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Concierge News

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How to protect your home from ice

By Leland Edward Stone

Preparing for winter

Winterization is a bit like insurance, in that its something to be taken care of well in advance of need. Don't wait until the first freeze before insulating, caulking or stocking up on salt for the front sidewalk. Besides, prepping for winter can really pay off in lower utility bills as well as fewer home repairs.

Outside is the obvious place to start, and the most critical concern is anything related to water. Because water expands when it freezes, freezing can cause damage to sprinkler pipes, the main water service pipe, lines feeding evaporative coolers, or even gutters. Ice can also be a problem for swimming pools, spas, and related equipment.

Save your sprinklers

Sprinkler systems should incorporate drain valves in areas subject to freezing. Shut down the main sprinkler control valve (on automatic systems, turn the timer off, too) and open the system drain valve. Sprinkler systems without drains should be blown free of water using compressed air, a job best left to a pro.

Wrap vacuum breaker valves with plastic sheeting and duct tape; use insulation in severe frost zones. An upside-down styrofoam ice chest can be used to insulate sprinkler valves and inexpensive styrofoam covers are sold for hose bibs.

Special care for pools

Pools and spas are expensive capital improvements deserving special care; at the very least, drain water to below the tile line and top the pool with an insulated cover to guard against freeze damage. Filters and similar equipment idled for the winter should also be completely drained and covered. If you're new to pool ownership, turn the job over to a pool service technician who's experienced with winterization.

Any pipes that are exposed to freezing temperatures should be wrapped with insulation.

Supply lines

The main water supply line feeding the house is probably safely buried below the frost line. Any part that's exposed to freezing temperatures (such as pipes in unheated crawlspaces or basements) should be covered with insulation.

In severe frost regions, install thermostatically controlled, electric pipe-heating tape along with the insulation. Depending on local energy costs, these tapes burn about a quarter's worth of juice per day a lot cheaper than having a plumber thaw frozen water pipes.

If that's not possible, a stop-gap measure is to open an indoor faucet and let water trickle through the pipes during a hard frost.

Ice dams

Heat tapes are a good idea for the roof, too. Low-temperature tapes provide constant heat to break the snowmelt and freeze cycles. Ice dams form when snow on warm patches of the roof repeatedly melts, flows downhill and freezes over the cold parts of the roof and gutters. Eventually a large mass of ice forms beneath the shingles or tiles. Snowmelt backs up behind these dams and sit in a big puddle on the roof, damaging it and causing leaks.

The problem starts with uneven temperatures on the roof caused by heat loss from the building's interior, a problem that may require extra insulation to solve. Gaps around plumbing vents and electrical wiring act like chimneys, siphoning heated interior air into the attic. A warm attic heats the roof, melting snow from the top of the roof down.

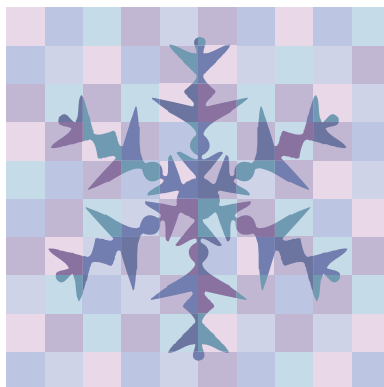
Spray-foam insulation is a simple and easy way to seal these gaps. Even if there are no gaps visible, additional insulation may be needed to prevent warm air from rising into the attic.

Specialty heat tapes are available to prevent ice build-up in gutters. If gutters fill with ice, they may start to sag from the weight and even break loose from their mountings.

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