

This article appeared in the St. Petersburg Times and is reprinted here with the permission of the author, Len Bonifield. Many thanks to him! Even though aimed at mobile home owners, the suggestions here apply to anyone who has a vacation home here, whether a mobile or a home of conventional construction. I hope that you find the ideas helpful! John Elwell - REALTOR®

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It won't be long before winter visitors head north for the summer. Here is our annual checklist to help you prepare your home before you depart. Doing it right before you leave will save you work and maybe major repairs when you return in the fall. This year's column draws on ideas we've offered in the past, plus reader contributions.

Many of the tips can be executed well in advance of your departure, so you need not wait till the last minute to do everything.

Begin to use up food in the freezer and pantry. Take items you won't use to a food bank or soup kitchen, or give them to a neighbor.

Dispose of items accumulated over the winter. Recycle those newspapers, bottles and aluminum cans. Take old clothes to a charity.

Notify your neighbors and, if you live in a community, notify management. Give them a departure date and an estimated return date. Ask several neighbors to keep an eye on your home. Make sure that at least one has a key (better: two or more). Ask one to check on the inside occasionally for leaks, infestations and burglaries.

Cancel newspaper subscriptions. Ask neighbors to pick up newspapers, periodicals, etc., that are tossed on your driveway or porch.

Ask a neighbor to park a car in your driveway to give the impression someone lives there.

Do not put a chain or barrier across your drive to keep vehicles out. It is a big signal to burglars that no one is home.

Make sure your air conditioner is working properly and in good condition. Install a new air filter or clean your permanent filter. Set the thermostat at 85 degrees. (This is the setting recommended by air conditioning contractors.) You want to do whatever you can to prevent mold and mildew.

If you have a humidistat (highly recommended by A/C contractors), set it at 60 percent.

Put a timer on at least one light, set to turn on and off to make the home appear occupied. Ask neighbors to check the bulb and replace it if it burns out.

If you have an irrigation system, set it to water your lawn in compliance with local government watering

Two motion-sensitive security lights at the rear of your home will discourage burglars.

Turn off electricity to your water heater.

Unplug all electrical items, except lights on timers, so they don't get zapped by a lightning strike. Switch off all circuit breakers for everything except your air conditioner, security lights, irrigation system and the circuit for the light inside the home.

There are two philosophies on what to do with the refrigerator. One is to leave it empty, unplugged, making sure the ice-maker water supply is off, and prop the door open. The second is to turn the dial to the warmest setting, turn off the icemaker and fill both the freezer and refrigerator with jugs of water. Some recommend placing a dish of either activated charcoal or baking soda inside to absorb odors. If you decide on this option, do not turn off the circuit breaker to this circuit.

Place any loose foods, opened boxes (pasta, flour) or spices in plastic containers with tight lids. If you are leaving your refrigerator on, place these items inside.

Notify the post office of your summer mailing address for forwarding mail.

Notify your water/sewer, electric and/or gas company where to mail bills while you are gone.

Consider what to do about your phone. You can switch your phone to vacation service, which has the effect of disconnecting the phone but keeping the number active so it can be reinstated when you return. However, if you have a security system that automatically telephones the monitoring office when a break-in is detected, placing your phone on vacation mode disables that part of your security system. If you have a security system, be sure to tell the neighbor checking you home how to enter and exit.

Notify your cable company of your departure. Bright House Networks, for example, offers a seasonal package if you are gone at least 60 days, a money-saver since you aren't paying for cable TV you're not here to watch.

Clean your dishwasher thoroughly, paying attention to the edges of the door. Blot up any residual water in the bottom after you run your last load. Prop the door open.

One of my readers recommends placing a small amount, one or two tablespoons, of a non-toxic RV anti-freeze in the bottom of your dishwasher and washing machine to keep the rubber washers from drying out. Some have used a tablespoon of vegetable oil, but one reader said it left the dishwasher and washing machine gummy. Leave a note to remind yourself to run the empty machine through a cycle when you return to remove the antifreeze or oil before you wash a load of clothes or dishes.

Pour a cup of chlorine bleach into each toilet bowl after flushing three or four times to clear any debris. If you have a septic tank, put enzyme cleaner in it when you leave and again when you return. Cover both the toilet bowl and the tank with plastic wrap to minimize evaporation and keep out bugs.

Some like to set out containers around the interior of the house with activated charcoal to absorb odors and moisture. It has also been recommended that cat litter in containers around the house will control moisture and odors.

Check - or have someone check - your plumbing system for leaks. Look for wet areas or water stains in your kitchen, bathroom and laundry areas. Look under the house for leaks.

Inspect - or have inspected - your roof for damage or leaks.

Turn off the water at the main shutoff. If this is not possible because you are leaving your irrigation system on, then close all shut-offs for sinks, toilet bowls and appliances.

Open all closet doors and dresser drawers so air circulates. Leave no clothes on wire hangers and none in garment bags, unless you leave them unzipped. Rust stains and mildew are often permanent. Make sure all clothes are clean before you leave: Residual stains can turn rusty.

Clean all floor coverings and all surfaces to ensure that no food particles or stains attract bugs or cause mildew.

Run ice cubes through your garbage disposal. Flush with baking soda and water, spray with WD-40 and put the stopper in place.

Thoroughly clean all appliances. This means everything: toaster, toaster oven, range, including the oven and broiler, as well as the burners and drip pans. Don't leave behind crumbs or grease that will attract pests.

Pull furniture away from the walls and pull out loose cushions on sofas and chairs. This allows air circulation that will retard mold and mildew.

Close and lock all windows. Place security bars in sliding glass doors. Close all blinds, draperies and awnings to keep out as much sun and heat as possible. Some seasonal residents place heavy cardboard or aluminum foil in windows and skylights, but these can be a tip-off that no one is home.

Some residents like to have a professional pest-control firm spray around and under the house before they leave. Others distribute the pesticide around the house themselves. One reader suggested scattering "Roach Away" boric acid to control roaches.

Place ant traps near piping or where pipe holes exist in the flooring or wall.

If you have candles and plan to leave your refrigerator on, place the candles in the fridge so they don't soften during the summer.

Have a screen room? Move upholstered furniture into the house in air-conditioned space. Cover furniture in the screen room. Do not leave a TV exposed to summer conditions in your screen room. If you have vinyl windows, lower a couple of windows from the top one or two inches for circulation.

Keep an eye on the Weather Channel for a few days prior to your departure. It's still winter up North. If a major storm is headed for your destination, you can delay your departure until the storm has passed and roads are clear.

PS from John Elwell

If you are putting your home up for sale while you are gone, please do not place mothballs around the interior of the home. I can tell you from personal experience that the strong smell that they emit drives away more potential buyers than bugs. Many people will not even enter a home that has the strong smell of mothballs in it. Then spray the interior, or set out ant buttons or roach motels inside.

If I can be of any further assistance, do not hesitate to contact me at any time!

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