

# Task Mastering: Decide what must be done, what can wait

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Ah, autumn, so happily filled with the new: clothes, sports, the latest TV shows. Then you remember the familiar cycle of fall chores: caulking windows, raking leaves, lugging in lawn furniture and wondering if the furnace will start. (Apartment dwellers can grin smugly and head off to a movie or a bike trail. Mulching? What's that?)

But somewhere between total neglect and one or two chore-choked weekends is a sensibly paced schedule of tasks that will focus on what really must be done and what can slide this year.

For most of us, some jobs will be best left to professionals: furnace tuneups, gutter clearing, chimney maintenance, window replacement. Make an appointment sooner rather than later; companies book up fast this time of year.

We called experts who know houses from top to bottom and asked them which chores should be attended to, and how frequently. (Do you really need to have your chimney cleaned every year? More than once? Depends on how often you use the fireplace and the quality of firewood. Can you get by without patching driveway and sidewalk cracks? Only if you're ready to gamble on winter's freeze-thaw cycle.)

These conversations produced a checklist to follow for the next couple of months, starting with the bigger jobs and leaving the smaller jobs for later in the season. Take a look and take your pick of priorities.

## OCTOBER

■ Walk around the exterior of the house and give it a careful once-over: Look for peeling paint or stucco. In places where the paint or stucco has lifted off or worn away, paint or restucco the area, or at least prime the naked patches, because water that freezes and thaws on exposed wood will badly damage it. Also look for damaged or rotting trim, loose shutters, cracked masonry and downspouts that don't extend at least six feet from the house to carry water away. If you are not the do-it-yourself type, call a handyman or contractor.

■ Roof maintenance should focus on clogged gutters; loose or damaged shingles or tiles; gaps in the flashing around vents, flues, skylights and chimneys. Examine the chimney top and crown (even from safely on the ground) for loose bricks

and cracks. If you see problems, don't put off calling a professional; damage from leaks can multiply your expenses many times; a blocked or damaged chimney is a fire hazard.

■ Have heating systems, including ducts, checked every year. This really is one thing you should not skip for several reasons: the dangers from carbon monoxide, a very cold house and possibly frozen pipes if the furnace conks out in freezing weather. (See furnace maintenance basics graphic.) If the water heater is not already insulated, boost your energy savings by adding an insulating jacket to it and the first few feet of pipes connected to it.

■ No matter how often you use your fireplace, you should check it every year for mortar damage in the chimney and firebox; for chimney blockage, whether by bird nests or a buildup of flammable soot and creosote; and to be sure the damper opens and closes smoothly. How often should you have it cleaned? Experts uniformly

say at least once a year. But the two main factors are how many fires you have per season and the quality of wood you burn. Even dry, well-seasoned wood will leave a potentially dangerous buildup inside a chimney. If you don't get a professional cleaning, remove any ashes from last season.

■ Need more firewood? Order now for the best chance of getting well-seasoned logs. Wood should be stacked several yards from the house, with space between logs for air circulation.

■ Plug cracks and holes in exterior masonry to keep critters out and to minimize heat loss. Common problem areas include openings around dryer vents, electrical wires and water pipes.

Check metal siding for breaks and seal them up. Caulk holes around outdoor faucets and light fixtures.

■ Check attic and basement walls for energy-saving insulation. If it is skimpy or nonexistent, insulate with material rated between R-13 and R-19 for heat retention. Attic floors should have a foot of insulation. Also check attic and basement vents for adequate air circulation to lessen moisture buildup, which can lead to mold or mildew.

■ Remove or cover window air conditioners; replace any broken window glass and missing putty or caulk. Swap screens for storm windows. (This is also the perfect time to get damaged screens repaired.)

■ Track down drafts around windows and doors. An easy way to find leaks is to move a lighted incense stick around the perimeter of doors and windows; wavering smoke will reveal a crack or gap that needs caulking or weather-

stripping.

■ Check the door sweeps — those flexible plastic or bristle-edged strips at the bottom of doors — to make sure they still block cold air at floor level; don't forget the garage door, which can be a major source of drafts. Inexpensive, easily installed replacement sweeps come in screw-on and self-stick models.

## NOVEMBER

■ While daytime temperatures are still moderate, examine the driveway, patio, walkway and steps. Patch all cracks and small holes with a filler or sealant (products differ for concrete and asphalt, so seek advice from a home store

staffer). If cracks are left unattended, the cycle of freezing and thawing can create more damage by spring.

■ Tree limbs should be trimmed back at least a foot from the house or roof to minimize the chance of wind and storm damage.

■ When turning back the clocks on Nov. 4, change the batteries in household carbon monoxide and smoke detectors. During the coldest months, when windows stay closed and heaters and holiday lights add to the risk of fire, these alarms can save lives.

■ Clean off lawn furniture and protect it from the harsh weather ahead. If there is no indoor storage space, or if furniture will be exposed to rain on a screened porch, protect it with fitted covers or a large tarp and bungee cords.

■ With days getting shorter, consider putting outside lights on timers so they switch on before you get home for better visibility.

■ Close the interior valves leading to all outside water faucets; disconnect all hoses; turn on the outside faucets to get rid of remaining water and shut them off again. Wrap water pipes, particularly those near exterior walls in unheated areas such as basements and crawl spaces, with insulation to avoid bursting during very cold weather. Consider putting insulated covers on outdoor faucets for added protection.

■ Clear leaves and debris from basement window wells to ensure drainage, then cover the window wells with inexpensive plastic domes to keep out rain and snow. Rake under porches and decks to keep pests away. Clear outdoor drains and low-lying areas to reduce the chance of flooding.

## DECEMBER

■ This is a good time for gutter cleaning; most leaves will have fallen.

■ Reverse the direction of the ceiling fan blades to force rising warm air downward into the room. This should allow you to lower the thermostat a few degrees, thus saving on your heating bill. (Keep the fan on the lowest speed so you don't create a chill.)

■ While retrieving holiday decorations from the attic, make sure the roof and gable vents are clear of debris and insulation. Unobstructed vents allow moist air to escape, decreasing the possibility of condensation and mildew.

## The pros who know

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✓ Jim Crenca, senior remodeling consultant, Case Design/Remodeling, Bethesda, Md.

Ashley Eldridge, education director, Chimney Safety Institute of America, Plainfield, Ind.

Angie Hicks, founder and chief marketing officer, Angie's List, Indianapolis.

Craig Smith, a manager at Strosniders hardware, Bethesda.

John D. Vaughn, civil engineer and home inspector, Monrovia, Md.

American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers, Atlanta.

Environmental Protection Agency, Washington.

National Fire Protection Association, Quincy, Mass.