

Published December 21st, 2011

## Preparing Your Home for Winter Weather

By Sophie Braccini, Cathy Dausman and Cathy Tyson



Sales Associate Alex Villa with furnace filters in Moraga Hardware. Photo C. Tyson

The holidays are a time for celebration and fun - nobody wants to see them disrupted by a failing furnace or a bursting pipe. Finding a chimney-sweep on Christmas Eve when the house smells like smoke, instead of Noble fir, sugar cookies and hot cocoa, may not be an easy task. So as you organize those family activities, don't forget your home and garden-with a little attention ahead of time, being home for the holidays will be festive, not frustrating.

So it's winter solstice. It's not too late to get your house ready for the cold and wet that's still ahead of us. You, of course, cleaned out your gutters weeks ago, right? If not, get that ladder up there fast; and it's a good idea to clear the roof as well. According to contractor Daniel Leleu, of Lamorinda Construction and Consulting, leaves and debris left on the roof can create slippery deposits that will damage your shingles and can be treacherous if you have to walk on the roof. If decomposition has already started, you might have to use a pressure hose to get rid of it.

With our recent spell of freezing temperatures, chances are that if trouble were going to happen, it already has. It's best to insulate exposed pipes with form-fitting neoprene foam or insulating wrap and tape, all available at

your local hardware store. Don't forget the above-ground sprinkler system that is often made of plastic. If it cracks, your garden may flood.

Always cover vulnerable trees and bushes if a freeze is predicted, and check the weather-stripping around doors and windows that help keep your home warm and dry.

Also water-related - make sure that the drainage system around the house is still efficient. Especially in an older home, the underground drainpipes can rot, become damaged by roots that grow through the pipe and end up blocking the passage of water. According to Leleu, the best way to make sure that the drainage is working is to go under the house and check for moisture, especially after a rain. If that crawlspace is seriously wet, it's time to seek professional services.

S.Braccini

### Sweeping Changes for your Chimney

While winter nights may conjure up chestnuts roasting on an open fire, it might also be a good time to have your chimney cleaned and inspected. Whether your house has a masonry chimney, a pre-fabricated chimney, an insert or a wood stove, they all need cleaning, says Sal Russo of Russo's Chimney Sweep. The National Fire Protection Association recommends an annual inspection. Russo suggests chimneys should be cleaned after burning through a cord and a half of wood or after using 30 manufactured logs. He says the hotter the fire, the cleaner the flue, and oak or almond wood burns cleanest of all. When using manufactured fireplace fuel, a chemical free variety prevents buildup and chemical odors. Santa should note that cleaning is done from the roof down if it's a masonry fireplace, and from the inside up the flue if the fireplace is pre-fabricated. Gas log fireplaces, too, need an inspection, although the frequency varies with use. If a gas fireplace is used only sparingly, an inspection every 10 years or so is adequate. Frequent, near-daily use of a gas fireplace calls for more frequent inspections to avoid the buildup of carbon monoxide and soot. Take care of the damper as well, to prevent carbon monoxide buildup in the home. A fireplace should be inspected only after a cleaning. There are no chimney sweep services within Lamorinda, but the online Prime Buyers Report, (<http://www.primebuyersreport.org/ca/walnut-creek-chimney-fireplace.html>) offers a list of "Top 10 Chimney Cleaning Services in Contra Costa County." The Chimney Safety Institute of America (<http://www.csia.org/HomeownerResources/ChimneySafetyInfo/ChimneyInspections/tabid/116/Default.aspx>) has a list of certified chimney sweeps in the outlying area.

C.Dausman

### It's Time to Clear the Air

Winter even in our little corner of paradise means the furnace is on. Most residents aren't losing sleep worrying about the last time the furnace filter was changed, but perhaps after all the holiday hubbub, it's worth a few minutes to check it out. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the air inside your home can be twice as bad, or worse, as the air outdoors. Nobody likes houseguests that stay too long; same with dust, pollen, mold spores and pet dander.

Filter manufacturers recommend for maximum effectiveness changing filters every three months, however more frequent changes should be considered if you have dirty ducts, construction work in progress, furniture and drywall sanding in progress, pets or smokers in the house.

Bill Snider, the owner and operator of Moraga Hardware, recommends for those who have the air conditioning on in the summertime changing the filter every three months. He says six months is generally the norm for those families without central air conditioning. "You want electrostatic filters - they're the best kind," said Snider, he's such a believer that he's discontinuing the older non-electrostatic versions in the store. Electrostatically charged means the filter fibers are both positively and negatively charged. Particulates in the air passing through the filter are also positively or negatively charged. The charge helps pull more particles from the air.

Filters come in various sizes, depending on the type of furnace, and in differing performance ratings. Higher ratings are better for folks with allergies and help keep your home much cleaner, according to Snider.

Performance levels vary from 300 MPR - Microparticle Performance Rating that helps reduce dust, pollen, mold and pet dander to 700, 800, and 1000 for the middle of the road models up to 1200, 1500, and 1900 for the best performance. The easiest way to change your filter is to bring your old one in to the hardware store to match the size exactly.

C. Tyson



Up on the rooftop: Sal Russo of Russo's Chimney Sweep Photo Cathy Dausman

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