

Winterizing the Farm

Winterizing the farm: your home, barn, livestock and equipment with this advice. Come the first storm of the season, and you'll be glad you did.

By Sue Weaver

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Winterizing our farms is a must. Whether we own and care for 200 cows or a horse and two goats, come blizzard, ice storm or power blackout, we farmers brave the elements to provide for our stock.

The beef rancher in northern Montana may be more concerned about ice and snow than his Arkansas-based meat goat breeder cousin, but both get cold—as do their animals. And when warmth is the objective, preparation is everything.

Be it winterizing your home or your barns and livestock, choosing cozy winter clothing, or stocking up for those inevitable midwinter storms, the time to act is now ... or as early as possible.

When the weatherman promises an ice storm or two feet of snow, you won't have time (and possibly the resources) for last-minute fixes. And you'd get mighty cold in the process.

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The Home

Most homes can be winter-proofed in a day. However, major improvements—such as adding to existing insulation under the floors, between walls and especially in the attics of older farmhouses—sometimes make a dramatic difference in heating bills and winter comfort level. In “the olden days” entire farm families wintered long, frigid months crammed into one or two downstairs rooms of their uninsulated homes. It worked, but for most of us that's not a welcome thought today!

Consider replacing old-style furnaces since they're notoriously inefficient. When updating window treatments, think about the winter cold. Wall-length draperies, curtain and shade liners and thermal shades incorporating small, insulative air pockets conserve lots of valuable heat.

© L. Diane Lackie Improperly sealed homes waste up to 15 percent of household heating dollars. So on winterizing day, weather-strip and caulk around exterior doors and windows and every opening designed to admit pipes, wires, vents and ducts into your home (such as light fixtures, plumbing pipes, dryer vents, ceiling fans and the like). Don't forget the attic door or pull-down stairway. Seal early in the season because most caulking materials lose their stickiness when temperatures dip below 45 degrees.

If your home is manufactured, winterize its roof. Seal the edges, seams, around the furnace vent cap and any other openings or cracks with roof sealant formulated for your climate.

Clean all heat registers, vents and duct openings. An industrial-strength vacuum works best but a good household vacuum will do. Re-vacuum them at least once a month, more frequently if you have furry indoor pets.

Service your furnace. Depending on its make and model, clean or replace the air filter now, and again monthly, throughout heating season. Lube the furnace's blower motor and make certain its thermostat and pilot light are working. Move combustibles away from the furnace and ductwork.

Inspect the chimney or flue. Clean it yourself or hire a chimney sweep to do it, especially if you use wood heat. If you have a fireplace, secure the damper and except when in use, keep it closed throughout heating season—open, it acts as a huge, open window, sucking away heat and creating a draft.

Finally, protect exposed pipes by insulating or wrapping them with heat tape. Follow package instructions exactly since

improperly installed tape can start fires. If pipes are already heat taped, check to see that they're safely wrapped and working properly.

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The Barn

When winterizing livestock barns, remember that adequate ventilation is vital to prevent respiratory problems. Don't plan to button up your barn up tightly—eliminating drafts is sufficient.

Snugly winterize heated areas such as tack rooms and wash racks by caulking and weather-stripping windows and doors, and filling cracks.

Service heaters and well pumps. Check well house insulation and apply heat tape where needed.

Make repairs, give your barn a thorough cleaning and check fences now. Seasonal chores aren't fun when it's 10 degrees below zero and a gale force wind is grabbing at your frozen fingers.

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Livestock

If your animals require winter clothing, hang up blankets to air and examine them to see if repairs or replacements are needed. It can be nearly impossible to buy quality blankets, locally, during the height of snow season.

Horses, cattle, hogs, sheep, llamas and poultry all require additional calories to generate body heat during cold spells. Know your animals' needs and stockpile emergency feed to last at least two weeks, preferably longer.

Calculate bedding needs and add an adequate supply to your emergency cache. Make certain your barn's first-aid kit is fully stocked and stash away extra pharmaceuticals you'd need should your veterinarian be unable to reach you.

During bitter winter months, free access to water is essential. It takes six times as much eaten snow to generate an equal amount of water, and consuming cold substances lowers body heat. Warm water is best, especially for old, young or debilitated animals of all species.

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Resources

[Winterizing Pets](#)

[Red Cross Winter Storm Information](#)

[Winter Storm Preparedness](#)

[Red Cross Disaster Supplies Kit](#)

[University of North Dakota: Coping With Winter](#) (Articles for homeowners, dairy owners and cattle ranchers; links too)

[Staying Safe Outdoors in Winter Weather](#)

[Articles from Emergency Essentials](#)

[Understanding Wind Chills](#)

If you're watering a family poultry flock, one horse or a few goats, you could carry warm water from the house. If you top off frozen buckets with extremely hot water, stand guard to prevent stock from drinking until it melts encrusted ice and cools a bit.

For larger groups drinking from communal water troughs, a tank heater or an automatic heated water bowl is a sound investment.

Plug it into a ground fault circuit interrupter (GFCI) equipped extension cord to prevent shocks. In use, check tank heaters often. A tripped GFCI could mean a frozen water supply, as can a heater fished out and dumped on the floor by playful livestock, especially horses.

If yours play tank heater hockey, build a tank cover. Drill a central hole through a partial sheet of plywood and install this over the tank with an opening at either end, weighting it with rocks, bricks, or whatever is needed to keep it in place. When freeze up arrives, you can thread your heater's cord through the hole, safely out of reach of inquisitive muzzles. Even using a GFCI equipped model, you may want to fit an exposed cord with a length of PVC pipe to thwart chewing and prevent shorts and shocks.

Keep the tank clean. Scoop out organic matter daily. To clean the tank, bail water into buckets and dump them someplace that won't create a dangerous ice slick for your animals to navigate. If spills happen, to provide safer footing, put down plenty of bedding material to freeze in with resulting ice. Ice slicks can be sprinkled with rock salt, sand or fresh kitty litter for better traction.

Barn cats and dogs should be factored into winterizing plans. Build them a cozy sleeping nest in a draft-free part of the barn. A travel crate surrounded by baled hay or straw and bedded with loose straw provides the cozy, den-like setting both prefer, but a heap of loose bedding or blankets in a sheltered spot works nearly as well.

Provide size-appropriate winter housing for outdoor farm dogs. A doghouse should be roomy enough for its occupant to sit up straight or stretch out on his side, but for optimal body-heat retention, don't make it any bigger. Shift existing doghouses so their doors face away from prevailing winter winds and tack dog flaps over the doorways. Inside, create deep, cushy beds of straw or hay. Blankets, rags and rugs are good but these pack down, making them less insulative than hay. Whatever you choose, set aside extra bedding so you can add more or replace wet material when needed.

When temps plummet below zero, even outdoor dogs should sleep indoors. Include feed and other necessities for barn cats, stock dogs and household pets when stockpiling winter emergency supplies. All need extra calories to stay warm and you don't want to run out of indoor cat litter while snowbound!

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Equipment

To winter-proof your tractor, inspect its hydraulic, fuel and electrical systems. Lube the engine with a lighter-weight winter oil. Check the antifreeze; most tractor manufacturers recommend new antifreeze every two years. To prevent fuel gelling at zero degrees and below, set aside a supply of fuel additive for your diesel tractor. Whether gasoline or diesel, plan to keep your tractor full of fuel throughout those frigid winter months.

A livestock owner must be able to reach the feed mill or vet regardless of what Mother Nature hands him. Check your farm truck's battery and recharge or replace it if needed. Examine the ignition system; you need a feed-hauler that reliably starts. Install snow tires or all-season radials and toss a set of chains in the back if you think you may need them. Check the brakes and exhaust system too. Exhaust leaks vent carbon monoxide to the cab—a serious problem when windows are cranked up tight. Test existing antifreeze and add more or replace it if needed. Make certain the heater, defroster and both windshield wipers are in good condition and fill up with winter-grade washer fluid.

Finally, sock away a winter household survival cache for your family. In recent years ice storms and blizzards left parts of the country without power for up to three weeks. Would you be prepared? Must-have items include a fully stocked first-aid kit and advance knowledge of how to use it; cooking and drinking water; an adequate food supply, standby items such as candles and plenty of matches, flashlights and a battery-powered radio with spare batteries for each; a supply of cozy blankets or warm sleeping bags; fire extinguishers and amusements such as board games for all family members, especially kids. Establish in advance what your heat source will be and which room or rooms you will heat. Many older farmhouses have capped thimbles in rooms once heated with wood stoves. If yours does and your homeowners insurance allows it, consider installing a standby wood heater or cook stove for the coldest winter months. Get a cord of seasoned hardwood and know how to safely build a fire in your stove of choice. With it, your alternative heat and cooking needs are easily met.

If you use a kerosene or other unvented heater, you'll have to cross-ventilate the room. Make certain windows on either

side can be opened at least an inch.

Don't ever consider hauling gas or charcoal briquette grills indoors for heating or cooking. It's never safe (often deadly), nor is using the kitchen range and oven as a heat source.

Water is best stored in clean, glass bottles or two-liter plastic bottles. Water kept in cool, dark locations, stored in plastic bottles stays good for about six months. Or leave four inches of head room in each bottle and store it on a porch or in an outbuilding location where it will freeze and stay frozen. Figure enough water for two weeks of drinking, cooking and personal needs—generally one gallon per person per day.

When planning a winter storm food cache, choose items that require no refrigeration and little or no preparation time, cooking or water. Don't be adventurous—select foods your family normally eats. If you must cook, use canned heat products such as Sterno or cook on your wood heater. Outdoors, use a camp stove or grill.

Don't forget to include a manual can opener and because cleanup will be difficult, plenty of sturdy paper plates, paper towels, and prepackaged moist towelettes.

Pack everything in food storage bags and stow these inside moisture and insect-proof food-grade containers (never industrial plastics, lawn or trash bags). Stash it all in a dry, cool spot. When the last winter storm of the season is a memory, use up remaining edibles and set aside the nonperishables for next year's winter storm survival supply.

Cold is a given most everywhere. Some fear it, many despise it. You need do neither if you plan ahead, act on that plan now, and ease into winter storms prepared. Then when Old Man Winter shrouds your farm with snow and ice, you and your family and stock will be warm, snug and well fed.

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Dressing For the Freezing Season

Do iced toes and frost-nipped fingers put a damper on your wintertime chores? Do you pile on sweaters until you feel like the Pillsbury doughboy, but still you shiver and shake?

No more! By combining today's outdoor wonder fabrics with a smidge of savvy you can ban the midwinter frozen-tootsies blues. The trick to staying snugly warm when temperatures topple is layering. The beauty of layering: if you dress too warmly, you can peel off a piece or two and stay dry. Sweat creates heat loss via evaporation. The cardinal rule of dressing to stay warm is simple: Avoid sweat—always.

Layer one: long underwear designed to absorb sweat and whisk it away from your body. Yesterday's cotton long handles won't do. Cotton absorbs sweat but doesn't wick, so instead, moisture lingers near your skin, making you feel cold and clammy.

That long underwear standby, polypropylene, does a better job at a fairly modest price but can't wick moisture unless topped with a highly absorbent second layer such as wool or fleece.

Best bets: today's non-scratchy woolen weaves, pure silk and blends combining polyester, wool, Lycra and nylon in knits, fleeces and microdenier pile. Whatever long underwear you choose, it must fit snugly but not so tight it constricts.

The items comprising your second warming layer should create dead-air space to slow the loss of body heat. Layer two also continues dissipating moisture, especially if you've chosen polypropylene underwear.

It can be one garment or many, depending on weather conditions, your own metabolism and what activity level you plan to pursue. Wool or synthetic fleece pullovers and turtlenecks are sound choices—cotton sweatshirts are not. The entire layer must be loose enough to trap air between each garment but not so bulky that you can't move.

A third and final layer can be a lightweight windbreaker and pants. Or top just one or two second layer garments with a down or synthetic fill-lined jacket or parka. Whichever, your outermost layer must be windproof, water resistant and breathable. Most of today's quality outerwear meets these standards; read labels to be sure. Choose a shell, jacket or parka with knit cuffs, wind plackets (a buttoned flap over a zipper closure or vice versa), and zippers with large nylon teeth.

To stay toasty warm on especially frosty days, cover every part of your body. Wear an ear-concealing, closely woven hat

with a scarf or neck gaiter, or choose a jacket or parka with a hood. If the temperature falls below zero, pull on a face mask or balaclava. You lose up to 60 percent of your body heat through the top of your head. Hats may not be fashion statements but they're essential.

Mittens are warmer than gloves. Choose mitts or gloves topped with waterproof, windproof fabric. Slide a chemical heater packet into either and your fingers remain comfy for hours. Wear a single pair of medium-weight socks. Two or more pairs create slippage, and slippage equals blisters. Bulky socks restrict circulation, causing iced feet. Wool, silk, synthetics and blends are great choices but save those cotton socks for warmer months.

Choose winter chore boots with removable liners. Buy at least two sets and wear one while the other dries out. Look for tall tops that secure tightly so snow can't slip down into the foot area or wear snow gaiters to prevent it. Winter boots must be roomy to accommodate socks without constriction.

About the Author:

Sue Weaver is a freelance writer based in Arkansas. She and her husband, John, have been hobby farming for more than 20 years, with many of these years spent in the Minnesota snow.

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