

Closing Your Home for the Winter

Ardala E. Littlefield and John L. Merrill

Closing your home for the winter involves making important decisions and completing important tasks. You must make decisions about utilities, water systems and whether or not to maintain heat in your home. Take into account the home's location, whether it is "seasonal" or permanent, the costs involved, your skills, how long you will be gone and your personal values.

Maintaining Heat

Maintaining heat in your home helps prevent the cracking of paint and plaster and damage to wood furniture which can occur as a result of the thermal expansion and contraction associated with extreme changes in temperature.

Maintaining heat in your home may also make it unnecessary to drain water pipes. However, extended electrical outages may occur in rural areas and allow the pipes to freeze. To avoid this risk, it may be advisable to drain water pipes or protect them with antifreeze.

Maintaining the heat at 40 degrees F will protect your home from temperature damage at a reasonable energy cost. However, if your home is not well winterized or water and sewer lines are far from the thermostat, a higher thermostat setting may be needed to maintain the necessary temperature.

Water Systems

When water freezes, it expands. If expansion occurs in a confined area, it can cause the pipe or fitting to rupture. Fixtures and appliances can also be damaged if water freezes in them.

The ideal situation is to have no water left in pipes or fixtures. However, this is easier said than done. Drain wherever possible; take other appropriate precautions to prevent freezing where it is not possible to remove all water.

The water "systems" which must be considered are fresh water and waste disposal systems, the hot water tank and water or steam heating systems. If you have your own well, attend to it as well as the pressure tank.

Water systems are the most critical for winterizing properly, as the most damage will occur if it is improperly done. The guidelines which follow are general and are not intended as specific instructions for your system. Household water systems vary greatly, so it is important to seek the assistance of a plumber the first time you close up your home. Some offer a "winterizing" package at a reasonable rate. Even if you plan to do the job yourself, professional advice on procedures

and codes will be particularly helpful.

Fresh Water Supply System. The preferred method of winterizing the fresh water supply is to drain the system. Begin by turning the water off at the meter or where it enters the house. Notify the city because it may want to drain the pipes leading to your house as well.

If you have your own well, turn off the pump and disconnect it from the system. Drain the pump and pressure tank.

Open all the faucets and valves to drain the water lines. A relatively simple water system (with few valves and bends in the lines so there are limited places for water to be trapped) will be completely drained by this procedure. This may be a good time to add additional valves in problem areas. In a more complex system, the lines should be blown out with compressed air. This may require a professional service call.

If water lines are not drained, a nontoxic antifreeze can be added to them. Because it must be forced into the system, it may not be a "do-it-yourself" project for the average homeowner. Approximately four to five gallons are needed for the average home.

The antifreeze is not intended for human consumption. Upon returning home, flush the water lines for 15 minutes, or until all traces of color from the antifreeze disappear.

The antifreeze is available from home supply, department, discount, hardware and plumbing supply stores. It may be labeled for use in recreational vehicles but is appropriate for home use as well.

Hot Water Heater. Before attempting to drain the hot water heater, turn off the electrical power or gas connected to it. Next, open the valve located near the bottom of the water heater. Open a hot water faucet somewhere in the house to introduce air into the system. This will cause the water heater to drain more rapidly and completely.

Disposal System. After the water has been turned off, flush all the toilets. Plunge them to remove as much waste as possible. Use a sponge to remove remaining water from the flush tank and toilet bowl.

You may either open and drain the traps or add nontoxic antifreeze to them to prevent freezing. If you choose to open and drain traps, use caution in working with them so they are not damaged by inappropriate force.

Look for traps under sinks, tubs, showers and floor drains. The dishwasher may empty into the trap under the kitchen sink, while the clothes washer probably has its own trap.

Look for areas of horizontal pipes that appear to be low. Such areas may not drain properly.

If you open and drain traps, you may leave them open until spring or replace them and add nontoxic antifreeze as a precaution.

Protect traps that are not drained by adding a nontoxic antifreeze to the water remaining in the trap. About two cups are needed in each trap.

Nontoxic antifreeze is also recommended for disposal systems. Automotive antifreeze is toxic and should not be used in household water and sewage systems because an equipment malfunction could cause contamination of the drinking water supply.

Heating Systems

A heating system utilizing water must also be winterized. The following procedures can be used.

The system (including boilers, radiators and connecting pipes) may be drained and blown out with air pressure. While this may be the best solution, it has the potential for two problems: (1) rusting inside the pipes and (2) air-bound lines when you refill the system, which cause uneven heating.

Another procedure is to introduce a high-grade antifreeze into the system at a 1:1 ratio. Leave it in the system year round for rust protection. The appropriate antifreeze can be purchased from a heating or plumbing contractor.

Utilities

Notify the electric and telephone companies if you wish to have service discontinued. If electrical service is continued and the heat has been turned off in the house, turn off the house power at the main switch. LP gas can be shut off at the tank.

Compare charges for disconnecting and re-connecting with those for continued service. If the telephone is disconnected, can you get your "old" number back? What is the charge for temporarily disconnecting the phone?

Appliances. Unplug and clean all appliances, including the television. Put small appliances in boxes or store them in an enclosed space to keep out dust.

Refrigerator/Freezer. Empty the refrigerator and freezer. Wash, rinse and dry the interior. Prop the door ajar to prevent mustiness from developing over the winter months.

Range. Ranges that are not cleaned may be damaged by rust or animals while the house is closed over the winter.

Clean the exterior, trays, shelves, ovens, burner pans and reflectors. Dry all parts completely.

Crumpled newspapers or brown paper bags in the oven will help prevent moisture build-up over the winter. Be sure to remove them before lighting the oven.

General Cleaning

As you clean your home, give special attention to food preparation and eating areas. Small food particles attract animals and insects. Check under furniture in lounging areas where popcorn and other snacks may have been dropped.

Before putting them away, empty the vacuum cleaner, shake brooms and dust mops outside, launder cleaning and dust cloths and wash sponges.

Cover upholstered furniture with sheets or furniture covers to protect it against dust and store folding furniture if space permits.

Be sure that all clothing and linens have been laundered. Use boxes or wrapping paper to store them appropriately.

Home Repairs

Check your home carefully for areas where small animals or insects can enter. Give special attention to eaves, attics and the foundation. Repair any holes and cracks you find. Steel wool can be stuffed into small holes and cracks to prevent animal access.

Make shutters for the windows or board them up to protect the house from easy entry. Shutters also prevent flying birds or running animals capable of breaking windows from entering.

Humidity

If the summer or fall has been humid, you may wish to turn on the heat for a few days before closing up the house. If there is a high humidity level, the humidity will condense and create moisture problems and mustiness when temperatures drop.

Summary

The above suggestions are offered as a guide in making decisions about closing up your home at the end of the summer season. Closing up is a step-by-step process. If care is taken in the decision making process and the procedures used, you can lock the door and leave with peace of mind.

References

- Longbotham, Marion, news release, "Closing A Summer Home Step-by-Step Process," October 6, 1976.
- Ponessa, Joseph, "Frozen Pipes—Causes and Cures," F5056, Cooperative Extension Service, New Jersey, 1984.
- Schrift, Patrick, The Plumbery, Iron Mountain, Michigan, telephone conversation, September 1984.
- "Vacationer Tips for Preventing Frozen Pipes May Save Travelers Costly Insurance Bills Later," *Life Style North*, November 14, 1984.
- "Winter Home Shutdown," *New Shelter*, 1984.

WEX University of Wisconsin-Extension, Cooperative Extension Service, Charles F. Koval, director, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Wisconsin counties, publishes this information to further the purpose of the May 8 and June 30, 1914 Acts of Congress; and provides equal opportunities in employment and programming including Title IX requirements.

Produced by the Department of Agricultural Journalism, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

B3359 Closing Your Home for the Winter

20¢

I-07-86-2M-E

This publication is available from your Wisconsin county Extension office or from:

Agricultural Bulletin, Rm. 245

30 N. Murray St.

Madison, Wisconsin 53715

Phone 608-262-3346

Editors, before publicizing, contact Agricultural Bulletin to determine availability.

Ardala Littlefield is an interior design and housing agent, University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension Service. John Merrill is a housing specialist, Family Living Education, University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension Service, and assistant professor of Environment, Textiles and Design, School of Family Resources and Consumer Sciences, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Editor: Barbara Sanford.