

1 Real Estate Advisor

Protect your home from Old Man Winter

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As temperatures begin to dip this fall, "winterizing" your home can stop your heating bills from going through the roof. With some basic maintenance, you'll also save yourself from expensive emergencies that can accompany the cold weather. Keep your house warmer, more energy efficient, and save some extra cash for holiday shopping!

Seven tips for the season:

1. Inspect the furnace

You don't want your furnace to be on the fritz in the dead of winter. Make sure it's in good working order before the cold weather hits. A strong smell is natural when you first turn the furnace on. But lingering odors can signal a problem. A heating professional can also check your furnace and make sure it's running safely, replace filters, clean the motor, and fix anything that's broken.

2. Reverse the fan

During winter, the warm air generated by your heating system rises to the ceiling while cooler air sinks. Reversing the fan direction draws the cooler air upwards, forcing the warmer air near the ceiling back down into the living space. Keeping the warm air where it's needed means you can turn the temperature down a few notches, stay comfortable, and save money.

3. Wrap the pipes

A burst pipe caused by a winter freeze can be a nightmare. Make sure all piping that runs through unheated portions of the house—crawlspaces, basements or garages—is properly kept insulated with fiberglass insulation or foam rubber sleeves, available at the hardware store. Drain your garden hoses and make sure you know exactly where the turn-off valve is for your water mains in case you need to shut it off during an emergency.

4. Deal with drafts

Inspect for drafts underneath doors and windows—it's easiest on chillier fall days. For doors, put a draft snake or rolled up towel across the bottom. If you have leaks near your windows, use weather-resistant caulk on the outside. Use masonry sealer for brick areas. You should also check for leaks where pipes and wires exit your foundation. Next, inspect ventilation ducts for cracks and separations, as vast amounts of heating can escape through gaps in the duct work.

5. Clean those gutters

Clogged gutters can cause ice dams on your roof, blocking the melting snow and causing water to seep in and damage your house. Clear the gutters of dead leaves and debris to help rain and snow drain easily.

6. Stock up on supplies

Create a 72-hour kit stocked with food, water, and other supplies in case of a power outage or emergency. Buy candles and matches. Find the phone numbers for your utility companies and keep them handy. Store non-perishable food items (including pet food), blankets, and a first aid kit. You might also consider picking up a bag of snow salt in case you become stranded.

7. Check the chimney

Fires can easily originate in chimneys because of obstructions (bird nests, leaves, and excessive soot), damaging the chimney and reaching the structure of the house. Get your chimney inspected by a certified chimney sweep before you start to build fires. Close the damper when the fireplace isn't in use, to keep out cold air. Cap the top of the chimney to keep out rodents, birds, and debris.

It pays to winterize

According to the Department of Energy, keeping your home energy efficient can save you up to 25% on utility bills. Take a few steps to help prepare your home. You'll stay toasty until spring -- and keep high energy costs from burning through your bank account.

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