investors, that’s what we want,” Trafford underlines.

Other “small stuff” needs attention, too, at this time of year, and particularly between tenancies. Certain actions reduce hassle later on, such as physically checking all appliances are working, vacuuming and cleaning heat pump filters (or having these professionally serviced) and checking alarms and security lights are working properly.

As a landlord, you can sometimes command optimal rental sums by allowing approved pets (and by providing the requisite fully fenced property).

It’s true many rentals come with the ‘absolutely no pets’ tag, but if you meet the pet and it doesn’t try to bite, it’s an opportunity to accept said pet in return for higher rent.

Once you’ve booked your open home, then done your maintenance and renovations, have a look around and create an interesting and attractive focal point for each room.

Are the curtains pulled right back to maximise every millimetre of natural light? Does the place smell fresh? Has it been cleaned to within an inch of its life?

Present your property as the best of its type in the area, and you’ll be able to ask for a top rental sum. Simple. It’s a spring cinch. ■