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Winterizing your home brings warm rewards

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Winterizing our homes can seem like such thankless drudgery that most of us either do the bare minimum or neglect it completely.

So before we look at what we need to accomplish to prepare for the cold and rain, first let's consider why this should be the year we actually do it:

Ease the financial pain. Reducing heat loss in your home helps cushion the impact of rising energy costs. Puget Sound Energy customers are likely to pay about 8 percent more for electricity and 5 percent more for natural gas this winter due to a rate increase, and other area energy utilities and companies have also boosted their rates.

Respect your house. When you don't properly maintain your home to keep moisture out, you can shorten its life and greatly reduce its resale value.



Take a stand. If you feel a sense of urgency about global warming and want to reduce the use of fossil fuels, put your weatherstripping where your mouth is.

Get cozy. Many folks don't realize how much a few simple measures, such as caulking and insulation, can improve a home's comfort level (by reducing drafts, for example).

Once you get motivated, plan your strategy for the two main priorities for home weatherization in this region: keeping heat in your home and keeping rain out.

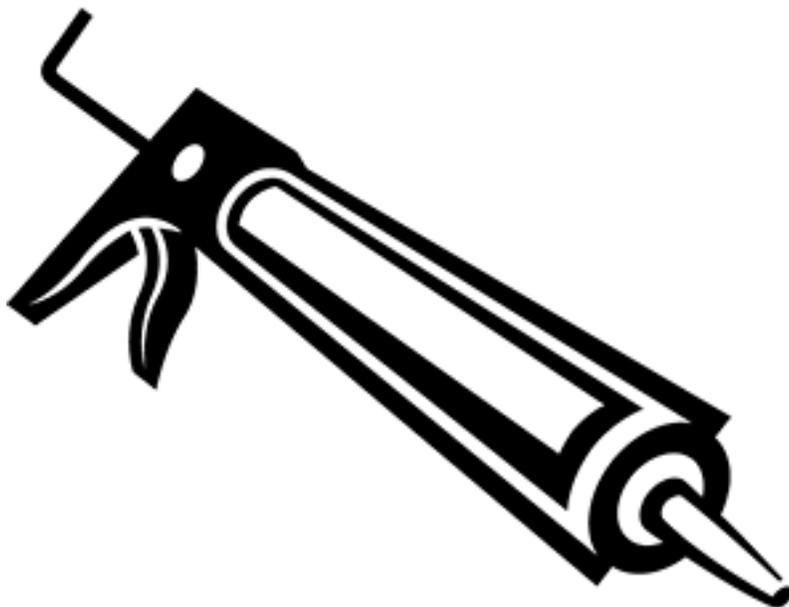
Moisture in the walls and basement can cause health problems such as toxic mold. Since the serious rain often arrives before the cold weather does, tackle the water issue first.

Before the deluge

If you work or play a lot outdoors in the Northwest, you may have heard the saying: "There is no bad weather, only bad raingear." The same goes for your house. If you properly prepare your home, it shouldn't make a difference if it rains 20 inches in November.

This year, heavy rains in late summer provided a useful preview of what's to come. If you noticed any problems then, fix them now. Was water cascading over your gutters? Did it puddle up near your foundation?

If you have large trees hanging over your house, you should probably clean your gutters in October and then again in November after all the leaves have fallen. But watch your step — ladder injuries send more than 160,000 Americans to the emergency room every year, according to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission.



Winterizing resources

Prep your home for the cold and damp

Home moisture audit: www.ehw.org/Healthy_House/HH_Moist_Audit.htm

Rain gardens: www.pierce.wsu.edu/Water_Quality/LID

Home energy audit: www.seattle.gov/light/printdocs/DoltYourselfHome.PDF

Puget Sound Energy insulation rebates: 800-562-1482; www.pse.com/solutions/foryourhome

Insulation and air sealing: www.eere.energy.gov/consumer/your_home

You might also consider installing "gutter guards." Most of these barrier or screening systems will not eliminate your gutter maintenance (despite their promises), though they may reduce it. Select a type of gutter guard based on the debris in your gutters — if you get tons of those little helicopter seed pods from maple trees, for example, you may need a different style of guard than if you just get leaves or needles.

Water from downspouts should be diverted at least 10 feet from your foundation, if possible. You might even want to install a "rain garden" in your yard to handle water runoff. Often planted with native species, these decorative and practical gardens have become increasingly popular with Northwest homeowners.

If you see any danger signs of moisture in your walls, such as exterior rotting boards or peeling paint, make a commitment to deal with the problem as soon as possible. Check the shingles on your roof as well.

Caulk of the town

Once you've got your water situation handled, it's time for more immediate gratification. Though not the most glamorous of jobs, caulking and weatherstripping can pay for themselves in energy savings in one year, according to the U.S. Department of Energy. A small crack at the bottom of an entry door without weatherstripping allows the same amount of air to pass through as a 9-square-inch hole in the wall.

Caulking works well for sealing gaps around vents, outlets, cables and pipes. For gaps of more than a quarter-inch, expanding foam might work better than caulk. But be careful — if you use too much foam or a type not designed for home air sealing, it may expand like something from a horror movie and damage a window or door frame.

Insulate, don't procrastinate

Installing insulation can be a little more involved and expensive, but pays big dividends. Seattle City Light recommends insulating at these depths or "R-values," which refer to heat resistance: Attics, 12 to 14 inches (R38); walls, 4 inches (R11); crawlspace, 6 inches (R19).

As an alternative to fiberglass, which can be itchy to install, consider cotton insulation. Ecohaus stores in Seattle and Bellevue carry cotton insulation recycled from denim scraps from jeans factories.

If you're a Puget Sound Energy natural gas or electricity customer, take advantage of rebates this fall of up to \$1,600 for insulation installed by an authorized contractor.

As a further investment in year-round energy savings and comfort, install a ceiling fan. In the winter, if you set it on low speed with blades turning clockwise, it pushes down the warm air collecting at the top of the room, making you feel warmer so you can turn down the heat. Also don't forget simple measures like replacing or cleaning your furnace filter every month to improve the efficiency of your furnace (and your indoor air quality).

The Internet and libraries offer voluminous resources to find the best winterizing methods for your specific needs. Staff at local hardware stores can also help select the energy conservation stars among the bewildering array of products now available.

Despite its mundane image, winterizing has warm rewards. Family members will appreciate that they don't need to put on rubber boots to go in the basement anymore, and that the house is more comfortable. And you'll appreciate the extra money in your wallet.

Tom Watson is project manager for King County's Recycling and Environmental Services. Reach him at tom.watson@kingcounty.gov, 206-296-4481 or www.KCecoconsumer.com.