Prep for Winter

Tend to Tree branches

Winter storms can deposit heaps of tree branches onto your roof. These can then snap under the weight of snow or ice and go on to pierce holes in your roof, loosen shingles, or get swept onto an adjacent roof where they can cause damage. To avoid surprise leaks in your roof, periodically prune branches that hang over the house, and use a roof rake to clear away any branches that fall onto the roof. (Call in an arborist if the job's too big for you.)

Safeguard faucets

Even after you turn off an outdoor faucet, water that lingers in an attached garden hose can freeze and cause pipes behind the faucet to burst, spouting water into your house/building. Always disconnect and drain garden hoses after using the faucet in cold weather and consider shutting off the valve inside the house/building to protect your pipes.

Clear out gutters

When your gutters become blocked with leaves or twigs, snow and ice that would ordinarily get directed away from the house/building will collect (and eventually melt) on the roof or run off onto the ground, leading to rotting fascia boards below the roofline, cracks in the foundation or walkways, or leaks in the basement. To avoid costly structural damage, inspect and, if needed, clean your gutters before the first freeze. Use a trowel or scoop for large debris, and rinse away smaller debris with a garden hose.

Wrap exposed pipes

Wrap insulation sleeves around pipes that run through unheated areas, such as attics and crawl spaces, to protect pipes from freezing and heat loss—and keep your home dry and your heating bill low.

Seal gaps and other openings

Applying caulk or weatherstripping to drafty windows and doors can keep the cold out and the heat in, maximizing indoor comfort and saving you anywhere from 5 to 10 percent in energy costs, according to the U.S. Department of Energy. Sealing up gaps can also prevent melted ice or snow from rotting exterior features. Take a day before the temperatures dip to caulk joints between walls and window frames and door frames, and place weatherstripping around window sashes.

Insulate walls and attics

An under-insulated home/building is subject to cold spots and higher heating bills, while a properly insulated home/building enjoys evenly distributed warmth, increased indoor comfort, and energy savings. The most effective places to insulate are exterior walls, attics, and unheated rooms, but it's important to find and repair any leaks in those areas before adding batt, spray-foam, loose-fill, or blown-in insulation.

Bundle up your water heater

Consider wrapping it with a water heater insulation blanket designed to fit your size tank. Made of materials that range from foil to fiberglass, these flexible accessories are like a jacket for your water heater—and they can reduce heat loss by 25 to 45 percent. With the 7 to 16 percent you'll save in energy costs, you can recoup the purchase price of the blanket in less than a year.

Reverse the fan blade direction

If your fan blades are still set to turn counterclockwise, the warm air you crave will float to the ceiling, while cold air will get pushed down toward the floor level where you are. To avoid wintertime chills, switch your fans to rotate clockwise so that the blades will push warm air down to you.

Lay off the lawn

Before the first frost, it's important to aerate the lawn—punch holes into it—to allow the soil to breathe after all the natural compaction that has occurred over the past year. This can be done with an aerator, a tool with spiked tines that pierce the soil, or, for larger lawns, with an electric- or gas-powered aerator or one that can be towed behind a lawn mower. But once your turf has gone dormant for the winter, keep kids, pets, and equipment off it as much as possible; heavy traffic can damage the turfgrass crowns that grow at soil level, resulting in bare patches of grass in spring.

HVAC

Make sure your building's heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) system is running efficiently and effectively. Replace filters, inspect, and repair broken parts, identify, and respond to cracked duct work, drain line clogs, and make sure your HVAC system is the proper size for your unit. While doing so, store or cover air-conditioning units that will go unused during the fall and winter seasons.

Fire

Service your fire prevention and safety equipment, making sure all sprinkler systems, fire extinguishers, smoke detectors, and fire alarms are in working order. Also, update emergency fire procedures and schedule a fall or winter season drill so occupants can practice how best to respond.

Roof

Inspect and repair your commercial property's roof for loose shingles or damage to existing flashing. To prevent the potential for ice dams to form, clean gutters and make sure they are properly secured to the building. Fall is also a good season to increase the insulation in existing attics. Doing this can decrease heat costs while also further reduce ice dam formation.

Plumbing

Colder temperatures put pipes at higher risk for freezing and bursting. Leaving your commercial building at risk for water damage. Avoid the wet mess by insulating and sealing cracks and openings around exposed pipes. Also, set internal thermostats (and instruct occupants to do the same) to keep interior temperatures at 55 degrees Fahrenheit.

Driving

Avoid using cruise control in wintry conditions; steer in the direction of a skid, so when your wheels regain traction, you don't have to overcorrect to stay in your lane; accelerate and decelerate slowly; increase following distance to 8 to 10 seconds; If possible, don't stop when going uphill.

Cold Temperatures

Cold weather can cause frostbite or hypothermia; dress in layers, cover exposed skin, and limit time outside; the NWS will issue a Wind Chill Warning or Wind Chill Advisory.

Walking

Slips and falls are major health threats in wintertime. Make sure you have sturdy boots with good grip and remember to “walk like a penguin” with shorter strides. Indoor tumbles are also common in the winter. Avoid slippery floors by investing in a good all-weather floor mat or boot tray to keep entrances clear of condensation from ice and snow.

Electrical Safety

Remove any flammable items from around your heat source; turn portable heating units off when you leave the room; do not overload electrical outlets; the safest way to power your space heater is to use a wall outlet with no other item plugged into the outlet. Power strips and extension cords are not equipped to handle the high electric current that most space heaters require; do not run electrical cords or power strips under rugs or behind furniture.