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CAPE COD HOME

Winterizing Your Cape Cod Vacation Home: The Complete Checklist

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



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The Cape Cod home that gives you so much joy in July can quietly destroy itself in January if you close it up wrong. A single frozen, burst pipe in an unheated, unwatched second home can flood the place for weeks before anyone notices — one of the most common and expensive disasters second-home owners face. Winterizing properly is cheap insurance against a catastrophe. Here's the complete checklist for closing up a Cape vacation home for the off-season. (Every home is different — when in doubt, have a licensed plumber winterize the plumbing and consult local pros.)

The number one risk: frozen pipes

Everything else is secondary to this. Water expands when it freezes, bursting pipes, and a burst pipe in an empty house is a slow-motion flood. You have two basic strategies:

Strategy	What it means	Best for
Keep heat on (low)	Maintain ~55°F, leave water on, add freeze protection	Homes you'll visit in winter
Fully winterize (drain)	Shut off and drain all water, add antifreeze to traps	Homes closed all winter

For a home sitting empty all winter, **fully draining the plumbing** (ideally by a plumber) is the safest choice. If you'll pop in occasionally, keeping the heat at a **minimum ~55°F with the water on** works — but only if you trust the heating system and have monitoring.

The plumbing shutdown (the critical part)

If you're winterizing (draining): - **Shut off the main water supply.** - **Drain all pipes, fixtures, the water heater, and appliances.** - **Add non-toxic antifreeze to drain traps and toilets** so remaining water can't freeze and crack. - **Consider having a licensed plumber do it** — the cost is trivial next to a burst-pipe flood, and they won't miss a line.

The full winterizing checklist

Water & heat - Winterize or set heat to ~55°F (your call per strategy above). - Shut off water to outside spigots; drain and disconnect hoses.

Protect against water intrusion & storms - Clean gutters and downspouts so meltwater drains away. - Check the roof and flashing; a small leak becomes a big one over winter. - Secure or store outdoor furniture, grills, and anything the wind can throw. - Trim branches that could fall on the house in a nor'easter.

Systems & safety - Have the heating system serviced before you rely on it all winter. - Test smoke and CO detectors; replace batteries. - Unplug non-essential electronics; consider surge protection. - Set the water heater appropriately (off if drained).

Deter problems - Set timers on a few lights for a lived-in look. - Stop or forward mail so it doesn't pile up (a vacancy signal). - Remove food that attracts pests; seal entry points against mice.

Monitoring: the modern must-have

For a second home sitting empty, **remote monitoring is the best money you'll spend**. Consider: - **A smart thermostat** you can check and control remotely. - **A low-temperature/freeze alarm** that alerts you if the heat fails. - **A water-leak sensor** near vulnerable spots. - **A trusted local caretaker or property manager** who checks on the house periodically — the human backup no sensor replaces.

Don't-miss cautions

- **The heat-on strategy fails if the heat fails.** Without monitoring, a furnace outage in a cold snap becomes a burst-pipe flood. Monitor, or drain.
- **Don't forget the water heater and appliances** — washing machines, dishwashers, and ice makers hold water that can freeze.
- **A caretaker check-in** catches problems (leaks, storm damage, break-ins) that sensors miss.

Don't miss: protecting against the frozen pipe above all else — and adding remote temperature/leak monitoring plus a local set of eyes. Most second-home winter disasters are burst pipes in unwatched houses, and they're almost entirely preventable. Winterize the plumbing properly, monitor the house, and you can leave your Cape home in November confident it'll be exactly as you left it in May.

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