

WINTERIZING YOUR HOME

Helpful tips to make sure you're ready when the temperature drops



By John Baugus

The advent of cold weather suggests some routines that will help your home and its various systems survive and perform well regardless of the temperature. These routines are most valuable if you continue to inhabit your home during the cold weather months, or if you are gone for relatively short periods of time. Those who spend the entire winter in warmer climates should completely "winterize" their vacant home before leaving and can disregard the following considerations.

Early Preparations

By the time cold weather arrives you should have had your heating system inspected, filters changed or cleaned as appropriate, and any other accessories (humidifiers, etc.) properly serviced.

If you enjoy fires in a fireplace or wood stove, you should assure that all flues have recently been cleaned.

It is very important that you protect against outside water line freeze-ups. If outside spigots have individual shut-off valves, close the valves and drain the line to the spigots. If you don't have such valves, purchase and install Styrofoam insulators that are specially designed to protect spigots. Appropriate corrective action should also be taken for any water lines that pass through unheated areas (talk with a professional). Finally, you should attempt to assure that water lines in outside walls are sufficiently insulated.

If there are any windows or doors in your home that have single-pane glass, you should seriously consider adding storm windows or a storm door to help reduce heat loss. The insulation around windows and doors should also be checked. (If you stand near a window or door on a cold day and feel a draft, you know you have a problem.)

It goes without saying that for emergencies any time of year you should have a reasonable supply of emergency provisions (food, drinking water, flashlight, candles, etc.). Some few will opt to have emergency generators, propane camping equipment (heaters, cook stoves, lights, etc.), and other equipment. Make sure that any such equipment is used only in full compliance with all safety warnings.

Daily Precautions

On days (and nights) when the temperature drops below freezing, you should be most conscious of protecting your water system. Remember, all parts of Big Canoe will generally experience lower temperatures than that forecasted by the Atlanta TV meteorologists, and the higher elevations can expect much lower.

If you are at home, you will probably use water during the day often enough to prevent any freezing in your lines. However, lines can and do freeze overnight, particularly if they are in outside walls or pass through any unheated space. The traditional stopgap precaution is to set faucets on these lines for a slow drip in order to keep the water moving. Obviously this method is not water efficient and should be used only until a permanent fix can be made.

During Absences

If you are going to be away from your home for an extended period during cold weather, you should seriously consider fully "winterizing" your home. This includes completely shutting off the water, draining the entire water system, and adding antifreeze to any components that cannot or should not be drained. However, this is a lot of effort if you are only going to be away for a day or so.

Short absences still present the danger of water line freeze-ups, particularly if the temperature drops well below freezing, and even more particularly if an electrical power outage occurs during this same time. This unfortunate combination of events has happened more than once at Big Canoe, and is certain to happen again.

Depending on how well you know the weaknesses of your water system, and how much risk you are willing to take, short absences should at least cause you to consider turning your water off at your meter or at the main valve where it enters your house. This will not prevent freeze-ups unless you also drain and use antifreeze. However if the freeze-ups rupture any part of your system, it will greatly reduce water loss and subsequent water damage when the freeze-ups defrost.

If you reduce your thermostat setting while you are away, do not set it below 55 degrees. This is a balance between saving on your heating bill and providing a cushion of safety for your home. This cushion is very important if an extended power outage occurs while you are away. Unfortunately, if the outage persists long enough, all bets are off.

Know Your Home

The above hints are general in nature and should not constitute the entirety of your cold weather considerations. In particular, after spending a winter in your home, you should know many of its eccentricities and be better prepared to take those steps that are most appropriate for your individual situation.

In addition, if there is any question in your mind regarding steps you should take, do not hesitate to call in a professional to evaluate your situation and to make recommendations that are responsive to your needs.

Reprinted from Smoke Signals.