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A Note from Ann:

Happy March! I hope everyone is enjoying an early Spring. Here's an interesting tidbit for you: According to the National Association of Realtors; January existing home sales reported the highest growth rate in 10 years (since Feb 2007) - [see the full article here](#).

This month my educational tidbit is on MIP - Mortgage Insurance Premiums. These are those pesky little fees that get added to your loan (and often upfront fees as well) to give the lender "insurance" in case you don't pay your loan. You are slapped with these fees when you do not put enough "skin" in the game. To avoid these fees a 20% down payment would be required. In recent years the rules have changed regarding MIP, depending upon the type of loan. Here's a snippet of the fees charged by different types of loans:

(We will use a loan amount of \$200,000 based on a 30 year term for these examples)

FHA: FHA requires only 3.5% down. However, for this lower down-payment, you will pay 1.75% up front MIP and .85% for the life of the loan. So, using the figures above, you would pay an upfront fee of \$3500 at closing and \$141.66 per month for this insurance. FHA has loan limits but they are higher than you might expect.

USDA: USDA is only allowed in rural areas, all of our local area qualifies. It will allow you to put 0 down. You will pay a 1% upfront fee and .35% for the life of the loan. This would result in \$2000 upfront fees at close and \$58.33 per month. Less than FHA, but they do have income restrictions you have to fit within.

VA: VA requires only an upfront fee - called a Funding Fee - which varies based on length of service, down payment and type of home, and can even be waived for certain situations.

Conventional: Conventional loans have come a long way. They now offer as little as 3% down payment. The MIP fees are based on your credit score and down payment, so I am unable to provide an example. However the good news with the conventional loan is the ability to stop paying the MIP payments once you have 20% equity in your home (with a 2 year minimum payment required). You can get to the 20% many ways - by paying down the loan or if you are in an area that is experiencing rising home values, such as ours, your home value is going up yearly in addition to your payments.

There are, of course, exceptions to every rule, and I understand the government is looking at the regulations regarding this very issue and may make changes in the near future. As you can see, once Conventional Loans dropped their required down payment, they made real competition for the government backed loans. For now, if you can, Conventional would be the cheapest loan in the long run in most instances. As always, I recommend you talk to a good lender to find out which loan type works best for your situation. I'd be happy to refer you to some good local lenders if you need assistance.

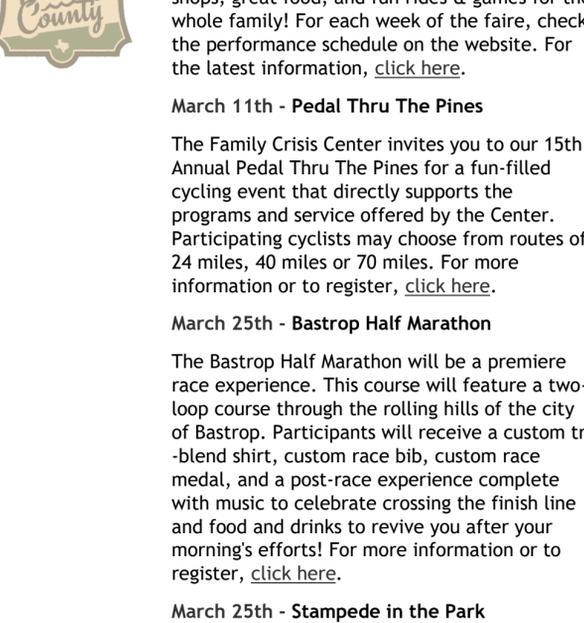
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Bastrop Area Monthly Statistics

Below are the current statistics for the Bastrop Area. The average home sale price for February was \$185,291, which is up +6.8% from the previous year. The average home sale price for 2017, so far, is \$189,891, which is up +4.4% from 2016.



Around Town



Upcoming Events

March 4th–April 23rd - Sherwood Forest Faire

Featuring over 40 stage acts, over 130 merchant shops, great food, and fun rides & games for the whole family! For each week of the faire, check the performance schedule on the website. For the latest information, [click here](#).

March 11th - Pedal Thru The Pines

The Family Crisis Center invites you to our 15th Annual Pedal Thru The Pines for a fun-filled cycling event that directly supports the programs and services offered by the Center. Participating cyclists may choose from routes of 24 miles, 40 miles or 70 miles. For more information or to register, [click here](#).

March 25th - Bastrop Half Marathon

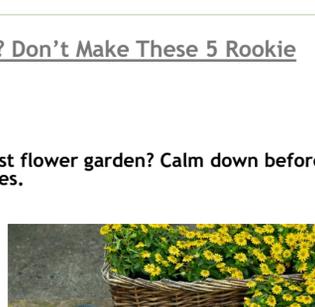
The Bastrop Half Marathon will be a premiere race experience. This course will feature a two-loop course through the rolling hills of the city of Bastrop. Participants will receive a custom tri-blend shirt, custom race bib, custom race medal, and a post-race experience complete with music to celebrate crossing the finish line and food and drinks to revive you after your morning's efforts! For more information or to register, [click here](#).

March 25th - Stampede in the Park

The Friends of Science Park will host their first annual 5K run and 1-Mile family fun run/walk. Stampede in the Park will take place at the MD Anderson Cancer Center Science Park Campus in Smithville. All funds raised at this event will be kept local and used for scholarships for graduate students working towards their PhD or MS at the Science Park Campus. For more information or to register, [click here](#).

Kitchen Countertops: Quartz vs. Granite

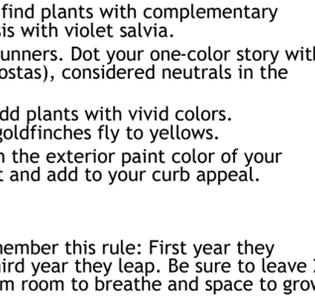
With the numerous choices of countertop materials on the market, it's often difficult to determine which will be the best choice for your home and for prospective buyers. Granite has long been the top choice for homeowners for their kitchen countertops, however quartz is now taking the top spot, and for good reason.



1. **Appearance** - Quartz, unlike other stone slabs, can be designed with a controlled appearance. The way quartz slabs are crafted allows the fabricator to provide you with the exact color, texture and pattern that you desire. Whereas with granite, you will have to hand select the pieces you want to use to make sure the patterns are similar and will match your color scheme once installed. Most homeowners do not know that some granite slabs are professionally dyed in order to improve their sales price. The most regularly dyed slabs are the group of black granites. As time passes, the dye changes and the look of the countertop may not be what you originally expected.
2. **Durability** - Quartz countertops are manufactured using 95 percent ground natural quartz and 5 percent polymer resins and some colorant. This creates a remarkably hard stone that is stronger than granite or marble. In fact, quartz is nearly indestructible. However, quartz is not heat resistant like granite, so you will need to make sure to always use a trivet or potholder when placing hot pans on the counter.
3. **Environmentally-Friendly** - Since quartz is engineered, it can be more eco-friendly than granite by purchasing it through a local fabricator. This cuts down on the transportation and energy costs. Where as granite must be quarried, which uses a lot of energy and resources to produce.
4. **Maintenance** - Granite countertops are porous and must be sealed regularly to prevent staining and the growth of bacteria. If you spill wine or coffee on unsealed granite, it can sink into the countertop and potentially permanently stain the stone. This maintenance adds to the cost of these countertops. Quartz does not require sealing or other routine maintenance to maintain its beauty and functionality, and because it isn't porous like granite, it's easy to keep your countertops relatively bacteria-free.

Mow Time

Don't let the grass grow under your feet this season. For a healthy-looking yard, now's the time to get started. Take a page from HGTV's lawn care handbook with these tips.



First, clear the grass and roots and rototill 6 inches below ground. This will help prepare the area to include equal parts loam, sand and topsoil. During this time, create a slight slope to help with drainage.

If sod is not in your budget, the next step is to hand-seed or hydroseed (a technique that spreads the seeds evenly). Choose the grass seed that is right for your climate and how you will use the lawn.

When it's time to cut the grass, set the mower to the highest notch that only mows the top third. This helps with root development and prevents the ground from drying out too quickly.

Then, get out the hose. If you just seeded, water every day for five to 10 minutes. After your grass comes up, water once a day for 15 to 20 minutes. Consider your soil type to figure out how much.

Twice a year, in spring and fall, fertilize.

Designing a Flower Garden? Don't Make These 5 Rookie Mistakes

By: Lisa Kaplan Gordon

Excited about designing your first flower garden? Calm down before you make these 5 rookie mistakes.

When designing your first flower garden, you're bound to make some mistakes.



Nick Statton of Monrovia plant nursery says beginners don't ask enough questions or read planting labels. The cure? Don't be shy about bugging your local plant growers with basic inquiries — they're there to help!

George Pisegna of The Horticultural Society of New York says newbies don't know enough about their soil. Get smart by testing your soil.

What other mistakes do first-time gardeners make when designing and planting their flower gardens?

Mistake 1: Disregarding the sun

Do you know how many hours of full sun your garden gets each day in each season?

If you can delay gratification, study your yard over a year before designing a garden. See how long the sun shines in the fall, spring, and summer. Read planting labels to determine how much sun a particular plant needs.

Sun-loving plants, such as roses, need at least 6 hours of sun a day; partial sun/shade plants need 4 to 6 hours; and shade plants need little or dappled sunlight: more sun can burn their leaves.

Mistake 2: Failing to consider color

It doesn't matter what color story you tell, just make sure you know the story before you plant. Here are some ideas:

- Pull out your color wheel and find plants with complementary colors, such as yellow coreopsis with violet salvia.
- Monochromatic gardens are stunners. Dot your one-color story with whites (daisies) and greens (hostas), considered neutrals in the garden world.
- If you want to attract birds, add plants with vivid colors. Hummingbirds like reds, and goldfinches fly to yellows.
- Pick blooms that contrast with the exterior paint color of your house, so plants will stand out and add to your curb appeal.

Mistake 3: Over-planting

When it comes to perennials, remember this rule: First year they sleep; second year they creep; third year they leap. Be sure to leave 2-3 feet between plants, giving them room to breathe and space to grow.

Mistake 4: Favoring lines over bunches

Tulips look like lonely soldiers when planted in lines. Instead, arrange bulbs and plants in more natural-looking, odd-numbered clusters of 3, 5, 7, and so on.

Mistake 5: Forgetting that size matters

Check labels for mature plant heights. Tallest go in back; medium in the middle; shortest in front. And don't forget to place a focal point, like an ornamental tree or fountain.

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