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Get ready for the winter



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Sweltering heat outside means one thing: It's time to start thinking about the furnace.

That's right. Late summer is the best time to start getting your house ready for the winter — everything from adding insulation and inspecting the furnace to checking windows for cracks and doing gutter repair.

"Everybody waits until the snow flies, and that's not a good thing to do," said Steve Cikach, owner of the USA Insulation franchise in Indianapolis. "I encourage people to start now. Don't wait until it gets cold."

Here are a few ways to prepare your house now for the chilly winter months ahead and save some money, too.

Insulate and get paid.

Before it expires at the end of the year, take advantage of a federal tax credit for homeowners of 30 percent on insulation materials up to \$1,500. Do the crawl space, the attic and the walls.

"Why not get the maximum amount back directly off your taxes?" says Cikach.

It will not only save you money this winter, but in the summer you will notice a drop in energy bills as well.

And if you feel like you just can't afford it, find an insulation company that works with energy

loan companies. You can get a \$50 to \$70 a month payment, and then when the \$1,500 credit comes back, just pay off the balance.

"You will save so much over the years if you just do it now," says Cikach.

Check doors and windows.

A lot of cold air can creep into the house through even the tiniest of cracks. Elizabeth Weintraub, who writes about winterizing your home on About.com, suggests the following checks be done before winter.

» Check the outside of your home for crevice cracks and exposed entry points around pipes. You also can use weather stripping around doors and caulk windows.

» Replace cracked glass in windows and, if you end up replacing the entire window, prime and paint exposed wood.

» If your home has a basement, consider protecting its window wells by covering them with plastic shields.

» Switch out summer screens with glass replacements from storage. If you have storm windows, install them.

Inspect the furnace.

Well, probably not you. It's best to have a professional inspect and service your heating unit each year before you begin to use it. Just like insulation, the earlier the better.

"We all get backed up because people wait until the last minute," said Cikach.

The inspection is done to ensure that your heater is both safe and functional. Making sure everything works now prevents the possibility of a breakdown during the winter — when you need the furnace to work.

Among the maintenance tasks a professional should perform during a standard checkup, according to www.doityourself.com are: Inspecting the thermostat for proper operation; inspecting the filter and changing or cleaning it as needed; checking all electrical components and controls; oiling the motors as necessary; cleaning the evaporator coil; and checking the air-fuel mixture.

Save money with fire

If you have a fireplace, put it to use to offset your heating costs. To get it ready for winter, you will want to cap or screen the top to keep out rodents and birds. If the chimney hasn't been cleaned for a while, call a chimney sweep to remove soot and creosote, says Weintraub.

It's also a good idea to start buying firewood now or chopping your own. It should be stored in a dry place away from the exterior of your home.

Lastly, don't forget to inspect the fireplace damper for proper opening and closing, she says.

★ Call Star reporter Dana Hunsinger at (317) 444-6012.