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How to Open Your Cape Cod House in Spring: The De-Winterization Checklist

A free field guide from the people who actually live here.



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Most second-home owners I talk to think Memorial Day weekend is “opening day” for their Cape Cod house. That’s the wrong frame. By Memorial Day, every reliable plumber from Bourne to Provincetown is booked solid, the cedar shingle guys won’t return calls until July, and whatever pipe split in February has been quietly dripping behind your kitchen wall for ninety days. The real Cape Cod opening window is the **last week of March through the second week of April** — and the people who treat it like a deadline have houses that run all summer without a single emergency call.

Here’s the checklist I’d hand a friend with a place in Wellfleet, Brewster, or Falmouth.

Why the Late-March Window Matters

Cape Cod’s last hard freeze typically falls around April 8–15, a few days later on the Outer Cape than the Upper Cape. That gives you a narrow runway: arrive late enough that overnight lows have stabilized, but early enough to catch problems before the May rush.

Three reasons March and early April are non-negotiable:

- **Contractor availability collapses after April 15.** Plumbers, septic pumpers, and irrigation companies double their lead times once seasonal renters start arriving.
- **Hidden damage is cheaper to fix in April.** A split copper line found in early April is a four-hour repair. The same split discovered in late June — after weeks of slow thawing and pressure — can mean ripped-out drywall and ruined hardwood.
- **Tick season begins in mid-April.** If you wait until May to walk the property, you’re walking through peak nymph activity in Eastham, Truro, and Brewster — exactly when Lyme transmission peaks.

Before You Even Drive Down: Three Calls

Make these from home, two weeks out.

1. **Your plumber** — book a turn-on and pressure-test visit. Don’t show up cold and try to do this yourself if the house was winterized with antifreeze in the traps; you want a pro confirming no splits.
2. **Your septic company** — if you haven’t had a Title 5 inspection in three years, schedule one. The Cape’s Title 5 rules are strict, and a failed system caught in April is fixable; one caught when you’re closing in October becomes a five-figure emergency.
3. **HVAC** — spring tune-up before they get slammed with AC calls in June. Most companies charge the same flat rate March through May, then tack on an “expedite” fee after Memorial Day.

The First-Visit Checklist

This is what to do, in order, on day one.

Water System Turn-On

Walk the entire house with the main valve still off. Open every faucet — kitchen, baths, laundry, outdoor spigots — so air can escape as you pressurize the lines. Then slowly open the main.

Watch each fixture. You’re listening for hissing that doesn’t stop, looking for drips at supply-line connections, and checking under every sink with a flashlight. Pay particular attention to:

- The water heater’s pressure relief valve
- Toilet supply lines (the braided plastic ones from the 90s are the number-one failure point)
- Dishwasher and washing machine inlet hoses
- Exterior hose bibs — frost-free or not, they split

If you have a well (common in Truro, Wellfleet, and parts of Eastham), prime the pump per the manufacturer’s instructions and shock-chlorinate before you drink from the tap. Cape well water that sat stagnant for four months grows things you don’t want in your coffee.

Outdoor Shower

This is the Cape Cod institution that gets winterized and forgotten. Reconnect the supply, then run it for five solid minutes before you trust it. Check the wood enclosure for winter rot — cedar floors near the drain are the first to go, and they’re a \$400 fix if you catch it now versus a \$2,500 rebuild if you wait two summers.

Septic and Drainage

Lift the access cover on your septic tank (or have your service do it). You’re looking for:

- Water level at the proper line — not high, not bone-dry
- No sewage smell at the leach field
- Grass over the leach field that’s healthy, not unusually lush (lush grass means a system pushing effluent to the surface)

If you’re on town sewer — Provincetown, parts of Chatham, downtown Hyannis — skip this and just confirm your cleanout is accessible.

Typical Cape Cod De-Winterization Costs (2026)

These are real ranges quoted across Barnstable County this past spring. Prices skew higher on the Outer Cape due to travel time.

Service	Upper Cape (Bourne, Falmouth, Sandwich)	Mid-Cape (Yarmouth, Dennis, Brewster)	Outer Cape (Wellfleet, Truro, P-town)
Plumber turn-on + pressure test	\$185–\$275	\$200–\$300	\$250–\$375
Well pump service & shock chlorination	\$225–\$350	\$250–\$400	\$300–\$450
Septic Title 5 inspection	\$800–\$1,100	\$850–\$1,150	\$950–\$1,300
Septic pumping (1,500 gal)	\$385–\$465	\$400–\$500	\$475–\$595
HVAC spring tune-up	\$165–\$245	\$175–\$265	\$225–\$325
Irrigation start-up (all zones tested)	\$135–\$185	\$145–\$200	\$175–\$245
Outdoor shower reconnect	\$150–\$225	\$165–\$245	\$195–\$285
Generator service (Generac/Kohler)	\$325–\$475	\$350–\$500	\$395–\$575
Pool opening (residential, in-ground)	\$450–\$725	\$475–\$775	\$550–\$895
Cedar shingle inspection	\$200–\$350	\$225–\$375	\$275–\$425
Tick perimeter treatment (1 acre)	\$95–\$145	\$105–\$155	\$125–\$185

Budget roughly **\$1,800–\$2,800** for a full professional open if you're checking every box. Most owners DIY the easier items and farm out the plumbing, septic, and HVAC — that brings it closer to **\$900–\$1,400**.

The Cape-Specific Hazards Nobody Warns You About

These are the things that bite second-home owners who think a Cape opening is the same as a Berkshires opening.

Cedar Shake and Shingle Damage

A bad nor'easter cycle — the December-through-February storms that drove sideways rain at 60+ mph this past winter — pulls nails on south-facing walls. Walk every elevation. Loose shingles aren't a cosmetic problem; they're how wind-driven rain gets behind your sheathing and rots your sill plate. Brewster, Orleans, and Chatham bayside homes are particularly vulnerable.

Mice in the Attic Insulation

If your house sat unheated below 55°F all winter, assume something moved in. Check the attic *before* you turn the HVAC on full blast — you do not want to circulate that air through the house. Look for tunnels in batt insulation, droppings near soffit vents, and any chewed wiring. A pest-control visit runs \$150–\$225 and is cheaper than rewiring a chewed circuit.

Tick Treatment Before You Walk the Yard

The Cape's tick population — primarily blacklegged (deer) ticks in Brewster, Wellfleet, and Eastham, and Lone Star ticks increasingly in Falmouth and Mashpee — overwinters in leaf litter. The single highest-ROI spring service is a perimeter treatment of your yard's woodland edges. Have it done before you start raking, not after.

Outdoor Furniture Mildew

Anything stored on a screened porch or in a garage that wasn't fully sealed will have surface mildew. Wipe down with a 1:10 bleach solution and let it sun-dry for a day before you put cushions on it. Pressure-washing teak furniture removes the patina you actually want — don't.

Generator Battery

If you have a standby generator, the battery is the number-one failure point after a winter of cold cycling. Test it under load before hurricane season starts in June. A dead battery during a July outage means hand-cranking a generator in a thunderstorm.

A Realistic Two-Day Timeline

If you're doing this in a weekend rather than a long stay, here's a workable sequence.

Saturday morning: - Plumber arrives 8 a.m. for water turn-on - Walk the exterior while they work; flag any shingle damage - Run every fixture for five minutes; flush every toilet twice - Septic inspection if scheduled

Saturday afternoon: - HVAC tune-up - Outdoor shower reconnect - Irrigation start-up (only after plumber clears the main) - Inventory anything mice touched

Sunday morning: - Tick perimeter treatment (book before you arrive) - Generator test - Pool opening if applicable - Restock the basics: propane for the grill, fresh box of baking soda in the fridge, batteries for the smoke detectors that died over winter

Sunday afternoon: - Drive to the transfer station with anything water-damaged - Make a list for the next visit

Don't-Miss Warnings

One: Do not turn on the irrigation system before your plumber has confirmed no splits in the main water line. A buried PEX line that froze and split will flood your yard the moment the irrigation pump kicks on. I watched it happen in a Dennis backyard last April — \$4,200 to fix, fully preventable.

Two: If your house has propane appliances and the tank ran empty over winter, schedule a leak test before you light anything. Empty tanks let air into the lines, and air plus a pilot light is how propane-fueled fires start. Eastham and Wellfleet, where most homes are off natural gas, see at least one of these incidents every spring. It's a five-minute test, and there are zero good excuses for skipping it.

Open the house right and your summer is fixing nothing and enjoying everything. Open it wrong and you'll spend July arguing with a plumber who can't get to you until August.

◆ THINGS TO DO

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