

Ten ways to help your home weather the fall

By Erin K. Witt

As the days keep getting shorter and temperatures drop, the signs are more and more difficult to ignore: fall is upon us, and winter is just around the corner. Although this transition welcomes brilliant fall leaves and football season, it also brings with it a hefty “to do” list for homeowners. Autumn home maintenance is crucial for keeping your home safe from damage and energy loss during the cold months ahead. The Homeownership Education Resource Organization suggests the following ten tasks to help you prepare.

Tip #1: Clean out gutters and downspouts. Clogged downspouts hold water that can eventually back up into the roof and cause damage. Trapped leaves can also become waterlogged and freeze, potentially causing the gutter to break. Dig out larger pieces of debris and flush downspouts out with a garden hose. This should be done seasonally, but is especially important after the fall of autumn leaves.

Tip #2: Check windows and doors for cracks and gaps. Forty-six percent of heat is lost around glazed areas in windows and doors. Using proper caulking or a window insulation kit can save large amounts of energy during the cold winter months. Door sweeps should also be installed on the bottom of doors leading outside your home, or to unheated areas. These sweeps attach to the bottom of a door and prevent air from escaping from underneath. Foam or weather-stripping may also be useful tools.

Tip #3: Check to be sure the hot water heater is properly insulated. If the tank surface feels warm to the touch, wrap it with additional insulation, available at most hardware stores. Make sure the airflow of a gas-fired water heater is not blocked, and never wrap this type of unit with combustible materials like old blankets or quilts.

Tip #4: Winterize your air conditioner. Call a service professional to properly prepare your central air conditioner for the winter months. Doing this can greatly prolong the life of the unit and keep it operating efficiently. If your home has a window air conditioning unit, purchase a cover to protect it from winter weather. Less contact with moisture means less chance for rust or mechanical malfunction. A good cover will also prevent cold air from entering your home through the unit’s seams.

Tip #5: Drain exterior faucets. If you have freezeproof faucets, you're protected every time you turn them off. But if you have outside faucets protected by stop-and-waste valves inside the house, you need to do some preventative maintenance to avoid costly plumber bills this winter. First, find the right valve and turn it closed. Open the outside faucet—and turn it 1/4 turn closed again. Then, open the waste cock on the side of the valve and check to make sure the faucet is draining.

Tip #6: Check your furnace and clean or replace filters. Installing a new furnace filter at least annually improves the efficiency of your furnace and your home’s air quality. Use manufacturer recommended replacement filters. It is also a good idea to have your

furnace serviced by a qualified professional. They can make sure the thermostat and pilot light work properly, and that the pipe bringing fuel to your furnace isn't leaking or loose. A professional cleaning and inspection can increase the efficiency and life of the furnace—and a well-maintained unit uses 10 percent to 15 percent less energy.

Tip #7: Place socket sealers over all electrical outlets. Surprisingly, open outlets can be responsible for up to 20 percent of the heat lost in a home. Socket sealers are more than child safety features; they lower utility bills as well. They are easy to find, inexpensive to buy and simple to install. But remember: always turn off the power when installing these devices.

Tip #8: Clean and reverse ceiling fans. Ceiling fans are wonderful aids in heating and cooling, but they do need a little attention twice a year. Every fall and spring you should turn the fan off, and check for an oil hole on top of the motor. If there is one, add five to six drops of light machine oil. Then, clean the motor housing, each blade and blade iron. Set the fan to blow up for the heating season and DOWN for the cooling season.

Tip #9: Inspect roof coverings, flashings and the chimney, and weatherproof as needed. An improperly sealed roof can leak, causing major damage throughout the entire structure. Look for missing and cracked caulk around vents and chimneys, and any loose items that may need to be refastened. This is also a good time to make an appointment with a certified chimney sweep—but remember to book your cleaning well in advance, since fall is a chimney sweep's busiest season.

Tip #10: Insulate pipes in your home's crawl spaces and attic. Winter winds whistling through overlooked openings can quickly freeze exposed water pipes. Remember: the more insulation you use, the better protected your pipes will be. Heat tape or thermostatically controlled heat cables can also be used to wrap pipes.