Winter Home & Garden

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Maintaining Your Furnace

A properly working furnace keeps your family warm, while lowering costs.

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Don't let your winter be ruined by the chill and soaring bills associated with poorly maintained heaters.

Maintaining your furnace can be as simple as regularly changing the filter. In some cases, however, you may have to take a deeper look to figure out what's going on.

FILTER REPLACEMENT

The filter plays a crucial role in maintaining air quality, as it removes things like dust, pollen, spores and pet dander. This can be particularly important for those who suffer from asthma or allergies. Inexpensive filters will provide a basic level of protection, catching many of these irritants. More expensive versions of these filters will often do more for the most sensitive — but check the owner's manual or ask a local professional before installing one. Some high-efficiency filters may not be compatible with your unit.

Whichever filter you choose, remember that a dirty one doesn't work properly. Your filter should be changed every three months, if not more often. Old filters impede airflow into the furnace, keeping it from operating at designed efficiency. Your home may not heat as well as it should, and costs could sharply rise as winter drags on.

BE ON THE LOOKOUT

If your furnace blower is noisy, that usually indicates an issue with its electric motor or blower wheel. Listen for shrill sounds that follow when metal surfaces grind together, which could be caused when the blower wheel is loose. Loud humming sounds are typically related to an electrical issue. Contact a trained professional to have a look. In the meantime, identify and correct any sources of air loss in the home, since that makes the unit work harder than it should. Local HVAC companies provide home-energy audits which can offer more comprehensive details. Those with gas furnaces should make sure that the exhaust flue going outside is clear.

All of these systems should be regularly cleaned to guarantee that they're running at optimal levels. Make sure registers are free of excess dust, debris and pet hair, since these things can move into the ductwork and reduce the unit's efficiency. Beyond this every day maintenance, consider having your entire ductwork cleaned by a professional every few years – in particular if you have had significant work done on your home.

Don’t Forget the Lawn

Most only associate this kind of outdoor work with the summer months.

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Taking part in winter maintenance now can help ensure that you have a vibrant, healthy and colorful yard next spring.

You might need to dress in layers, but putting in a little cold-weather sweat equity through seeding, fertilizing and trimming your lawn now can have a huge impact later.

SEEDING

There are a myriad of problems associated with seeding your lawn in the warmer months that won’t happen in winter. Consider shifting your growing season to the time of year when lawn traffic slows, scorching afternoons fade and hungry birds migrate elsewhere. Dormant seeding from late fall through early spring can produce heartier grass, since the roots dig deeper into the soil in search of warmth and nutrition. Just be sure to apply the seed before frost or snowfall.

FERTILIZING

The best time to fertilize isn’t just before your annual Fourth of July cookout. It’s often in late fall or early winter, when these extra nutrients provide a sturdy foundation for spring. The kind you’ll need depends on the soil and the climate where you live. Fertilizers are blended to exacting specification in order to match these particular needs, with regulated amounts of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium. (The most common is labeled 5-10-5, with numbers representing how much of these ingredients are inside.) Nitrogen promotes growth, phosphorus bolsters root strength and potassium builds strength. If you’re unsure which formula would work best for your lawn, consider having it analyzed by a local landscaper.

MOWING

Trim grass to its lowest healthy length before winter, since higher blades can attract mice, snakes and other pests. Their nests and droppings may create lasting damage. Wilting grass can also restrict airflow, and the build-up of moisture may lead to assorted fungal diseases. It’s important, however, not to cut it down all at once, since the shock can stunt growth or even kill your grass. Instead, begin gradually lowering your grass with each cycle over a period of a month or so. Find out the optimal length before you begin, since it varies depending on the variety. Grass that’s cut too short will have trouble absorbing nutrients and sunlight. Make sure your lawn is dry before you mow, since cutting while wet can damage the roots. Wilting grass is also difficult to cut evenly.

Smart Thermostats

New technology provides comfort and opportunity for big savings.

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The old mechanical version won't pre-heat your home before you arrive home from work or errands — or adjust itself while you're away.

Smart thermostats, on the other hand, provide programming flexibility that helps bolster green initiatives, provide personalized comfort and lead to lower utility bills.

A GROWING TREND

The Energy Information Administration reports that sales of these high-tech thermostats have doubled in the last decade, as more people discover the flexibility they offer. Energy costs for heating and cooling typically comprise more than 40% of home-energy costs, according to the EIA. Much of these costs, they noted, are related to air conditioning spaces when the home is unoccupied or while the homeowners are sleeping. New options allow us to program around this every-day waste of money. Energy Star recommends a setback of around eight degrees when the home is unoccupied in winter, and a four-degree adjustment when asleep.

HOW THEY WORK

The ultimate goal is a furnace that works less through the colder months, when costs can skyrocket as homeowners battle freezing temperatures. Electronic thermostats won't simply have a dial or a button indicating up or down. There will be an array of programmable features to help customize your approach. Digital sensors measure room temps then alert the system when the need arises, and they're far more accurate than the mechanical versions. Whereas the old thermostats might only be accurate to within five degrees, these are typically within one. Geofencing technology even allows your smart thermostat to sense when you're not home and automatically adjust temps.

SAVING MONEY

Electronic thermostats allow you to control the temperatures within the home while you're away, turning the heat down during work hours or vacation. You can even adjust the heat to accommodate cooling temperatures as night turns into morning. When properly programmed, installing a smart thermostat can lead to savings of 10 to 30% on the air-conditioning portion of your energy bill. Smart thermostats also help homeowners track usage and temperature data so you can make changes along the way. Download the smartphone application associated with your thermostat, and you'll have control when you're on the go. They're particularly helpful for those who regularly travel or own a second home. Just make sure the thermostat is connected to a Wi-Fi network.

How Does Rock Salt Work?

Slippery sidewalks and driveways can lead to a series of dangerous winter risks.

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We're typically encouraged to keep these areas ice free by using rock salt, which provides traction to avoid bruises, fender benders and even death.

But how does it work — and which product is designed for your particular situation? Making the right choice can provide an important protection for anyone hoping for a safer winter.

MELTING ICE

Applying salt to slippery surfaces has an immediate impact, since the salt-water mixture freezes at a lower point than water all by itself. The layers of ice quickly begin to melt, and with each dissolving layer, more salt water is formed — and eventually the ice can begin to clear entirely. That's why rock salt has become the most common de-icer in use today. Still, there are important decisions to be made depending on where and how you're using salt – in particular on concrete, around vegetation or in places where it might come in contact with human skin.

DIFFERENT PRODUCTS

Sodium chloride is the scientific name for rock salt, which quickly melts ice. Be aware, however, that it also releases lots of chloride as it dissolves, and that can damage metal or concrete. As effective as salt is, there are sometimes important side effects associated with it that could impact which product you choose. De-icers made of calcium chloride are harmful to your skin. Potassium chloride is recommended more often for those who have plants around an icy sidewalk, since it's safe for vegetation and won't irritate the skin. Another popular product for home use is magnesium chloride, which melts down to -13 degrees Fahrenheit but is safe for both concrete and plants.

HOW TO APPLY

Simply tossing around a bunch of salt won't ensure that your sidewalk or driveway is a slip-free zone. In order to get the best of these products, shovel as much snow and ice from the area as possible before applying salt. Ice will begin to melt away on contact. Shovel the area again, then reapply for best results.

Those who are most worried about pitting or other damage to sidewalks or driveways may choose alternative methods, like applying sand, cat litter, gravel, straw, wood chips or sawdust. They won't necessarily melt the ice, but will sometimes provide an adequate level of traction for short periods of time.

Stopping Winter Pests

Protecting your home now can avoid a costly infestation.

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As it gets colder, all manner of creatures will try to get inside looking for warmth.

Rodents and insects then become more than just a nuisance. They can damage your home, and they may carry dangerous disease risks. There are a few simple steps, however, that can prevent these pests from making themselves at home.

ACCESS PREVENTION

It doesn't take much of a hole for the tiniest of pests to intrude. Insects can slip through tiny cracks. Even a mouse can slip through a space no larger than a dime, according to the National Pest Management Association. Check the perimeter of your home for any points of access, preferably before winter's worst sets in. Pay special attention to holes made for everyday use like clothes dryer vents, cable or satellite wiring, and electrical, appliance or plumbing access. Pests may find small areas around the edges to sneak in, or take advantage of a hole that's now become unused. Fill in any visible spaces with foam or silicone. If there are places you can't examine, in particular underneath the home, consider calling a local professional.

KEEP IT DRY

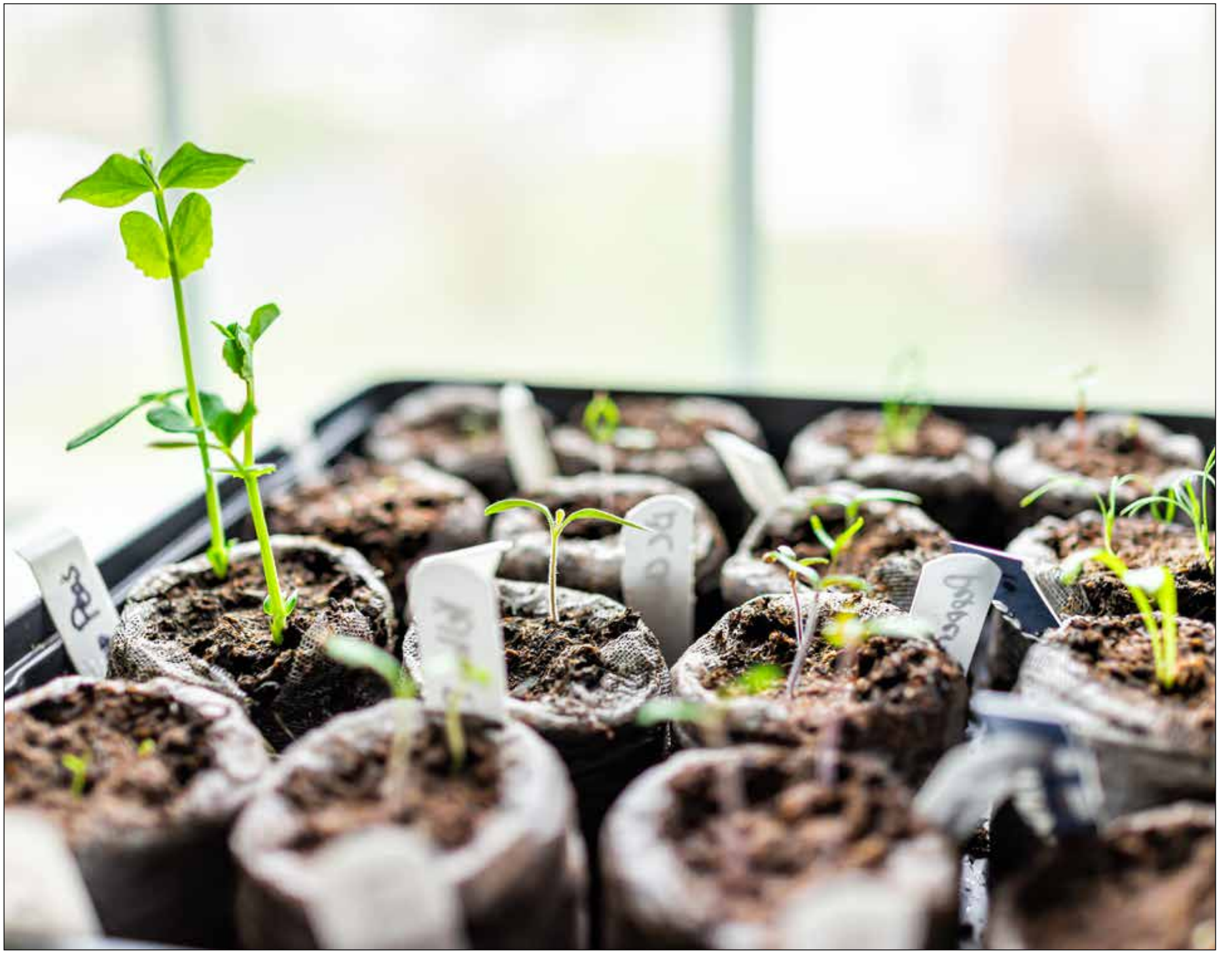
Moisture in a home attracts these pesky visitors. Insects rely on damp areas for survival, and water sources can also sustain other pests. Termites, for instance, typically begin an infestation by devouring wet wood then spread to other areas, eventually causing far more extensive damage to the home. Basements are a particularly attractive area, since they often have leaks and repairs are typically quite costly. Water issues under sinks or around toilets can typically be handled by the homeowner, but some jobs might require professional help.

CALLING THE PROS

The average handyman may not be able to handle larger plumbing projects, basement-wide seals and the installation of a sump pump in order to deal with consistent standing water or unwanted moisture. That's when placing a call to a local contractor, plumber or renovation expert is in order. You may also consider calling an exterminator. They'll begin by doing a home-wide inspection to determine which pests are present, how to deal with them – and how to make sure they don't return. If you are having issues with a specific issue, like rodents, seek out pros who specialize in that area.

Don’t Wait For Spring

We tend to think of winter as a time when growing ends.



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Sowing in the colder months can give your perennials and annuals a nice head start.

You’ll be able to enjoy it all weeks earlier — and you don’t need any specialized equipment or growing lights. Instead, winter sowing can be refreshingly DIY.

WINTER SOWING

Containers can serve as cute little mini-greenhouses, allowing plants to take root before it’s warm enough to grow them conventionally. Make these winter-sowing containers out of old water or milk jugs, cutting them in half with about one-quarter still intact to create a hinge. Use an electric drill or craft knife to punch holes in the bottom for drainage purposes, and in the top so that moisture gets in. Sowing can then begin as early as January, depending on your location. Plant in airy soil like perlite or peat moss, or else a potting mixture with a similar texture. Wet and then drain the soil before proceeding. Once planted, tape the containers closed and place them outside in a place where they’ll get southern exposure to the sun. The seeds will take root through winter and then sprout as temps warm.

WHAT TO PLANT

The ideal candidates for winter sowing are hardy annuals and perennials which grow best in your zone. Hardy plants are able to withstand frost, can be planted outdoors in late fall or early winter, or in early spring when the evenings are still cool. Additional plant options for winter sowing are those with labels stating that they need pre-chilling or require stratification. If you want to sow other annuals, simply wait until closer to spring.

OTHER SMART TIPS

Don’t forget to label everything so you’ll know what to look for once sprouts are expected to appear. Place it all out of reach of wild animals or curious pets. If condensation doesn’t begin to form inside the containers, add a small amount of water inside around the edges and punch more holes in the top. Eventually, as the weather warms, you’ll open the lids in order to provide the plants with full sun exposure. If the tops are left on too long into spring, they will begin to create excessive heat which may kill the plants.

Wrapping Your Pipes

Any plumbing that isn't protected within heated spaces is at risk in winter.

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Pipes inevitably lead outside, and that's when they can be exposed to brutal conditions.

Depending on how cold your winters are, ice can build up inside one of these pipes. As the ice expands, it can create a leak or even burst. Wrapping your pipes can keep this kind of plumbing emergency from happening.

HOW TO PREPARE

Pipes are most at risk outside, but they can also be subject to suboptimal conditions inside your home during power outages or in unheated spaces like attics, basements or crawl spaces. This kind of mishap becomes even worse because leaking water may damage cabinets, floors and furniture. In both cases, pipes are typically protected with sheets of insulation, heat cables or heat tape. Consult manufacturer's instructions before installing. Also check unsealed areas for places where cold intrudes, since caulking or sealing those cracks can keep temperatures at a more manageable level.

Outdoor cut-off valves should be closed before the worst of winter arrives, and faucets drained. Store sprayers and hoses inside or in a covered area, if possible. Faucet covers are recommended for added protection. When winter storms hit, turn on enough water for it to drip out of the faucet to help keep pipes from freezing. Open up cabinets under sinks to let warmer air circulate inside.

WHEN IT HAPPENS

Unfortunately, frozen pipes do happen. The most damaging incidents require big clean ups, and sometimes renovation. More often, however, frozen pipes are typically discovered when a faucet only produces a trickle of water. If this happens, turn the faucet all the way on, since flowing water will eventually help thaw the ice. Exposed piping can be thawed with a heating pad or warm towels – as long as the towels are regularly changed since they will lose heat.

Hair dryers may also be used, but keep the air moving over a foot to a foot and half of piping at a time, moving back and forth. Extreme focused heat can cause serious damage, and it's also a fire hazard. Similarly, never use an open flame to thaw a pipe. For enclosed piping, try turning the thermostat up in the home to help with the thawing process. In some cases, a section of wall may need to be exposed in order to employ the thawing methods described above.