

Spring & Summer Seasonal Maintenance Guide -- Northeast

Article From HouseLogic.com

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Published: November 13, 2009

If you live in the Northeast, here are maintenance jobs you should complete in spring and summer to prevent costly repairs and keep your home in top condition.

Certain home maintenance tasks should be completed each season to prevent structural damage, save energy, and keep all your home's systems running properly. These maintenance tasks are most important for the Northeast in spring and summer. For a comprehensive list of tasks by season, refer to the to-do lists at the end of this article.

After a long, cold Northeastern winter, spring is an excellent time to get outside and perform a fresh inspection of the whole house, says Steve Gladstone of Stonehollow Home Inspections in Stamford, Conn. Give all your major exterior systems-roof, siding, gutters, drainage-a close examination to make sure they're working properly and are in good shape.

Key maintenance tasks to perform

* **Monitor your gutters and drainage.** If debris has accumulated over the winter, you'll find out when the snow melts and spring rains arrive. Remove any blockages and look for signs of bending, damage, and areas where water has been diverted onto the roof or siding. You can usually make minor gutter repairs yourself for under \$50 by adjusting or reattaching brackets, gently hammering out bent areas, and replacing damaged sections of gutter if necessary.

This is also a good time to walk around the house and make sure the soil slopes away from the foundation at a rate of at least 6 vertical inches over the first 10 feet. If you have standing water or mushy areas, consider re-grading, adding berms (raised areas), swales (contoured drainage ditches), or installing a French drain (<http://www.houselogic.com/articles/french-drains-when-you-need-them/>) (a shallow trench that diverts water

away from the house). Try to identify whether your problem is improper sloping or gutter overflow. A home inspector can help you if you're stumped; inspection services run about \$80-\$100 per hour.

* **Inspect your roof and chimney for winter damage.** Shingles may need repair after a rough winter. Look for loose chimney bricks and mortar, rotting boards if you have a wooden chimney box, or rust if you have a chimney with metal parts and flashing. Inside the house, check your skylights to make sure there are no stains that indicate water leakage. If you suspect a problem, call a roofing contractor or a chimney sweep certified by the Chimney Safety Institute of America for an estimate for repairs. Minor roof repairs run from \$100 to \$350.

* **Examine siding for signs of winter damage.** Check for loose or rotting boards and replace; inspect the areas where siding meets windows and doors and caulk any gaps. Give your siding an annual cleaning (<http://www.houselogic.com/articles/clean-and-care-siding/>) using soap and water, a brush, and a garden hose. Also, make sure your house number hasn't been damaged or obscured by dirt and is easily visible to emergency personnel.

* **Schedule your spring air conditioning service.** Get ready for the air conditioning season with your spring tune-up. If your system wasn't running well last season, be sure to tell your contractor, and make sure he performs actual repairs if necessary rather than simply adding refrigerant. Follow your contractor as he works to get an idea of the maintenance checklist he uses and ask questions about what he's doing. Your contractor's checklist should include inspecting thermostats and controls, checking the refrigerant level, tightening connections, lubricating moving parts, checking the condensate drain, and cleaning the coils and blower. Expect to pay \$50-\$100 for a tune-up. Meanwhile, make sure your air filters are changed and vacuum out your floor registers.

If duct cleaning is part of your scheduled service, make sure you aren't

charged extra for it. Some contractors may try to convince you to let them apply antifungal/antibacterial chemicals to the interior surfaces of the ducts; this isn't usually necessary and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (<http://www.epa.gov>) says research has not yet confirmed its effectiveness or potential to be harmful. Any chemicals you add to your ducts will likely become airborne, so exercise caution.

* **Check kids' outdoor play areas.** "Swingsets tend to get funky over the winter," Gladstone says. "Tighten bolts and make sure things are still properly put together and safe to use." Make sure no sharp edges or splinters are sticking up, and clean off any mold growth with a household-strength 1:9 solution of bleach and water.

* **Check your GFCIs.** A ground fault circuit interrupter (GFCI) protects you from deadly electrical shocks by shutting off the power anytime even a minimal disturbance in current is detected. They're the electrical outlets with two buttons in the middle ("test" and "reset") that should be present anywhere water and electricity can mix: kitchens, bathrooms, basements, garages, and the exterior of the house. The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (<http://www.cpsc.gov>) recommends monthly testing, which you're likely to remember if you incorporate it into your spring routine.

To test a GFCI, plug a small appliance (a radio, for example) into each of your GFCIs. Press the test button, which should click and shut off the radio. The reset button should pop out; when you press reset, the radio should come back on.

If the radio doesn't go off when you press the test button, either the GFCI itself has failed and should be replaced, or the outlet is wired incorrectly and should be repaired. If the reset button doesn't pop out, or if pressing it doesn't restore power to the radio, the GFCI has failed and should be replaced. These distinctions can help you tell an electrician what the problem is-*neither* job is one you should attempt yourself if you don't have ample experience with electrical repair.

* **Pay a visit to the attic.** During a spring rain, check for visible leaks, water stains, discolored insulation, and rotting or moldy joists and roof decking. If detected, call a handyman or roofing contractor for an estimate for repairs. If you have areas of rot or mold exceeding 10 sq. ft., call an indoor air quality inspector or mold remediation company for advice. If you have an attic fan, make sure it's running properly and that the protective screen hasn't been blocked by bird nests or debris.

* **Clean dirty windows.** This is a good task for the end of summer, when it's still nice outside. Clean windows allow more solar energy into the house in the cooler months to come, which will help you save on your heating bill. For streak-free glass, use an eco-friendly solution of one part vinegar to eight parts water, with a few squirts of dish soap; apply to window with a sponge or soft mitt, scrubbing any tough spots. Rinse with clean water and then squeegee the surface dry.

Along with these important maintenance tasks, be sure to check out the others cited in the to-do lists following this article. Spending a weekend or two on maintenance can prevent costly repairs and alert you to developing problems. Visit the links listed below for more detailed information on completing tasks or repairs.

Karin Beuerlein has covered home improvement and green living topics extensively for HGTV.com, FineLiving.com, and FrontDoor.com. In more than a decade of freelancing, she's also written for dozens of national and regional publications, including Better Homes & Gardens, The History Channel Magazine, Eating Well, and Chicago Tribune. She and her husband started married life by remodeling the house they were living in. They still have both the marriage and the house, no small feat.