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seasonal safeguards

How to close and open your cabin to prevent accidents even when you're not there

by DANIELLE TAYLOR

1 Having a cabin retreat for weekend or vacation use can be a wonderful way to spend some carefree time relaxing and getting away from the stresses of day-to-day life. To ensure your cabin remains a low-maintenance destination that relieves headaches instead of adding to them, make preparations to open and close your cabin for extended periods away from it.

As you get used to readying your cabin each time you come and go, you'll likely develop your own to-do list of things to take care of. Here's a basic run-down to get you started.

Closing Your Cabin

As you prepare your cabin to maintain itself during your absence, you mainly want to take as many precautions as possible to prevent problems that might arise while you are gone. A house is designed for regular use, so think carefully about what might happen if your home sits stagnant and unattended.

With no one at home, it may seem cost-effective to simply turn off the heat or air conditioning, but this can invite a number of unpleasant issues. Unregulated temperatures can cause mold and mildew during warmer months, and frozen or burst pipes during colder ones, and interior doors can warp, making them impossible to close or open, in a fluctuating environment. Fortunately, devices such as programmable thermostats can maintain a suitable tempera-

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ture in your home, even if left unattended for long stretches of time.

Minimum and maximum thermostat settings for unoccupied homes vary widely depending on the heating system you use, as well as the temperature and humidity variations in your region, so check with your heating system manufacturer for specific guidelines. Check with your insurance company as well, as many contracts stipulate a specific internal temperature range for coverage to apply. In general, however, setting your minimum internal temperature to 50 degrees in the winter and your maximum temperature to 85 degrees in the summer will ward off most problems.

In the event of an unexpected temperature change (e.g., a power outage), other innovations can sense problems and alert you remotely. A freeze-sensing system, such as the Basic FreezeAlarm by Protected Home (protectedhome.com), monitors your home's internal temperature and calls you if temperatures fall (or rise) abnormally.



You'll want to prepare your home's other utilities for your absence as well, as unprepared and unmonitored systems can break, causing major headaches. To avoid water damage from leaky pipes, close the valve to your home's main water supply after you turn down or turn off your water heater. Before turning off the water, flush fresh water into every toilet and sink, and close the lids on each toilet. This fills the traps with water and reduces the chance of evaporation, which can allow noxious septic gases into your home. Once the water is off, run your faucets to drain the lines completely.

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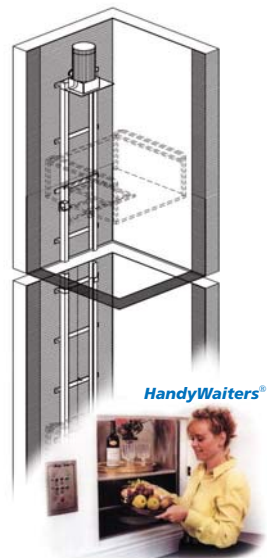
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If your landscaping depends upon an automatic watering system that's connected to your home's water supply, leave the main water source on and turn off the water to each individual fixture and appliance (dishwasher, washing machine, refrigerator, every toilet and sink, etc.). Better yet, create a low-maintenance landscape that doesn't depend on constant artificial watering.

Depending on what kind of water heater you have, you can either shut it off entirely or set it to a lower setting. Switch off the power to an electric water heater at the circuit breaker, or set your gas water heater to "pilot," "low" or "vacation mode."

For electronics, unplug unnecessary units (televisions, small kitchen appliances, unneeded lights, etc.) at their source. Not only does this reduce the possibility of a fire, it also cuts down on your electric bill as well as your chances of killing your electronics in the event of a power surge.

If your smoke and carbon monoxide detectors run on batteries, check to see if they're still working, and replace them at least twice a year even if they don't run out. For more security, consider investing in a remote monitoring system, such as the Direct Connect 911 smoke detector (directconnect911.com; see page 87) or Sensaphone (sensaphone.com). These



devices can instantly alert you to problems by calling your pre-designated number if the alarm triggers. The Direct Connect 911 system also alerts local emergency services for immediate response.



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To further protect your home, take other anti-theft precautions to make your home look like it is being occupied while you're away. Set lights on timers, and stop the delivery of your newspapers and mail. In the fall and winter, hire a neighbor to rake your leaves or shovel your snow.

To deter against pests and make your home more pleasant for your return, toss out any food that will expire before you come back, and tightly seal and date any open food containers that you plan to leave in your refrigerator or pantry. Go through every room, and collect all trash. If your trash collector won't come until after you leave, bring your refuse with you and toss it at your earliest opportunity, or ask a neighbor if you can leave your last bag in his or her can so your trash won't sit out for an extended period.

Lastly, ensure that everything is locked up tightly and that all safety measures are in place. The best alarm system in the world won't do anything if you don't activate it. Make sure that all your doors and windows are tightly closed and locked, and unplug your garage-door opener to deter unauthorized or accidental opening. In case of an emergency, ask a neighbor to keep an eye on your home and contact you in case anything crops up.

Opening Your Cabin

In general, making your cabin ready for use after an extended absence largely involves undoing the preparations you took to close it down after your last visit. After checking for any obvious issues, turn your utilities back on, and run fresh water through your toilets and sinks. Plug your electronics and appliances back in as needed, check on your smoke and carbon-monoxide detectors, and slowly bring the temperature back to a comfortable level. If you expect to be back for a while, call to reinstate your mail and newspaper delivery as well as your trash collection, if available in your area.

Check your perimeter for any new problems. If your exterior walls are made of logs, check to make sure that no upward-facing cracks have developed, as these can collect

rainwater and damage the integrity of your wood. Clear any vegetation that has accumulated near your home's foundation to avoid problems associated with moisture, pests or fire.

It doesn't take more than a few moments to prepare your home for your comings and goings, but you'll rest easy when you're away knowing that you've taken care of all the details. With these basic steps, along with any others you develop for your home's specific amenities, climate and needs, your cabin can truly become a haven of relaxation while you're there and a worry-free getaway when you're not. **COZY**

Many low-maintenance lawns can thrive on natural rainfall, and color can be added through seasonal accents, such as these autumn pumpkins and chrysanthemums.



Cindy Thiede photo



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