

FREE GUIDE

The Utah home maintenance guide.

Most of what goes wrong in a house announces itself first as a small maintenance job. This is the seasonal round we would follow if the house were ours — written for Utah, where swamp coolers, hard water and expansive clay make the list different from anywhere else.

HOW TO USE IT

Four rounds a year, about two hours each.

None of this needs a trade license or a ladder you do not already own. The point is not to fix everything yourself — it is to notice things early, while they are still cheap. A roof leak found in October is a tube of sealant. The same leak found in March is a ceiling.

Print the PDF, keep it with the water heater manual, and work through whichever season you are in. Anything you are unsure about, photograph it and send it to us — we would rather answer a question than inspect the damage later.

JUST MOVED IN

The first weekend in a new house.

Before the seasonal round starts, there are a handful of things worth doing once — mostly so that when something does go wrong at 11pm, you are not learning the house for the first time.

- ☐ Find the main water shut-off and make sure it actually turns. Tag it.
- ☐ Find the gas shut-off and the meter, and keep a wrench near it.
- ☐ Open the electrical panel, check every breaker is labelled, and correct the labels that are wrong.
- ☐ Test every smoke and carbon monoxide alarm, and note the manufacture date on the back — they expire.
- ☐ Locate the water heater's drain valve and the furnace filter slot.
- ☐ Change the exterior locks, and the garage door opener code.

- ☐ Photograph the model and serial plates on the furnace, water heater and A/C. You will want them for parts.

Test for radon early

Utah has a genuine radon problem, and it is not widely known. The Utah Division of Environmental Quality reports that about **35% of Utah homes tested come back above the EPA action level** of 4.0 pCi/L — against roughly 1 in 15 nationally. It is geology: the uranium-bearing rock the valleys sit on.

A short-term test kit costs very little and takes a few days. If the result is high, mitigation is a fan and a pipe, and it works. Retest every couple of years, and again after any work that changes how the basement breathes.

THE SEASONAL ROUND

What to check, and when.

Spring

MARCH – MAY

The year's most useful two hours. You are looking for what winter did, and getting cooling ready before the first hot week.

- ☐ Walk the roof line from the ground with binoculars: lifted, cracked or missing shingles, damaged flashing, anything that moved under snow load.
- ☐ Clear gutters and downspouts, and check that extensions still carry water at least four feet from the foundation.
- ☐ Swamp cooler startup: new pads, reconnect and pressurise the water line, check the float valve and the pump, oil the motor if it takes it.
- ☐ If you have refrigerated air instead, hose the condenser coils clean and clear two feet around the outdoor unit.
- ☐ Turn on the irrigation system, walk every zone, and repair heads before you are watering a fence.
- ☐ Check the grade around the house still falls away from the foundation. Utah clay settles, and every year it settles a little more.
- ☐ Look at exterior caulking and paint on the south and west elevations — our sun is hard on both.
- ☐ Test GFCI outlets outside, in the garage, the kitchen and the bathrooms.

Mostly water: using less of it outside, and making sure what is inside stays where it belongs.

- ☐ Check under every sink and around the water heater base for damp, rust or mineral crust.
- ☐ Flush a few gallons off the water heater tank. On Utah's hard water this matters more than the manual implies — sediment insulates the burner from the water and shortens the tank's life.
- ☐ Clean the dryer vent duct, not just the lint screen. A blocked duct is both a fire risk and a slow dryer.
- ☐ Replace furnace and air handler filters — every 1 to 3 months depending on the filter and whether you have pets.
- ☐ Look at window and door weatherstripping while it is easy to work outside.
- ☐ Trim vegetation back at least a foot from siding, and keep tree limbs off the roof.
- ☐ On foothill and bench properties, clear dry fuel within thirty feet of the house.
- ☐ Check the swamp cooler pads mid-season — hard water scales them fast.

The one to not skip. Nearly everything expensive that happens in a Utah winter traces back to something not done in the fall.

- ☐ Blow out the sprinkler system before the first hard freeze, and shut the stop-and-waste valve.
- ☐ Disconnect hoses and cover exterior hose bibs.
- ☐ Winterise the swamp cooler: drain it, disconnect and drain the supply line, and cover the unit.
- ☐ Have the furnace serviced. Ask specifically about the heat exchanger.
- ☐ Clean gutters again after leaf fall — a blocked gutter is how ice dams start.
- ☐ Get into the attic and look: is insulation even and to depth, are the soffit vents clear, is there any daylight or staining at the roof deck.
- ☐ Seal gaps where pipes and wires enter the house, before mice find them.
- ☐ Test smoke and CO alarms and change batteries. CO matters more once the furnace is running.
- ☐ Check chimney and flue if you burn anything, and have it swept on a schedule.

Watching more than doing. Most of this is looking up at the roof and paying attention to what the house is telling you.

- ☐ After heavy snow, look for ice building at the eaves. A ridge of ice with icicles behind it is an ice dam forming.
- ☐ Watch for uneven melt patterns on the roof — bare stripes over warm spots mean heat is escaping into the attic.
- ☐ Keep the furnace exhaust and intake clear of drifted snow.
- ☐ On the coldest nights, open cabinet doors under sinks on exterior walls and let a tap run a trickle.
- ☐ Check the attic for frost on nail points or sheathing, which means warm moist air is getting up there.
- ☐ Look for condensation on windows. Persistent condensation is a humidity problem worth solving.
- ☐ Clear snow away from the foundation and away from basement window wells.

THREE UTAH PARTICULARS

Things that catch people who moved here.

Hard water

Utah's water is among the hardest in the country. It scales fixtures, shortens water heater life, silts up swamp cooler pads and leaves valves stuck open. Flushing the water heater and descaling fixtures is not fussiness here — it is the difference between a tank lasting eight years and fifteen.

Expansive clay

Much of the valley floor is clay that swells when wet and shrinks when dry. That movement shows up as stair-step cracking in foundations and drywall, sticking doors, and sloping floors. The practical defense is boring: keep moisture around the foundation *consistent*. Steady is better than heavy, and better than none.

Ice dams

Snow melts on a warm roof, runs to the cold eave, and freezes. The ridge that forms holds the next melt behind it until it backs up under the shingles. Roof rakes and heat cable treat the symptom. The cause is almost always attic insulation and ventilation, and it is fixable.

PLANNING AHEAD

Roughly how long things last.

Typical service life, not a guarantee — installation quality, water chemistry and how hard a component works all move these. Useful for budgeting, and for knowing when to start watching something closely.

COMPONENT	TYPICAL LIFE	WORTH KNOWING
Asphalt shingle roof	15–30 years	Utah sun and freeze–thaw push most roofs to the lower half of that range.
Water heater (tank)	8–12 years	Hard water shortens it. Annual flushing extends it more than anything else.
Furnace	15–25 years	Heat exchanger cracks are the failure that matters. Have it checked yearly.
Central air conditioner	12–18 years	Coil cleaning and clear airflow do most of the work of keeping it alive.
Evaporative (swamp) cooler	10–20 years	Life depends almost entirely on whether it is drained properly each fall.
Exterior paint	5–10 years	South and west elevations go first. Repaint those before the others need it.
Water supply piping	40–70+ years	Galvanized steel in older Salt Lake homes closes up from the inside as it corrodes.
Smoke & CO alarms	7–10 years	They expire whether or not the test button beeps. Check the date on the back.
Garbage disposal	8–12 years	—

COMPONENT	TYPICAL LIFE	WORTH KNOWING
Dishwasher	9–12 years	The supply line and the drain hose are worth replacing before the machine.
