

Winter Home & Garden



Keep Winter Water Outside

Water damage caused by snow, freezing rain, clogged gutters and melting ice can really put a damper on your winter.

Snow, ice and freezing temperatures can turn small roof or gutter problems into expensive water damage.

The roof, gutters and ice dams are common trouble areas. A little preventive maintenance before winter can save homeowners from emergency repairs later.

START WITH THE ROOF

The Environmental Protection Agency recommends repairing roof leaks before winter weather arrives.

From the ground, inspect shingles for obvious damage, missing shingles, curling edges or areas that appear worn.

Look for damaged or missing flashing around chimneys, vents and skylights.

Check the attic for signs of previous leaks: water stains, damp insulation, discoloration or damaged wood.

Never climb onto a snow- or ice-covered roof. If something looks questionable, have a professional inspect it.

Have a local roofing contractor perform an inspection if the roof is older, visibly damaged or difficult to safely inspect.



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GET GUTTERS READY FOR SNOW AND ICE

The EPA specifically recommends cleaning and repairing roof gutters as part of moisture control.

Clean leaves, twigs and sediment from gutters and downspouts before freezing weather. Make sure downspouts are securely connected and direct water away from the foundation. Check for sagging gutters or obvious cracks and leaks. Consider gutter guards, but know that they don't eliminate the need for maintenance.

For tall or difficult-to-reach gutters, hiring a local gutter

company can be safer than getting on a ladder.

UNDERSTAND ICE DAMS

Warm air escaping into the attic can warm the roof, melting snow. That water flows toward the colder eaves, where it refreezes and forms an ice dam. Water can then back up underneath shingles and enter the home. Icicles can be a warning sign, although not every icicle means an ice dam.

The U.S. Department of Energy recommends addressing air sealing, insulation and attic ventilation to help prevent ice dams.

DIY VS. CALL THE PROS

Good DIY projects:

- Clean gutters.
- Clear downspouts.
- Inspect visible roof and attic areas.

- Look for signs of leaks.

- Check that water drains away from the foundation.

Call a professional for:

- Roof repairs or replacement.
- Ice-dam removal when significant ice has accumulated.
- Attic air sealing or insulation work when the homeowner isn't experienced.
- Structural damage or persistent leaks.

Don't chip away at an ice dam with a hammer or climb onto an icy roof. Falling ice and ladders are serious hazards.

WHEN WINTER WATER GETS INSIDE

Act quickly when a leak appears. Move belongings away from the affected area and contain dripping water if possible. Fix the source rather than simply repairing the ceiling stain.

Document damage for insurance purposes.

EPA says wet or damp materials should generally be dried within 24 to 48 hours to help prevent mold growth.

Cut the Draft, Not the Comfort

Air leaks and drafts account for 25-40% of the energy used for heating and cooling in a typical American home, according to the U.S. Department of Energy and the Environmental Protection Agency.

Lowering your heating costs in the winter starts by becoming a bit of a detective. Identify areas where heat might be escaping your home to save money and use less energy.

DETECTIVE MODE ACTIVATED

Using some common household items, you can check the most common trouble spots in your home for heat leaks. Here are some suggestions from heating and air conditioning brand Aireserv.

Hand test: Move a damp hand slowly along door frames and windows on a windy or cold day to feel incoming air drafts.

Dollar bill test: Close a door or window on a dollar bill; if you can pull it out easily without any resistance, the seal is too loose.

Incense test: Light an incense stick on a windy day and move it near joints and frames; watch the smoke waver or pull toward a gap.

Here are some common trouble areas to check:

- Attic hatches
- Basement rim joists
- Recessed lights
- Windows and doors
- Ductwork
- Electrical outlets on exterior walls

If you're serious about finding the maximum number of leaks in your home, consult a local con-

tractor for a professional energy audit.

MAKE REPAIRS

Once you've identified leaks, repairs can range from low-cost fixes to larger contractor-led upgrades.

Here are some repairs you can do yourself.

Doors and windows: Use caulk and weather stripping. Depending on the location and shape of the door or window frame gap, you can choose between V-strip, felt, foam, rubber and metal weather strips. Use a caulking gun for small areas. For a less permanent option, try rope caulk.

Attic and crawlspaces: If you have fewer than 10 inches of insulation, add layers of cellulose or fiberglass insulation from your local hardware store. And, of course, apply duct wrap to any HVAC ducts.

Basements: To insulate gaps a half inch or wider between the house framing and the foundation, try a can of polyurethane insulation foam. The foam expands to tightly fill large gaps. Fill small gaps with silicone or latex caulk. Always use heat-resistant caulk around furnace flues or the exhaust vents of fuel-burning water heaters.

If you need bigger repairs, look for a qualified local contractor. Check for local energy-assistance programs, and utility rebates to help reduce your costs.



Are You Ready for a Power Outage?

Winter power outages can happen quickly. Ice, heavy snow, high winds and extreme cold can knock out power with little warning.

A winter outage isn't simply an inconvenience: Loss of heat can become a safety issue, particularly during prolonged outages or extreme temperatures.

The best time to prepare is before the forecast turns dangerous.

BUILD A WINTER EMERGENCY KIT

Assemble emergency supplies in one accessible location.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency recommends keeping enough supplies to remain self-sufficient for several days.

Include the following:

- Flashlights and extra batteries
- Battery-powered or hand-crank radio
- Portable phone chargers/power banks
- Blankets and warm clothing
- First-aid supplies
- Several days of drinking water
- Nonperishable food and a manual can opener
- Necessary medications
- Basic tools
- Pet supplies

Consider the needs of older adults, babies, people with disabilities and pets.

HAVE A PLAN FOR KEEPING WARM

Identify the safest room in the house to gather if the heat goes out, advises Ready.gov. Close doors to unused rooms and keep curtains closed



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to conserve warmth. Dress in layers and use blankets.

Never use a gas oven, charcoal grill, outdoor heater or other appliance designed for outdoor use to heat a home.

If using a fireplace or wood stove as an alternative heat source, make sure

it has been properly maintained and vented.

GENERATORS: KNOW THE RULES

Never operate a portable generator inside a house, garage, basement or other enclosed space, warns the Con-

sumer Product Safety Commission.

Keep generators at least 20 feet from the house and direct exhaust away from windows, doors and vents.

Never connect a portable generator directly to household wiring unless the system has been properly installed by a qualified electrician.

A transfer switch may be required for certain setups.

Store fuel safely and follow the generator manufacturer's instructions.

Consider having a local electrician evaluate the home's generator setup before an emergency occurs.

PROTECT PIPES

During a prolonged outage in severe cold, exposed plumbing can become vulnerable. Know where the home's main water shutoff is located. If a pipe freezes, don't use an open flame to thaw it. A plumber should handle a burst pipe or a freeze problem that can't be safely addressed by the homeowner.

MAKE A FAMILY COMMUNICATION PLAN

Decide how family members will communicate if cell service or internet access becomes unreliable. Choose an out-of-area contact and an agreed meeting location.

Write down important phone numbers rather than relying exclusively on smartphones. Know where local emergency shelters and warming centers are located.

DON'T FORGET YOUR NEIGHBORS

Winter emergencies can be especially challenging for people living alone, older adults and those with mobility or medical needs. Check on vulnerable neighbors when conditions are safe.

A simple neighborhood plan — who checks on whom and who has supplies — can make a major difference.

Plan it Now, Enjoy it in Spring

Cold weather may put outdoor projects on hold, but it doesn't have to put home improvement plans on hold.

Winter is an ideal time to research projects, establish budgets, get estimates and schedule contractors before spring demand picks up.

Planning early can uncover permitting, material or design issues before construction begins.

START WITH THE PROJECTS THAT NEED LEAD TIME

Major projects can come with lead time spanning into several months. Talk with local contractors early, particularly for projects requiring permits or specialized materials.

Start talking to local contractors early to be ready to break ground on your projects in spring, particularly projects that require permits or specialized materials. Here is a list of projects that might require a jump start.

- Decks, patios and outdoor living spaces
- Fences
- Landscaping and hardscaping
- Garden sheds and other outdoor structures
- Windows and doors
- Roofing or siding
- Kitchens and bathrooms



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- Basement finishing
- Major painting projects

PLAN YOUR OUTDOOR LIVING SPACE

Winter is a good time to decide what you actually want from a spring outdoor space. Consider a new deck, patio, pergola, fire-pit area or outdoor kitchen.

Think through how the space will be used, where the sun falls, drainage, privacy and access from the house. Sketch the space or create a simple wish list before requesting estimates.

A landscape designer or local hardscaping contractor can help turn ideas into a work-

able plan. Check local zoning and permit requirements before construction begins.

GET AHEAD OF SPRING LANDSCAPING

Landscaping companies become busy as temperatures rise.

Winter is an opportunity to plan tree planting, garden beds, retaining walls, walkways, drainage improvements and lawn renovations.

Make a rough site plan and identify problem areas such as standing water or poor drainage.

Local nurseries can help homeowners choose plants appropriate for their soil,

sunlight and growing zone. Consider scheduling spring installation early.

INDOOR PROJECTS ARE PERFECT FOR WINTER PLANNING

Renovations such as kitchens, bathrooms, basements and laundry rooms often require significant planning. Establish a realistic budget, including a contingency for surprises.

Gather inspiration, but prioritize function over trends.

Research contractors and obtain multiple estimates. Ask about licensing, insurance, references, permits, materials and expected timelines. For

major renovations, consider consulting an architect, designer or other qualified professional before work begins.

DON'T FORGET ENERGY-EFFICIENCY PROJECTS

Winter can make problems with drafts, insulation and inefficient windows especially noticeable. Air sealing and insulation can improve comfort and reduce energy use.

Possible projects include attic insulation, air sealing, window or door replacement and HVAC upgrades. Local insulation and HVAC professionals can identify opportunities specific to the home.

Winter Heating Maintenance

Before the deep freeze, give your heating system a checkup.

Winter is a bad time to discover that the furnace, boiler or heat pump isn't ready for the workload ahead. In late fall or early winter, get ahead of problems before they begin.

The U.S. Department of Energy recommends regular HVAC maintenance and filter checks during peak-use months.

Replace or clean the HVAC filter according to the manufacturer's recommendations. Make sure supply and return vents aren't blocked by furniture, rugs or other objects.

Listen for unusual noises and pay attention to unusual smells, frequent cycling or rooms that aren't heating properly. Consult a local HVAC professional for an annual inspection and servicing of fuel-burning systems.

WHOLE HOME HEATING SYSTEMS: KEEP THE HEAT PUMPING

The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission recommends annual professional inspection of fuel-burning heating systems, including furnaces, boilers, chimneys, flues and vents.

Don't attempt to repair gas lines, burners, electrical components or combustion equipment unless you're qualified. Have fuel-burning



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furnaces, boilers and other heating systems professionally inspected and serviced. Ask the technician to check venting, flues and chimneys for blockages, corrosion or other problems.

Keep the area around the furnace or boiler clear of boxes, paper and other combustible materials.

A local HVAC compa-

ny can perform preventive maintenance before a small problem becomes a no-heat emergency.

CARBON MONOXIDE: THE INVISIBLE WINTER DANGER

Carbon monoxide is colorless and odorless, making it impossible to detect without an alarm. Install CO alarms

on every level of the home and outside sleeping areas.

Test alarms monthly and replace batteries as recommended. If an alarm sounds, leave the home immediately and call emergency services from outside.

Never use a gas oven or range to heat the house. Make sure exterior furnace and appliance vents remain clear of

snow and ice.

SPACE HEATERS: SMALL APPLIANCE, BIG RESPONSIBILITY

Space heaters can be useful for supplemental heat but require careful placement. The CPSC cautions users to keep them at least 3 feet from bedding, curtains, furniture and other combustible materials. Place them on a stable, level surface. Plug electric heaters directly into a wall outlet—not an extension cord or power strip. Never leave a space heater running while sleeping or unattended, and keep children and pets away from hot surfaces.

CPSC estimates portable heaters were associated with an average of 1,600 fires annually during 2020–2022.

FIREPLACE AND CHIMNEY MAINTENANCE

Before using a wood-burning fireplace or stove regularly, have the chimney inspected and cleaned as recommended.

Look for visible cracks or damage around the fireplace. Keep the damper open while a fire is burning and until ashes are cool. Use a sturdy screen to prevent sparks and embers from escaping. Store firewood safely away from the house as appropriate.

The CPSC recommends annual professional inspection of fireplaces, wood stoves, chimneys and flues. Look to a local chimney sweep or fireplace professional for these services.

Keep Winter Green

Once the garden goes dormant, it can be tempting to put away the gloves until spring. Winter, however, is not necessarily the end of gardening.

Beneath the soil, roots are resting. Outdoors, perennial plants are enduring cold and fluctuating temperatures. Indoors, houseplants are responding to shorter days and dry air.

During the winter months, gardeners can focus on protecting outdoor plants, overwintering tender plants, preparing for spring and keeping indoor plants healthy.

Winter is also the perfect time to prepare for the growing season ahead.



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PROTECT WHAT'S SLEEPING OUTDOORS

Check vulnerable trees and shrubs periodically for snow and ice damage.

After heavy, wet snow, gently brush snow from branches if it can be done safely — but don't knock ice off branches, which can cause additional damage. Protect young tree trunks from rodents and rabbits with appropriate guards. Replenish mulch if needed, but don't pile it against tree trunks. During extended periods of dry weather when the ground isn't frozen, newly planted trees may still need

water.

Don't walk repeatedly on frozen lawns, which can damage dormant grass. Keep an eye on newly planted trees and shrubs, which may be more vulnerable to winter temperature swings.

OVERWINTER TENDER BULBS AND PLANTS INDOORS

Some popular summer garden plants — including dahlias, cannas, caladiums, elephant ears and gladiolus — may not survive cold winters outdoors in northern climates.

Gardeners can dig up bulbs,

corms or tubers after the growing season and store them in a cool, dark, dry location, depending on the plant. Inspect stored material periodically and discard anything showing rot or disease.

Don't treat every bulb the same: storage requirements vary by species. A local nursery or garden center can provide advice on which plants need to come indoors and the best storage conditions.

WINTER PRUNING: KNOW WHAT CAN WAIT

Winter can be an appro-

priate time to prune some deciduous trees and shrubs, particularly when their structure is easy to see. Timing varies by species, however, and pruning flowering shrubs at the wrong time can mean losing next season's blooms.

Remove hazardous or damaged branches when appropriate. Leave major tree work to a qualified arborist — especially branches near utilities.

GET A HEAD START ON SPRING SEEDLINGS

Winter is the perfect time to plan the vegetable and flower

garden. Order seeds early and check seed packets for recommended indoor starting dates.

Create a dedicated seed-starting area with:

- Clean containers and trays
- Seed-starting mix
- Grow lights
- A timer
- Heat mats if appropriate
- Labels

Clean and disinfect reused containers.

Avoid starting seeds too early; leggy, oversized seedlings can struggle after transplanting, according to the University of Minnesota Extension.

HOUSEPLANTS NEED WINTER CARE, TOO

Indoor plants experience winter differently than outdoor plants. Shorter days mean less natural light, while heating systems can create dry air. Move plants closer to bright windows when appropriate, but keep them away from cold drafts and direct contact with freezing glass. Consider supplemental grow lights for plants that aren't getting enough light.

Check soil before watering rather than automatically following a summer watering schedule; many houseplants use less water during winter.

The University of Wisconsin Madison Division of Extension advises gardeners to watch for pests such as spider mites and fungus gnats, and increase humidity when appropriate, while avoiding conditions that leave foliage constantly wet.

10 Cozy Home Essentials

We tend to hibernate in our homes during the colder months. A few thoughtfully chosen accessories can transform your home into a comfortable winter retreat.

A few simple items can make your home warmer, more inviting and better equipped for surviving the coldest months. Some add warmth and style, while others help manage the practical challenges of snow, cold temperatures and dry indoor air.

1. A plush throw blanket. Nothing says cozy quite like a soft, oversized blanket. Choose fleece, sherpa or chunky knit fabrics to add texture to your living room while keeping everyone warm during movie nights.

2. A durable entryway rug. Snow, salt and slush can wreak hav-



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oc on floors. A washable, nonslip entryway mat designed to absorb moisture and trap dirt protects flooring while keeping the entrance looking attractive.

3. A good humidifier. Winter heating can leave indoor air uncomfortably dry. A properly maintained humidifier can help, particularly in bedrooms. Look for an easy-to-clean model with adjustable humidity settings.

4. Warm, inviting lighting. Short winter days call for extra illumination. Table lamps, string lights or flameless candles create a welcoming atmosphere. Choose warm-white bulbs for a softer glow that makes rooms feel inviting.



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5. Seasonal throw pillows. Swap lightweight summer fabrics for velvet, faux fur or textured knits. Rich colors such as burgundy, forest green and chocolate brown can make a room feel warmer without requiring major redecorating.

6. A hot beverage station. Create a dedicated spot for coffee, tea or hot chocolate. A decorative tray, favorite mugs and a selection of warm drinks make everyday winter rituals feel a little more special.

7. A decorative storage basket. Winter accessories tend to accumulate. A large woven basket keeps extra blankets within reach while adding texture and warmth to the room. Smaller baskets can organize slippers, scarves or other essentials.

8. Comfortable indoor slippers. Cold floors are no match for a good pair of slippers. Look for cushioned, insulated styles with nonslip soles. Keep an extra pair near the door for guests.

9. A soft area rug. Hardwood and tile floors can feel chilly underfoot. A plush area rug adds comfort and visual warmth, especially in bed-

rooms and living rooms. Choose a rug pad to help prevent slipping.

10. A flameless candle or candle warmer. Create a cozy glow without an open flame. Flameless candles provide ambiance, while an electric candle warmer can release fragrance. Follow manufacturer instructions and keep warmers away from children and pets.



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