



# Fall & Winter Seasonal Maintenance Guide -- Northeast

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If you live in the Northeast, here are maintenance jobs you should complete every fall and winter to prevent costly repairs and keep your home in top condition.

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Certain home maintenance tasks should be completed each season to prevent structural damage, save energy, and keep all your home's systems running properly. These maintenance tasks are most important for the Northeast in fall and winter. For a comprehensive list of tasks, refer to the to-do list to the right of this article.

As cold weather approaches in the Northeast, it's important to prepare your home for freezing temperatures, ice, and snow, says Steve Gladstone of Stonehollow Home Inspections in Stamford, Conn.

## Key maintenance tasks to perform

\* **Clean your gutters.** Leaving debris in your gutters is an invitation for trouble. Not only can it freeze and damage the gutters themselves, but it also can force freezing water up under your shingles and damage the roof. Gladstone says that many homes in the Northeast now have covered gutter systems, which fools many homeowners into thinking gutter cleaning is unnecessary. "Gutter covers keep leaves out," he says, "but not fine organic material or grit from the roof." It's important to remove the covers and clean just as you would regular gutters.

\* **Clean and put away lawn and garden equipment.** Do a visual inspection of the yard to identify anything lying around - garden tools, hoses and nozzles, patio furniture and accessories - that might be damaged by

snow and ice and should be brought in for the winter.

Run your lawn mower until the gas tank is empty; if you leave gas in the tank over the winter, it can degrade and lose some of its combustion ability.

Worse, gas can react with the air in the tank and oxidize, forming deposits that affect the machine's performance; worse still, moisture can condense inside the tank and cause rust that blocks the fuel lines.

If you know you're going to leave gas in the tank over the winter, add a stabilizer to the last gallon you put in (mix it in the gas can, not the mower tank, so that you get the mixing ratio correct).

\* **Disconnect hoses and winterize lawn irrigation systems.** Leaving water in any exterior hoses or pipes can cause them to freeze and burst. If your exterior faucets aren't self-draining, be sure to turn off the water manually at the shutoff valve inside the house so water doesn't stand in the wall pipes.

If you have a lawn irrigation system, it's important to make sure all the water has drained from the system before the first freeze. Depending on the type of system you've installed, this may require the assistance of a professional. A pro charges \$50 to \$150 to winterize an irrigation system.

\* **Schedule a furnace tune-up.** Follow your HVAC professional as he works and ask questions about what he's doing, says Gladstone. The technician should be working his way through a checklist of items such as inspecting filters, checking the chimney exhaust, and examining the blower and fuel connections. Expect to pay \$50 to \$100 for a furnace tune-up.

\* **Replace wicks and air filters in your humidifier.** If you use a portable humidifier in winter to mitigate the drying effects of heating, start the season with fresh wicks—the small filters that absorb moisture from the reservoir; a fan directed at the wick dispenses the moisture into the air. Also check air filters, if your unit contains them (consult your owner's manual). Replace wicks again in two to three months for a cost of about \$15. It's an absolute must to clean the humidifier every few weeks during winter to keep it free of mold, bacteria, and mineral deposits. Follow your manufacturer's instructions.

However, Gladstone points out that "most homes are too wet." Humidifiers

may contribute to excess moisture that encourages the growth of mold and mildew. Use a humidifier only if necessary, and choose a single-room model so that you can check easily to see if the unit needs cleaning.

\* **Protect your air conditioning unit.** If your outdoor air conditioning unit is located under trees or under the drip line of the house where icicles and snow may fall, give it a little protection by placing a sheet of plywood over the top and draping a dropcloth over it. However, don't create a fully enclosed space, as that can trap moisture and offer winter protection for rodents.

\* **Close your storm windows.** It's a simple step, but an easy one to forget. Make sure the windows are shut properly so that the outer pane is up and the inner pane is down; this keeps rain and other forms of precipitation out.

\* **Insulate pull-down staircases for attics.** The openings that accommodate pull-down staircases can cause significant heat loss during winter. You can purchase an insulated cover for the opening, or for about \$30 you can make a foam box yourself with duct tape, weatherstripping, and a piece of 2-inch-thick polystyrene foam; 2-inch foam has an insulating value of about R-10. "This simple step will pay for itself many times over," Gladstone says.

Spending a weekend or two on maintenance can prevent costly repairs and alert you to developing problems. Visit the links listed below for more detailed information on completing tasks or repairs yourself.

Karin Beuerlein has covered home improvement and green living topics extensively for HGTV.com, FineLiving.com, and FrontDoor.com. In more than a decade of freelancing, she's also written for dozens of national and regional publications, including Better Homes & Gardens, The History

Channel Magazine, Eating Well, and Chicago Tribune. She and her husband started married life by remodelling the house they were living in. They still have both the marriage and the house, no small feat.



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