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Fall May Be Perfect Time to Sell

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Curb appeal, inviting interiors, right pricing are key.

For the Huntsville area, fall is special. A burst of colorful leaves; a reason to light up the fireplace; and the opportunity to sell your house when it can be its coziest and most appealing.

If you're doubting how well your sale might go in the colder months, our team of experts say there's no reason worry. Get some apple cider, and get ready for some tips that'll show you how to get your price by taking care of everything: from pricing to curb appeal to decorating that seals the deal.

"This part of the country is blessed to have the seasons that we have. Take advantage of that and if you have a home on the market in not-ideal condition months, get a step ahead of your competition and get it ready correctly - the first time around," says Betty Hughes, owner of Hughes Properties in Huntsville,. "Price and curb appeal is first step no matter what time of year."

Before you go shopping for those pretty haystacks with the yellow and orange flowers on them for the front yard, Craig LaMar, associate broker with Coldwell Banker Premier, and Cindy Allen, broker with Re/Max, both say that pricing the house right should be your first priority. This is good year round advice to promote a good sale, but especially so in today's buyer's market. LaMar says it's not rocket science - it's a simple formula of price, presentation and promotion.

Hughes says buyer incentives like a good home warranty or offering to pay a year on the homeowners association dues or membership for amenities can also generate more interest in the house.

"The current buyer market means that you are in a pricing war and a beauty contest," LaMar says. "You must win them both to get the offer, and then have an experienced counselor to negotiate the best terms to turn the offer into a closing. A qualified buyer who is ready, willing and able to purchase has many, many choices. You must be the best priced and best looking property they see the day they are previewing property."

Remember, in a more competitive market, there are others out there pricing their houses to sell. LaMar warns overpriced houses can sit on the market for days, weeks or months, typically resulting in the seller repricing anyway or taking the house off the market.

"The market for sellers is more competitive than you have experienced in the last two years," he says. There is no premium in this buyer's market. The 'prize' is to get any offer and then be able to negotiate that offer to closing."

Another year-round fact is buyers are always looking for a deal, which brings us back to the vital emphasis on correct pricing.

"If the buyer is moving here from another area and was able to sell their property there, they probably did not realize the equity they had expected from the sale of their home," LaMar says. "When they purchase here, their objective will be to replace that equity, plus make a good purchase where that will not happen again. They have an abundance of choices to be able to create that situation. If they can't make a good deal, they will move on to the next property. You deal with that by being the best priced and most beautiful property they see on that day in the price range in which they are looking."

Allen offers the good news that statistics indicate that September sales in Madison County show single-family houses are selling at 98 percent of list-to-sell price. Low interest rates are luring buyers. She also says today's better-educated buyers know good

pricing, and their offers are based on the market price. An over-priced house tends to draw lower and lower offers as it sits on the market.

Selling in fall also means your house is competing with fewer properties on the market than the busier spring and summer months. Allen says the kids are back in school so fall buyers are typically ready to settle quickly, meaning they're ready to buy.

According to Hughes, "Homeowners sometimes get the mindset that holidays are not good to sell because it slows down some, but it is not always a given that there are no buyers. People still have to move for one reason or another, and sellers need to sell for reasons beyond their control."

And you get to do cool stuff like tastefully decorating your house for the holidays to give it that cozy feel. Our experts agree, however on this point: no going overboard. You can put out the pumpkin, but Allen says don't go crazy with halloween decorations or too many pumpkins. A few fall flowers will suffice. Hughes says simpler is better.

"You want the buyer to envision themselves and their things in the property, not yours," Lamar says. "Tasteful, neutral decors with a splash of color and fragrance here and there to provide sensory emotional responses are the key."

What's that you say about curb appeal? It's going to take some work. LaMar suggests planting evergreens to provide a "foundation of color" in the dreary, cold months, warm lighting from the street, porch and windows, and white pansies "nodding 'hello' in the late afternoon sun." And he adds nothing says "Buy Me" more than holly, nandinas, crackling birch bark or scented fir. Trim the landscape, add mulch and pansies or cold-weather plants, and remove garbage cans and toys from view.

Hughes agrees fall selling can be an advantage, particularly if you have a wooded lot, you're on the water or you have a view. "The property shows better when you can see lay of land," she says. "In areas such as these with acreage, it is nice to see what is there."

You should also expect to upgrade the house, which is part of your curb appeal.

According to LaMar, "If the buyer drives up and perceives a tired, worn exterior with dying, thin (or overgrown) shrubbery you have lost the first step in the beauty contest: curb appeal."

"Keep it clean," Allen advises. This means having a well-maintained yard with leaves raked, walkways blown and neatly kept beddings.

As we venture inside the house, she also recommends "staging warmth" by keeping a fire in the fireplace, a pretty afghan on the sofa and a cozy space for reading in a study by the window.

Hughes advises if you've got pets, handle the odors and try to schedule showings without them in the house.

"Many times I have encountered large pets and most people do not know if and what pet is docile, especially if they have children with them," she says. "One family I had had two small boys that refused to go in the house. I could not get them back in even without the pets."

And as a quickie overview, Allen adds, "This fall is a great time to buy, simply because there are a lot of houses to choose from, priced right and interest rates are still at an all-time low...how long that will last, we do not know."

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