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The Handyman France Idiots' Guide Winterizing a Second Home

It's important to winterize your second home not only to avoid damage from weather and rodents, not to mention burglars, but also to save the problems with trying to claim from your insurers. This guide is intended to not only highlight the obvious, but to suggest the less obvious.

The basics -

1. Turn off the water at the meter. Less obvious, drain the system so that it's no longer under pressure. That way, if pipes freeze, they won't split.
2. Turn off the electric – or not as the case may be! We'll come to this later.
3. Turn off the gas – unless you have a gas boiler which should be on the anti-frost setting. You'll need the electric left on for the boiler to work.
4. Turn off the electric water heater if the electricity is left on.
5. Ensure all windows, exterior doors and shutters are secure and locked.
6. Leave all interior doors unlocked. A locked door tells the burglar there's something valuable behind it. So he'll smash it open and your valuables will disappear anyway – and you have a damaged door to add to the bill.
7. Leave interior doors ajar. If opened completely, air gets trapped between the door and the wall, leading to damp mould. If closed, the air goes stale.
8. Put a '*pas de pub*' note on the letterbox so that it doesn't overflow with brochures.
9. If possible, put the wheelie-bins in the garage. They provide an easy ladder for burglars to get onto the roof and affect entry from there.
10. Leave the fridge door open. It will stink if you don't.



You may want to leave the electric on, and have a light or two going on and off to give the impression that someone is in. If so, use a timer with a battery backup. If there's a power cut, it will still operate at the times you've set it. If the timer has multiple settings, vary the times each day. Don't forget to have a light on early in the mornings for a little while.



Maybe have a radio going on and off with or without the lights. Use a talk channel (there's plenty of them!) as all that a potential intruder would hear is voices.

You may also want to use an electronic mouse scarer if the electrics are left on. Poison and traps are of limited value when the house is empty for prolonged periods. Traps are useless once tripped, and poison simply leaves dead bodies everywhere. They are incredibly destructive, and of course mice breed like rabbits.

A single pregnant female mouse can lead to 60+ mice in around three months. Rats are just as bad; 5 litters per annum, each of up to 7-15 baby rats, each of which starts breeding aged 5 weeks, so the potential is for numbers that are truly staggering. The figures given here are dependant on the particular breed of rodent, and reflect good conditions for breeding (for example, a plentiful food supply). But it illustrates the scale of problem you could encounter if you neglect to take precautions.



How long will your house empty?

Leave the house spotlessly clean! Crumbs and food waste turn into mouse magnets.

Hoist up floor length curtains so that any passing rodent won't eat them. They may eat furniture etc., but at least your curtains should be safe. (Mice can extract enough water from your curtains to survive without drinking.) Make sure all bedding is on top of the bed and not dangling over the sides onto the floor for mice to climb. Do you really want Mickey & Minnie in your bed?

Block any hole larger than 4mm between your house and the outside world. Mice can collapse their bodies to 5mm. And they do, just to get into a house. Expanding foam is often just the thing to use. Inexpensive and easy to use, though a little unsightly. Remember that prevention is cheaper than cure.

The only good thing about having mice is that it means you don't have rats.



Of course you could invest in a snake, but that may be considered a little excessive.

If you have a driveway, ask a neighbour if they'd like to use it to park their car. If you have a car that's left at the property, have someone move it around regularly – again, it gives the impression that someone is at home at least some of the time.

Get someone to give the garden a once over every few weeks. Nothing makes a house look deserted more than an overgrown garden. Cut down or severely trim any trees, shrubs, etc. that obscure the

view of vulnerable areas from the street or neighbouring properties. Burglars hate an audience.

Consider a 'beware of the doggy' sign. The dog in the photo would be as much use as an ashtray on a motorbike, but I thought you'd like to see her. Of course, burglars don't know just how soft Roxy is...

Keep an eye on the weather websites for the area. Ask someone to visit after any periods of extreme weather.

Don't forget the pool! Having lowered the water level to just below the skimmers when it was hibernated, it will refill with rainwater. Whilst this may be welcomed in early spring, late autumn/early winter rain can over fill the pool with resultant damage a little later when the freeze sets in.

A word of caution. If you ask a neighbour or friend to keep an eye on your place, it's free but risky. When disaster strikes and your friend/neighbour hasn't done anything, you'll feel miffed and your friendship is at risk.

If you claim from your insurance after a storm, remember that there's usually a time limit. So if your house has been empty and unchecked for months, trying to claim for historic storm damage can be all but impossible. Amongst other obstacles, you may be expected to provide proof that there was a storm. If you don't know when it was, how do you do that?

An intruder alarm probably won't help with natural disasters or a rodent infestation, but it can work wonders against the two-legged variety of unwelcome visitors. Alarms are better than cameras. Both are probably better still. Modern alarms can call any phone number programmed into the system, so it's not just a lot of noise. This can even be done using a SIM card rather than a landline – if you have a mobile signal of course.

Most of the steps you need to take to protect your assets when you're back in Blighty aren't much more than common sense, but it's easy to just assume everything will be OK when you lock the front door. If you return for a weekend and find a minor problem, it becomes a crisis with limited time available.

I repeat my earlier observation – ***prevention is cheaper than cure!***

