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COMMUNITY LIVING

Getting your property ready for the winter

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Any day now, temperatures will plunge and snow will drift. It's not too soon for that to happen. The record for Chicago's earliest measurable snowfall was set three years ago, on Oct. 12.

Is your community association ready to face the perils of winter? Here are some ideas to keep your property and residents safe and secure until daffodils return:

Prevent broken water pipes. The rash of foreclosures and bankruptcies this year has resulted in many an unoccupied and unattended unit. If a unit is unheated, its plumbing pipes can freeze, thaw and burst, and cause water damage to neighboring units and common areas.

Try to find an owner, lender, real estate broker or other responsible party to make sure minimum heat settings are in place, said association consultant Shirley Feldman, president of Association Advocates Inc. in Chicago and Park Ridge.

"Don't wait until the temperature dips below freezing," she said. "It could take some time to research the appropriate contact person who may have the authority to assist you."

"Never, ever turn the furnace off," said insurance broker Karyl Dicker Foray of Rosenthal Bros. in Deerfield. "Turning the furnace down a bit is fine -- never below 60 degrees, but turning it off is asking for trouble."

Open any cabinet doors that hide plumbing so warm air can circulate around them and help prevent freezing, she said.

Sprinklers and outdoor spigots should be turned off and drained, said Feldman.

Be ready for snow and ice. Your snow removal contract is signed, right? Supplement the plower's efforts by placing buckets of ice-melting compound and scoops near doorways and other slippery spots. Encourage owners and staff to spread before they tread.

"Even if your snow removal contractor has all ready plowed or shoveled, that little bit extra that you put down can mean the difference between a ride in an ambulance and a ride in a car out to dinner," said Foray.

Make a grand entrance. Give your front door personnel the tools they need to do their jobs in inclement weather, said Victor Weisskopf, president of Admiral Security Services Inc. in Niles.

Keep an adequate stash of outerwear on hand for staffers to wear and working heaters to allow them to warm up later, he said.

"Keep entrances and walk-off mats clear of wet leaves, which lead to slip-and-fall accidents," he said. "And warn everyone to take extra care to control doors when entering and exiting during windy periods -- doors are hard to fix at 11 p.m."

Protect the landscaping. The trees and turf that everyone enjoys during the warmer months take a beating in the cold, said Sherman Fields, president of Acres Group landscaping and snow removal company in Wauconda and Plainfield.

He offers a few suggestions to improve vitality and survival rates:

Evergreen shrubs and trees, especially recently planted ones, are prone to drying out. The condition is called desiccation, and it causes the plant to brown out partly or completely. Avoid the problem by applying an anti-desiccant spray, which creates a waxy coating to seal in moisture.

Bugs are another problem. Harmful insects such as aphid, scale and honey locust spend the winter as eggs attached to woody surfaces of plants. They hatch in the spring and start chomping away.

Instead of spraying pesticide after the insects emerge, an application of dormant oil in the fall will cover the eggs and prevent them from hatching. Dormant oil must be applied while the plant is in dormancy and the temperature is above 40 degrees.

Mulch looks nice, but it's also functional. Mulch is an organic fertilizer, protects plants from freezing temperatures, insulates their roots and preserves moisture in the soil.

"Fall also is a great time to add additional fertilization," he said. "The thicker and healthier your turf is, the fewer weed and turf diseases your lawn is susceptible to receive."

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