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Top Tips for Winterizing a Vacant Home

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For a home to remain in good shape throughout the winter it needs regular care and

attention. When a home is occupied, many of the things that are necessary to keep it in good working order happen by default. But when the home is vacant, it is up to the owner or the property manager to prepare it from freezing temperatures and other winter risks.

The worst risk comes from bursting pipes, which can lead to water damage that can significantly impact the value of the home. Left alone, water can ruin everything it touches – walls, floors, electrical systems, etc. It can even damage the foundation. Other risks exist as well, such as pest infiltration, which can leave nasty surprises for the homeowner.

Taken together, the dangers of failing to winterize a home are too severe to ignore. Any real estate agent who has been involved with selling bank owned properties or vacant short sales can certainly tell you the necessity of knowing how to winterize a vacant home! In order to get an informed opinion on the subject we reached out to a well-known real estate agent in Westborough, Mass., [Bill Gassett](#), who has been selling homes for nearly 30 years. Gassett runs a popular real estate blog known as Maximum Real Estate Exposure that offers numerous tips to buyers and sellers. Below he shares all of his tips for getting your place winterized.

When readying a vacant home for winter weather, there are several things you can do to prepare before freezing temperatures and other winter risks arrive. These include:

Bring in a plumber.

Hiring a professional plumber to winterize the pipes and water system in the home is extremely important if you want to avoid the incredibly expensive water damage that can occur from freezing pipes. The plumber can examine the entire system, inside and out, and then prepare it for freezing temperatures. The plumber will drain all areas where water is stored, like water heaters and hot tubs, and will use an air compressor to expel water from the pipes throughout the house. With the water removed, you do not have to keep the house heated to prevent freezing. The pipes are protected and you save money in

utility costs.

Drain outdoor garden hoses.

Water hoses must be disconnected from the home and drained of water to prevent damage to both the hoses and the spigots where they attach to the house. Left undrained, the water inside will freeze and burst not only the hose, but often the spigot as well. If winter watering must be done to keep landscape plants alive, make sure the person who does the watering drains the hoses and disconnects them from the house after each use.

Close up all openings to the house.

To prevent animals and insects from entering the home for shelter, you will need to close up all openings throughout the house. These include dryer vents and the chimney.

Have the gutters cleaned and repaired if necessary.

Gutters must be free of debris and attached properly to the house to funnel water away from the roof, siding and foundation. When debris accumulates, the gutter may stop working properly. If enough water collects and a freeze hits, the weight of the ice can pull the gutter away from the home, damaging the siding and leading to potential ice hazards where water collects at the base of the house. If you live in a cold weather climate then you understand just how bad ice damming was last year. Knowing [how to prevent ice dams](#) is something every homeowner should have a grasp of. Ice dams can cause serious damage to a home including mold behind ceilings and walls that you may not be able to detect! Have the gutters cleaned periodically until all leaves have dropped from the trees, and make sure they are in good repair.

Remove anything touching the side of the house, such as leaves and firewood.

Water and insects can accumulate in firewood and debris, causing damage to the siding and leading to potential infestations. Keeping everything away from the house creates a

safe barrier and prevents water damage. This includes shrubbery and other landscaping. Keep a minimum of a couple of feet to allow the home to breath.

Have trees trimmed over the home.

Remove any tree branches that may touch the house or hang too closely. Tree branches increase the leaves that accumulate in the gutter and can also break and fall on the house in a snow or ice storm. If you are negligent about keeping branches over your home it could lead to insurance denying your claim.

Use moth balls to keep insects out of the house.

Moth balls may smell unpleasant, but they are effective at keeping insects away. Use them anywhere you think insects may be a problem.

Talk to the gas company about disconnecting the gas supply.

A gas explosion can cause even more damage than frozen pipes. Let the gas company know the home is vacant and ask them to disconnect the gas supply to the home. Obviously if you are not living in the home this becomes important because if a gas leak were to form it would be too late for you to do anything about it. This is one of the major reasons why nearly all bank owned properties get winterized.

Make the home appear occupied at a glance.

It is better for potential buyers and discouraging to unwanted visitors if the home appears occupied. You can setup lights on timers and have the landscaping tended to periodically to keep things looking nice. If snow is an issue you can also have the driveway cleared. We provide a list of many tips on [how to sell a home in the winter](#). This advice applies to both occupied and non-occupied homes. Keep in mind that if your home is on the market you are going to need to get it un-winterized with fairly short notice when the buyer schedules a home inspection. Buyers will want to be able to check the heating and

plumbing systems and will not be able to do so if the home is winterized.

Hire a landscaper to perform a fall cleanup.

As the weather gets colder, plants will die and you will be left with a disheveled looking yard and landscape. It is beneficial for the sales process if you have someone come in and cleanup around the home after the first freeze or two, when most of the vegetation has died off. The landscaper can cut back any dead growth, rake up leaves and prepare plants for the winter.

Check on the home periodically.

An unoccupied home, even when the lights come on and the driveway is plowed, can be appealing to burglars and to squatters. It can also be a destination for kids in the neighborhood to come hang out for fun. The only people you want visiting are potential buyers, so you should maintain a schedule of visiting the home periodically to make sure it is being left alone and to discourage unwanted visitors.

Use of all these tips and your experience with winterizing a home should be a breeze!

This post was originally published on RISMedia's blog, [Housecall](#). Check the blog daily for winning real estate tips and trends for you and your client.

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