

Autumn, the best time of year.

Ah, fall is in full swing with both the temperatures and leaves dropping. The mornings are crisp and the evenings make you crave a nice bowl of soup with a grilled cheese sandwich. There's nothing better in my book than being snuggled up in our home with a blaze in the fireplace and an old movie or college football on the television, unless we're out in the woods...

As the cooler months settle in here in the Treasure Valley, keeping our homes safe and warm becomes essential. I hope you are taking those steps to protect your home and family. We have already discussed our roofs and HVAC systems in our previous articles and you had them checked, right? Good. Now let's turn our attention to a couple of other areas that need attention to properly winterize our homes both inside and out.

Speaking of that fireplace, if you have a wood burning fireplace, check it for any creosote buildup. Creosote is the black residue left from burning wood and will accumulate more quickly if you burn sap-heavy woods like pine or fir. Hardwoods burn cleaner and will leave less creosote but will build up eventually. To keep the fire in the firebox (and not in your chimney), have your chimney inspected and cleaned annually. If you have a newer home with a gas fireplace insert, you still need to do some cleaning. While the flue is not going to have creosote buildup, it is a good idea to take off the front panel and vacuum out the dust and spiderwebs to make sure there are no combustibles in there and that the gas flows freely. This is also a great time to think about carbon monoxide detectors and checking the batteries in your smoke detectors. Remember, the smoke detector is not just a timer for the broiler, it can save your life.

Now's the time to check all the weatherstripping around our doors and windows. Take a moment to go around your house and look at the door frames and see that there are no gaps or voids in the sealants. Faulty weatherstripping will create drafts and lead to higher heating bills. Check that your windows are closing tightly and can be secured as they will create those cold drafts as well. No sense in enjoying that warm fire and then having cold drafts blowing on your neck.

So, let's take a look outside the house. Once the leaves have fallen with the temperatures, we have some cleanup to do. Hey, at least you're not going to have to mow the lawn for a couple of months, what's a little raking? Take a look around your foundation. If you notice any low spots or depressions, you need to fill those in with some topsoil. These low spots can funnel water into your crawlspace or create freezing pockets that can damage the foundation. Take a look at the caulking on your siding and trim. If you can see gaps, water can find its way into the house. Sealing these gaps will ensure that the water stays out and does not create any damage. You can always wait until spring for the touchup painting but get those gaps sealed now.

Don't forget to blow out your sprinklers and drain any hoses. Water left in pipes can freeze and cause costly damage. This quick task will save you an expensive repair bill in the spring. Be sure to drain any outdoor water features or showers, too.

While not necessarily a part of the home, your vehicles need winter prep too. Think about having your car serviced now before the weather really hits. Being stranded on the side of the road is no one's idea of having a good time. Topping off the wiper fluid, changing the wiper blades and replacing headlights will help you to keep your eyes on the road and ready for anything. Steve Green, of Steve's Auto Care, reminds us that servicing your brakes and checking the tires are a couple of the most important safety steps you can take. Remember to double or even triple your following distances in snowy and icy conditions to keep you and your family safe while traveling this year.

For me, my house is the building, but my **home** is so much more; it's the people inside that matter most. I hope you enjoy the fall season and are warm and comfortable all winter long.

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