A PLAIN-ENGLISH PRACTICAL GUIDE

Home Maintenance, Step by Step

Small, Regular Work Prevents Big Surprises



Monthly and Seasonal Checklists, Safe DIY Tasks, and When to Call a Pro

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Trinfinity Enterprises

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Before You Begin

I have spent most of my working life managing projects, and the lesson that applies best to a house is this: small, regular work prevents big, expensive surprises. A $5 furnace filter protects a furnace that costs thousands to replace. A $10 tube of caulk keeps water out of a bathroom floor. A dryer vent cleaned once a year prevents a fire.

This book gives you a simple system: a monthly check, a seasonal checklist for spring, summer, fall and winter, and step-by-step directions for the jobs most homeowners can do safely. It also tells you plainly which jobs belong to a licensed professional.

How to Use This Book

Start with Chapters 1 through 3: know your house, gather a basic tool kit, and learn the safety rules. Then use the monthly and seasonal checklists in Chapters 4 through 8 as your schedule. Chapters 9 through 16 explain how to do the main tasks: heating and cooling, the water heater, plumbing, caulk and weatherstripping, electrical basics, alarms, appliances, and the outside of the house. Chapter 17 covers when to call a pro, and Chapter 18 covers records and budgeting. The appendix has printable checklists, a home log and the sources.

Each chapter ends with one small next step. Do one a week and in a few months you will know your house better than most people ever do.

What This Book Is and Is Not

This is general information for homeowners. Follow your appliance and equipment manuals, which take priority over general advice. Local codes, permits and licensing rules vary; check with your local

building department. If something is beyond your comfort or skill, call a licensed professional.

Chapter 1: Know Your House

Before you fix anything, learn where the important parts of your house are and how to shut them off. In an emergency, a minute spent hunting for the water shutoff can mean a flooded floor. Walk through this chapter with a flashlight and a notepad.

The Main Water Shutoff

Every house has a valve that shuts off all the water coming in. Find it before you need it.

- **Where to look:** where the water line enters the house, often in a garage, utility room, crawl space or basement, or near the water heater. In many Western homes it is in the garage or outside near the foundation. Homes on a well usually have a shutoff near the pressure tank.
- **Street side:** City water homes also have a curb valve in a box near the street, usually next to the meter. That one generally belongs to the water utility. Use the house-side valve if you can.
- **Test it:** Turn it off and on once a year so it does not seize. If it is stiff or leaks, have a plumber replace it.
- **Label it.** Hang a tag on it that says "Main water shutoff."

Fixture Shutoffs

Most sinks and toilets have small shutoff valves (often called angle stops) under or behind them. Turn them clockwise to close. These let you fix a single fixture without shutting off the whole house. If they will not turn or they drip, replace them before you need them in a hurry.

The Electrical Panel

- Find the main panel. It is often in the garage, a utility room or on an outside wall.

- Make sure every breaker is labeled. If they are not, spend an afternoon with a helper flipping breakers and noting what goes off.
- Know where the main breaker is. It shuts off power to the whole house.
- Keep the area in front of the panel clear so you can reach it in the dark.

Gas Shutoff

If your home has natural gas, the main shutoff is on the pipe next to the gas meter. If you use propane, the shutoff is on the tank. Know where it is, but do not turn off natural gas unless you smell gas, hear it leaking, or are told to by the gas company or fire department. Once the gas is off, only the gas company should turn it back on and relight the pilots.

> **If you smell gas** Do not turn lights or appliances on or off, do not use a phone or anything that could make a spark inside, and do not try to find the leak. Get everyone out of the house, then call 911 and your gas company from a safe distance outside.

Other Things to Find

- ☐ Water heater, and its shutoff valve and drain valve
- ☐ Furnace and its filter slot
- ☐ Air conditioner or evaporative cooler, and its shutoff switch
- ☐ Septic tank lid or sewer cleanout
- ☐ Attic access and crawl space access
- ☐ Sprinkler system controller and backflow valve
- ☐ Smoke and carbon monoxide alarms on every level
- ☐ Fire extinguisher in the kitchen

Start a House Binder

Keep one binder or folder, paper or digital, with:

- A one-page sheet showing where every shutoff is
- Appliance manuals, model numbers and serial numbers
- Paint colors and brands for each room
- Filter sizes for the furnace, cooler and refrigerator
- Receipts and warranties for major repairs and appliances
- Names and numbers of contractors who have worked on the house
- A simple log of what you did and when (there is one in the appendix)

Your Next Step

Find and label the main water shutoff today.

Chapter 2: Tools and Supplies

You do not need a garage full of tools. A modest kit handles nearly every task in this book. Buy decent quality; cheap tools strip screws and break when you need them.

The Basic Kit

- ☐ Claw hammer
- ☐ Screwdrivers: several sizes of flat and Phillips, or a multi-bit driver
- ☐ Adjustable wrench, 8 and 10 inch
- ☐ Slip-joint pliers and needle-nose pliers
- ☐ Locking pliers
- ☐ Tape measure, 25 foot
- ☐ Utility knife with spare blades
- ☐ Level, 2 foot
- ☐ Stud finder
- ☐ Cordless drill-driver with a set of bits
- ☐ Putty knife and a 5-in-1 painter's tool
- ☐ Caulk gun
- ☐ Flashlight and a headlamp
- ☐ Non-contact voltage tester
- ☐ Plunger (flange type for toilets) and a hand drain auger
- ☐ Bucket, old towels and a shop vacuum
- ☐ Step stool and a sturdy step ladder
- ☐ Safety glasses, work gloves and dust masks

Supplies to Keep on Hand

- ☐ Furnace and cooler filters in the right size
- ☐ Batteries for smoke and carbon monoxide alarms
- ☐ Light bulbs in the sizes your fixtures use
- ☐ Caulk: kitchen-and-bath silicone and exterior grade
- ☐ Plumber's tape (thread seal tape)
- ☐ Assorted screws, nails, wall anchors and picture hangers
- ☐ Duck tape and painter's tape
- ☐ Spackle and a small can of each wall paint color
- ☐ A replacement toilet flapper that fits your toilet

Your Next Step

Gather what you already own into one toolbox or bin, and make a short list of what is missing.

Chapter 3: Safety First

Most home maintenance is safe and simple. The few ways people get hurt are predictable: falls from ladders, electric shock, and working on gas. Take a minute before each job to think about which of these is in play.

Ladders

- Use the right ladder for the job. A step ladder for indoor work; an extension ladder long enough to reach without standing on the top rungs.
- Set it on firm, level ground. Never on a table, a bucket or loose gravel.
- Keep three points of contact: two feet and a hand, or two hands and a foot.
- Keep your belt buckle between the rails. If you have to lean, climb down and move the ladder.
- Do not stand on the top step of a step ladder or the top rungs of an extension ladder.
- Stay well away from overhead power lines with any ladder, especially a metal one.
- Have someone home, or better yet holding the ladder, when you work up high.
- If the roof is steep, slick, or two stories up, hire it out.

Electricity

- Turn off the breaker before you touch any wiring, even to change a light fixture or outlet.
- Confirm the power is off with a non-contact voltage tester before you touch a wire.
- Keep water and electricity apart. Use a ground fault outlet outdoors and near sinks.

- Leave work inside the electrical panel, new circuits and anything you are unsure of to a licensed electrician.

Gas

Never work on gas lines, gas valves or gas appliance connections yourself. If you smell gas, follow the steps in Chapter 1: get out, then call 911 and the gas company from outside.

Personal Protection

- Safety glasses when cutting, drilling, scraping or working overhead.
- Gloves for rough work, chemicals and sharp edges.
- A dust mask or respirator for sanding and dusty work. If your home was built before 1978, the paint may contain lead; test it before sanding or scraping.
- Hearing protection for loud tools.

Know Your Limits

A good repair you can do safely saves money. A bad repair, or an injury, costs far more than the service call would have. Chapter 18 lists the jobs that belong to a licensed professional.

Your Next Step

Check your ladder for loose rungs, cracked rails and worn feet. Replace it if it is damaged.

Chapter 4: The Monthly Checklist

A few minutes once a month catches most small problems before they grow. Pick a day, such as the first of the month, and walk through this list.

- ☐ Test every smoke and carbon monoxide alarm (Chapter 14)
- ☐ Check the fire extinguisher gauge
- ☐ Test each GFCI outlet (Chapter 13)
- ☐ Check the furnace or air conditioner filter; change it if dirty, and at least every 3 months (Chapter 9)
- ☐ Look under every sink for drips and dampness
- ☐ Look around the water heater, washer and refrigerator for leaks
- ☐ Listen for toilets that run on their own
- ☐ Clean the dishwasher filter and the range hood filter if they look dirty
- ☐ Clean the lint screen area and check that the dryer vent flap opens
- ☐ Run water and flush toilets in any rarely used bathroom
- ☐ Walk around the outside of the house: anything loose, leaking or damaged?

Make It a Habit

Put the list on the refrigerator or in your phone's reminders. Check off each item and write the date. A completed list is also a useful record if you ever sell the house or file an insurance claim.

Your Next Step

Set a monthly reminder on your phone called "House check."

Chapter 5: Spring

Spring is the time to repair winter's damage and get ready for heat. Most of these items come from the UGA Extension home maintenance checklist and the ENERGY STAR homeowner guide.

Outside

- ☐ Check the roof from the ground for missing or damaged shingles and loose flashing
- ☐ Clean gutters and downspouts; make sure water exits 2 to 3 feet from the house
- ☐ Look for cracks in the foundation, driveway and walks
- ☐ Check siding and trim for peeling paint, rot and gaps
- ☐ Check decks and fences for rot and loose boards
- ☐ Trim branches that hang over the roof (leave work near power lines to the utility)
- ☐ Reconnect hoses; turn on outdoor faucets and check for leaks inside the wall
- ☐ Start up and check the sprinkler system; fix broken heads and leaks
- ☐ Service the lawn mower

Inside

- ☐ Schedule the air conditioner tune-up, or evaporative cooler start-up
- ☐ Check weatherstripping and caulk around doors and windows
- ☐ Check the attic for leaks, pests and blocked vents
- ☐ Clean window and door screens and repair holes

- ☐ Check the basement or crawl space for moisture, mold and pests
- ☐ Test the garage door auto-reverse

Your Next Step

Book the cooling tune-up now, before the first heat wave fills the contractor's schedule.

Chapter 6: Summer

Summer is a good time for outdoor projects and painting, as long as you work early and stay out of the heat.

- ☐ Keep the outdoor air conditioner unit clear of weeds, leaves and shrubs
- ☐ Check the furnace or air conditioner filter monthly during heavy use
- ☐ Check sprinklers: are they watering the lawn and plants, not the siding or the street?
- ☐ Paint or stain siding, trim, decks and fences while the weather is dry
- ☐ Reseal the driveway if it needs it
- ☐ Check ceiling fans: clean the blades and set them to blow down for cooling
- ☐ Check window and door screens
- ☐ Keep weeds and dry grass cut back from the house
- ☐ Check the attic on a hot day: is it vented, and is the insulation in place?

Your Next Step

Pick one outdoor project, such as painting the trim or sealing the deck, and do it early in the summer before it gets too hot.

Chapter 7: Fall

Fall is the most important maintenance season. What you do before the first hard freeze prevents the costliest winter problems.

Outside

- ☐ Disconnect and drain garden hoses
- ☐ Drain outdoor faucets and shut off their inside valves if they have them
- ☐ Blow out or drain the sprinkler system
- ☐ Clean gutters and downspouts after the leaves fall
- ☐ Check the roof again from the ground
- ☐ Check caulk and weatherstripping around windows and doors
- ☐ Drain and cover the evaporative cooler, and shut off its water line
- ☐ Store or cover outdoor furniture and the grill
- ☐ Empty gas from the mower or add stabilizer, as its manual directs

Inside

- ☐ Schedule the furnace tune-up
- ☐ Change the furnace filter and buy spares for winter
- ☐ Test smoke and carbon monoxide alarms; replace batteries if you do that once a year
- ☐ Have the chimney inspected and cleaned if you burn wood
- ☐ Set ceiling fans to turn slowly clockwise to push warm air down
- ☐ Check the water heater and test the T&P valve
- ☐ Locate the main water shutoff and make sure it works

Your Next Step

Put “drain hoses and outdoor faucets” on the calendar for the week before the usual first freeze where you live.

Chapter 8: Winter

Winter maintenance is mostly watching: for ice, for drafts, for frozen pipes, and for the furnace working harder than it should.

- ☐ Check the furnace filter monthly
- ☐ Keep the furnace, water heater and dryer vents outside clear of snow
- ☐ Keep the gas meter clear of snow and ice
- ☐ In hard freezes, let faucets on outside walls drip and open sink cabinet doors
- ☐ Check the attic after storms for leaks or frost on the underside of the roof
- ☐ Look for ice dams at the roof edges
- ☐ Check for drafts around windows and doors and add weatherstripping
- ☐ Keep walks and steps clear and use ice melt
- ☐ Do indoor projects: caulking the tub, fixing drips, labeling the breaker panel

If a Pipe Freezes

If a faucet only trickles in a hard freeze, a pipe may be frozen. Keep the faucet open. Warm the pipe with a hair dryer, starting near the faucet and working back. Never use an open flame. If you cannot find the frozen spot, or a pipe has burst, shut off the main water and call a plumber.

Your Next Step

Put a flashlight and a pair of gloves next to the main water shutoff.

Chapter 9: Heating and Cooling

The furnace and air conditioner are usually the most expensive systems in the house to run and to replace. Two simple habits, clean filters and a yearly tune-up, do more for them than anything else.

Filters

ENERGY STAR advises checking your filter every month, especially during heavy-use months in winter and summer, and changing it at least every 3 months. A dirty filter slows air flow, makes the system work harder, and lets dust build up in the equipment.

1. Turn the system off at the thermostat.
2. Find the filter. It is usually in a slot at the furnace or air handler, or behind a return air grille in a wall or ceiling.
3. Slide the old filter out and note the size printed on its edge.
4. Slide the new one in with the arrow pointing toward the furnace, in the direction the air flows.
5. Write the date on the edge of the new filter, and turn the system back on.

Buy filters several at a time so you always have the next one ready. Homes with pets, smokers, dust storms or nearby construction may need to change more often.

Yearly Tune-Ups

ENERGY STAR recommends a yearly tune-up by a qualified contractor. Its homeowner guide suggests the spring for cooling, before summer, and the fall for heating, before winter. A tune-up usually includes cleaning, checking refrigerant and electrical connections, testing safety controls, and checking a gas furnace's burners and venting.

Why it matters for gas furnaces A cracked heat exchanger or blocked flue can send carbon monoxide into the house. A yearly check by a qualified technician, plus working carbon monoxide alarms (Chapter 14), protects your family.

Between Tune-Ups

- Keep supply and return vents clear of furniture, rugs and curtains.
- Keep 2 feet or so of clear space around the outdoor air conditioner unit. Clear leaves and weeds and trim shrubs back.
- Gently rinse dust off the outdoor unit's fins with a garden hose (power off at the disconnect first). Do not use a pressure washer.
- Make sure the condensate drain line, the small pipe that carries water away from the indoor coil, is draining.
- Keep the area around a gas furnace and water heater clear of stored items, especially anything that can burn.

Evaporative Coolers

Many homes in the dry West use evaporative (swamp) coolers. In spring, have the cooler started up: new pads, a clean pan, a check of the pump, belt and float, and the water line turned on. In fall, drain it, shut off and drain the water line, and cover the unit or close the damper so warm air does not escape all winter.

Saving Energy

- ENERGY STAR says a certified smart thermostat can save about $100 a year in homes with high heating and cooling bills or that sit empty much of the day.
- Sealing and insulating ducts can improve a system's efficiency by as much as 20 percent, according to ENERGY STAR. Start with ducts in the attic, crawl space or garage.

- ENERGY STAR suggests a professional evaluation if your equipment is more than 10 years old.

Your Next Step

Find your filter size and buy a year's supply.

Chapter 10: The Water Heater

A tank water heater works quietly for years, then fails all at once, often by leaking across the floor. A little attention extends its life and gives you warning before it fails.

Know Your Water Heater

Write these in your house binder:

- Gas or electric, tank or tankless
- Tank size in gallons
- Age: the year is usually coded into the serial number on the label; the maker's website explains how to read it
- Where the cold water shutoff valve is (on the pipe going in, usually at the top)
- Where the drain valve is (near the bottom of the tank)

Checking It

The UGA Extension checklist lists these water heater checks:

- Look for leaks, rust and corrosion around the tank, fittings and base.
- On a gas water heater, check that the flue (the vent pipe on top) is in place and not rusted or loose.
- Test the temperature and pressure (T&P) relief valve.

Testing the T&P Relief Valve

This valve opens if the tank gets too hot or the pressure too high. It is the water heater's main safety device.

1. Put a bucket under the discharge pipe that runs from the valve toward the floor.
2. Lift the valve's lever briefly. Hot water should spray into the pipe and stop when you let go.

3. If nothing comes out, or it keeps dripping after you let go, have the valve replaced by a plumber.

> **Careful** The water is scalding. Keep hands and feet away from the discharge pipe. On an older tank, the valve may not reseat after testing; be ready to call a plumber if it keeps dripping.

Flushing Sediment

Minerals settle at the bottom of the tank, especially with hard water. Sediment makes the heater work harder and can cause popping or rumbling sounds. University of Florida Extension suggests draining about a quart of water from a tank-style heater every 3 to 6 months, following the maker's recommendations for your unit. That quick drain is simple: put a bucket under the drain valve, open it until about a quart runs out, and close it. For a fuller flush when sediment has built up, follow your owner's manual; a typical flush goes like this:

1. **Turn off the heat.** Gas: set the control to "pilot" or "vacation." Electric: turn off the breaker.
2. **Shut off the cold water** going into the tank.
3. **Hook a garden hose** to the drain valve and run it to a floor drain or outside, somewhere the hot water cannot hurt anyone or kill plants.
4. **Open a hot water faucet** in the house to let air in.
5. **Open the drain valve** and let the water run until it comes out clear.
6. **Close the drain valve,** remove the hose, and turn the cold water back on. Let the tank fill until water flows steadily from the open hot faucet, then close it.

7. **Turn the heat back on.** For an electric heater, the tank must be full before you turn on the breaker, or the elements can burn out.

If the drain valve is old plastic and will not close after flushing, a plumber can replace it with a brass one.

Temperature

University of Florida Extension calls 120 degrees F the best setting for both energy efficiency and function; higher temperatures raise energy costs and the risk of scalds. Electric heaters often have two thermostats, upper and lower; set both the same. Adjusting an electric thermostat means removing panels near live wiring, so turn off the breaker first, or have a pro do it.

Signs It Is Time to Replace

- Water pooling under the tank or a leak from the tank itself (not a fitting)
- Rusty hot water
- Running out of hot water much faster than before
- Age: University of Florida Extension says most water heaters last 10 to 15 years, and suggests starting to shop for a replacement once yours is more than 10 years old

Replacing a water heater involves gas, venting or high-voltage wiring and, in most places, a permit. Have a licensed plumber do it.

Your Next Step

Find out how old your water heater is.

Chapter 11: Plumbing Basics

Small plumbing problems are the most common home repairs, and most are easy fixes. Big plumbing problems usually start as small ones that were ignored. Start every plumbing job by shutting off the water to that fixture.

A Running Toilet

A toilet that runs on its own, or refills every so often, wastes a lot of water. Usually the cause is one of three parts inside the tank.

1. **Check the flapper.** Take off the tank lid. The rubber flapper at the bottom seals the tank. If it is warped, stiff or covered in buildup, it leaks. Put a few drops of food coloring in the tank and wait 15 minutes without flushing. If color shows up in the bowl, the flapper leaks. Shut off the water, flush to drain the tank, unhook the old flapper and install a matching new one.
2. **Check the chain.** It should have just a little slack. Too tight and the flapper cannot seal; too loose and it can catch under the flapper.
3. **Check the water level.** If water is running into the overflow tube, the fill valve is set too high. Adjust the float down so the water stops about an inch below the top of the overflow tube. If the fill valve still runs or hisses, replace it. Fill valve kits come with directions and fit most toilets.

A Clogged Drain

- **Toilet:** use a flange plunger. Make a good seal, push gently the first time, then plunge firmly a dozen or so times. If that fails, use a closet auger.
- **Sink or tub:** remove and clean the stopper first; hair and soap often collect right there. Then try a cup plunger, with the

overflow hole covered by a wet rag. A plastic drain cleaning strip or a hand auger clears most of the rest.

- **Kitchen sink:** the trap under the sink can be removed by hand on most newer sinks. Put a bucket under it first.
- **Skip chemical drain openers.** They can damage pipes, hurt septic systems, and splash on you if you then have to plunge.
- **Call a plumber** if more than one drain is slow or backing up at once. That usually means a problem in the main line.

A Dripping Faucet

Drips usually come from a worn cartridge, washer or O-ring. Shut off the water under the sink, plug the drain so small parts cannot fall in, and take the handle off. Take the old cartridge or parts to the hardware store to get an exact match, or look up the faucet brand and model. Many faucet makers offer replacement parts.

Leaks Under Sinks

Look under every sink a few times a year with a flashlight. Feel the supply lines and the trap for dampness. Replace any supply line that is bulging, kinked or corroded. Braided stainless steel lines are a good upgrade.

Washer Hoses

The UGA Extension home maintenance checklist includes checking washing machine hoses and inlet filters. Rubber hoses can burst without warning and flood a room. Check them for bulges and cracks and replace them every few years, or upgrade to braided stainless steel. Leave a few inches behind the washer so the hoses are not kinked.

Outdoor Faucets

In fall, disconnect and drain hoses, and drain outdoor faucets as the UGA checklist advises. A hose left attached in a hard freeze can split the pipe inside the wall, and you may not notice until spring.

Your Next Step

Do the food coloring test on every toilet in the house.

Chapter 12: Caulk and Weatherstripping

Caulk and weatherstripping are cheap, and the jobs are easy to learn. They keep water out of walls and floors, and keep heat in during winter and out during summer.

Where to Caulk

- Around tubs, showers and sinks, where they meet the wall or counter
- Around the base of toilets (leave a small gap at the back so a leak can show)
- Around window and door trim, inside and out
- Where siding meets trim, and around pipes, vents and wires that pass through outside walls
- Along kitchen backsplashes

Pick the Right Caulk

Where	What to use
Tubs, showers, sinks	100 percent silicone or a kitchen-and-bath caulk with mildew resistance
Interior trim to be painted	Paintable acrylic latex caulk
Exterior gaps around windows, doors and trim	Exterior-grade sealant made for outdoor use and the materials involved
Large gaps over about 1/4 inch	Backer rod first, then caulk; or expanding foam for gaps out of sight

How to Caulk

1. Cut out the old caulk with a utility knife or caulk removal tool, and pull it out completely.
2. Clean the joint. For tubs and showers, clean off soap scum and mildew, then let it dry completely, ideally overnight.

3. Run painter's tape along both sides of the joint if you want a crisp line.
4. Cut the caulk tube tip at an angle, with a small opening. You can always cut it bigger.
5. Push the gun along the joint at a steady pace, pressing the bead into the gap.
6. Smooth the bead with a wet finger or a caulk tool.
7. Pull the tape right away, before the caulk skins over.
8. Let it cure for the time on the tube before using the shower or painting.

Weatherstripping

Worn weatherstripping lets in drafts, dust and insects. ENERGY STAR's homeowner guide suggests checking the weatherstripping around your doors once a year and replacing it as needed.

- **Check doors:** close the door on a piece of paper. If it slides out easily, the seal is weak. On a sunny day, look for light around the edges from inside.
- **Door bottoms:** replace a worn door sweep or adjust the threshold.
- **Door sides and top:** most modern doors have a foam or rubber strip pressed into a slot. Pull out the old one and press in a matching new one.
- **Windows:** replace cracked or flattened seals, and caulk gaps around the outside trim.

Your Next Step

Look at the caulk around your tub or shower. If it is cracked, moldy or pulling away, plan to redo it this month.

Chapter 13: Electrical Basics

Electrical work is the place to be most careful. Many small jobs are safe for a homeowner who turns off the power and checks it. Anything inside the panel, any new circuit, and anything that sparks, smells hot or keeps tripping belongs to a licensed electrician.

Ground Fault Outlets (GFCI)

A ground fault circuit interrupter (GFCI) cuts the power in a fraction of a second if electricity starts flowing where it should not, such as through a person standing in water. The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) notes that the electrical code has required them over the years outdoors (since 1973), in bathrooms (1975), garages (1978), kitchens (1987), crawl spaces and unfinished basements (1990), wet bar sinks (1993), and laundry and utility sinks (2005). An older house may not have them everywhere they now belong. Some GFCIs are breakers in the panel instead of outlets.

1. Plug a lamp or night light into the outlet and turn it on.
2. Press the TEST button. The light should go off.
3. Press RESET. The light should come back on.
4. If the light stays on after TEST, or the outlet will not reset, the GFCI is not protecting you. Have it replaced.

The CPSC says to test every GFCI after installation, at least once a month, after a power failure, and as the manufacturer directs. The UGA Extension checklist also includes tripping circuit breakers now and then to keep them working.

One GFCI can protect several outlets If a bathroom or outdoor outlet seems dead, look for a tripped GFCI somewhere else on the same circuit, such as in another bathroom, the garage or outside, and press RESET.

Tripped Breakers

1. Unplug or turn off what was running on that circuit.
2. At the panel, find the breaker that is in the middle or off position.
3. Push it fully to OFF, then back to ON.
4. Turn things back on one at a time.

If a breaker trips again right away, or trips over and over, there may be a short or an overloaded circuit. Stop resetting it and call an electrician. Never replace a breaker with a larger one.

Safe Jobs for Most Homeowners

- Changing light bulbs (power off for fixtures you have to take apart)
- Resetting breakers and GFCI outlets
- Replacing cover plates
- Replacing a light fixture or switch like-for-like, with the breaker off and the wires checked with a voltage tester, if you are comfortable and your local rules allow it

Call an Electrician For

- Anything inside the panel
- New circuits, outlets or switches where there were none
- Aluminum wiring, knob-and-tube wiring, or two-prong outlets you want to upgrade
- Outlets or switch plates that are warm, discolored, buzzing or smell like burning
- Lights that flicker or dim throughout the house

- Any shock, however small

Cords and Outlets

The UGA Extension checklist reminds homeowners to look for frayed cords and wiring. Replace damaged cords, do not run cords under rugs, and do not plug space heaters into extension cords or power strips.

Your Next Step

Test every GFCI outlet in the house and write down which ones protect which rooms.

Chapter 14: Smoke and Carbon Monoxide Alarms

Working alarms are the cheapest life insurance in the house. Checking them takes a few minutes a month.

Smoke Alarms

The U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) recommends:

- **Placement:** inside and outside each bedroom and sleeping area, and on every level of the home, including the basement.
- **Interconnection:** choose interconnected alarms, so when one sounds, they all sound.
- **Type:** dual-sensor alarms, or a mix of ionization and photoelectric alarms, give the best coverage.
- **Testing:** test every alarm once a month by pressing the test button.
- **Batteries:** replace standard batteries at least once a year, including the backup battery in hardwired alarms. Sealed 10-year alarms do not need new batteries; replace the whole unit as the maker directs.
- **Replacement:** replace smoke alarms 10 years from the date of manufacture, which is printed on the back.
- **Cooking:** if an alarm goes off while you cook, fan the air or open a window. Do not take the battery out.

Carbon Monoxide Alarms

Any home with a gas furnace, gas water heater, gas range, wood stove, fireplace or attached garage needs carbon monoxide (CO) alarms. Install them where the maker's directions say, typically near sleeping areas and on each level. Test them monthly along with your smoke alarms, and replace them by the end-of-life date printed on the alarm.

Fire Extinguishers

Keep a multipurpose (ABC) extinguisher in the kitchen and one in the garage. The UGA Extension checklist suggests checking each month that the gauge shows a full charge. Learn the PASS steps: Pull the pin, Aim at the base of the fire, Squeeze the handle, Sweep side to side. If a fire is bigger than a wastebasket or spreading, get out and call 911.

A Monthly Routine

- ☐ Press the test button on every smoke and CO alarm
- ☐ Check the fire extinguisher gauge
- ☐ Look at the date on the back of each alarm when you replace batteries

Your Next Step

Pick a day each month, such as the first, and put “test alarms” on your calendar.

Chapter 15: Appliances

Appliances last longer and run better with a few minutes of care. The manuals are worth keeping; most list the cleaning and maintenance their makers recommend. If you lost one, the maker's website usually has it by model number.

Refrigerator

- **Check the door seal.** The UGA Extension checklist suggests the dollar bill test: close the door on a bill. If it slides out easily, the gasket is not sealing. Clean the gasket with warm soapy water, and replace it if it is torn or flattened.
- **Clean the coils.** Dust on the condenser coils, under or behind the fridge, makes it work harder. Unplug it and vacuum the coils with a brush attachment once or twice a year.
- **Change the water filter** on the schedule in the manual, if it has one.

Dishwasher

- Clean the filter in the bottom of the tub. Many newer dishwashers have a filter you twist out and rinse.
- Check the spray arms for clogged holes.
- Look under the sink at the drain hose and connections for leaks.

Clothes Washer

- Check the hoses (Chapter 11).
- Clean the inlet screens where the hoses connect, as the UGA checklist suggests, if water fill is slow.
- On front-loaders, wipe the door seal and leave the door open after use to prevent mildew.

Clothes Dryer

Dryer lint is very flammable. The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) says the leading cause of home clothes dryer and washer fires is failure to clean them. The UGA Extension checklist also says to vacuum lint from the ducts and the area around the dryer.

- Clean the lint screen before or after every load, and never run the dryer without it.
- The NFPA says to clean lint out of the vent pipe once a year, or more often if clothes are taking longer than normal to dry.
- Check that the outside vent flap opens when the dryer runs and is not blocked by lint, snow or a bird's nest.
- Use rigid or flexible metal venting, as the NFPA advises, not plastic.
- Do not run the dryer when you leave the house or go to bed.

Garbage Disposal

- Run cold water while it runs and for a few seconds after.
- Keep grease, fibrous peels, bones and coffee grounds out of it.
- If it hums but does not turn, turn off the power and use the hex key that fits the socket on the bottom to free it. Press the red reset button.

Range Hood and Bath Fans

Clean or replace range hood filters. Make sure bath and kitchen fans actually vent outside, not into the attic, as the UGA checklist reminds homeowners to check.

Your Next Step

Pull the dryer out from the wall and check the duct behind it.

Chapter 16: Roof, Gutters and the Outside

Water is the enemy of every house. Most exterior maintenance comes down to keeping water off the roof, out of the walls and away from the foundation.

Roof

You can check most of a roof from the ground with binoculars. Do it each spring and fall and after big wind storms.

- ☐ Missing, cracked, curled or lifted shingles or tiles
- ☐ Flashing around chimneys, vents and skylights in place and sealed
- ☐ Granules from shingles collecting in gutters or at downspouts (a sign of an aging roof)
- ☐ Moss, debris or branches on the roof
- ☐ Inside, in the attic: water stains, damp insulation or daylight showing through

Leave roof repairs and anything on a steep or high roof to a licensed roofer.

Gutters and Downspouts

The UGA Extension checklist calls for cleaning gutters and downspouts, and making sure downspouts send water 2 to 3 feet away from the house.

- Clean gutters at least in spring and fall, and more often if trees hang over the roof.
- Flush downspouts with a hose to make sure they run free.
- Add extensions or splash blocks so water lands well away from the foundation.

- Tighten loose hangers and reseal leaking seams.

Grading and Drainage

The soil around the house should slope away from the foundation so rain and snowmelt run away from it. Fill low spots near the walls with soil, not mulch or gravel alone, and keep sprinklers from spraying the siding.

Siding, Trim and Paint

- Look for cracked or peeling paint, gaps in caulk, and soft or rotted wood, especially near the ground and around windows.
- Repaint before bare wood is exposed. Paint protects wood from water and sun.
- Keep shrubs and soil from touching the siding.

Foundation, Driveway and Walks

The UGA checklist includes checking the foundation and masonry for cracks, and driveways and walkways for cracks. Fine hairline cracks are common. Cracks that are wide, growing, letting in water, or uneven from one side to the other should be looked at by a professional.

Decks and Fences

Check decks and fences for rot, loose boards and popped nails, as the UGA checklist suggests. Probe suspect wood with a screwdriver. Tighten railings; a loose deck railing is a fall hazard.

Garage Door

The UGA checklist lists the garage door's safety shut-off. Test the auto-reverse: place a piece of wood or a roll of paper towels on the floor under the door and close it. The door should reverse when it touches the object. Also check that it reverses when you break the beam of the photo-eye sensors. If it does not, stop using the opener

and have it repaired. Leave the springs and cables to a professional; they are under high tension.

Your Next Step

Walk around the outside of the house after the next rain or snowmelt and see where the water goes.

Chapter 17: When to Call a Pro

Knowing when to stop is part of good maintenance. A professional costs money, but a botched repair on gas, electricity, structure or a roof can cost far more, and some work legally requires a licensed contractor and a permit.

Always Call a Licensed Professional For

- **Gas:** any gas line, gas valve, or connecting or disconnecting a gas appliance. Any smell of gas: get out and call 911 and the gas company.
- **Electrical panels, new circuits and rewiring.**
- **Water heater and furnace replacement,** and anything involving venting or combustion.
- **Roof work** on steep, high or fragile roofs.
- **Structural problems:** sagging floors or ceilings, large or growing foundation cracks, doors that suddenly stick throughout the house.
- **Main sewer line backups** or more than one drain backing up.
- **Garage door springs and cables.**
- **Tree work** near power lines or on large limbs.
- **Asbestos or lead paint** you would disturb in older homes.
- **Anything that needs a permit** in your area, unless you are qualified and the permit allows owner work.

Signs a Small Problem Has Become a Big One

☐ Water stains that keep growing

☐ Mold that comes back after cleaning

☐ Breakers that keep tripping

☐ Warm, buzzing or scorched outlets or switches

- ☐ A furnace that short-cycles, smells, or will not stay lit
- ☐ Sewage smells or gurgling drains throughout the house
- ☐ Cracks that are getting wider

Hiring Well

Get more than one bid for larger jobs, check the contractor's license and insurance, put the scope and price in writing, and never pay too far ahead of the work. The companion book Hiring a Contractor Without Getting Burned walks through each step, including how to check a Nevada license.

Your Next Step

Write down the names of a plumber, an electrician and a heating contractor you would call, and keep them in your house binder.

Chapter 18: Records and Budget

On large projects, nothing gets done without a schedule, a budget and a record of what happened. A house is no different, just smaller. A little paperwork now saves money later, at tax time, at claim time and at sale time.

Keep a Home Log

Use the log in the appendix, a notebook, or a spreadsheet. For each task, write:

- The date
- What was done
- Who did it (you or a company)
- What it cost
- Parts or model numbers used
- When it is due again

This tells you when the filter was last changed, how old the water heater is, and what the roofer said three years ago. When you sell, a buyer and inspector will be impressed by a house with a record.

Keep the Paper

- Receipts for repairs and improvements. Some improvements can affect taxes when you sell; keep the receipts and ask a tax professional.
- Warranties and manuals.
- Permits and final inspection sign-offs.
- Photos of each room and its contents, updated every year or two, for insurance.

Plan for the Big Items

Every house has parts that wear out on a long cycle: the roof, the water heater, the furnace and air conditioner, the appliances,

exterior paint. Make a simple list of each one, its age, and roughly when you expect to replace it. Then set money aside each month toward the next one, so it is a planned expense instead of an emergency.

Item	Year installed	Expected replacement year	Estimated cost	Saving per month
Roof				
Water heater				
Furnace				
Air conditioner or cooler				
Exterior paint				
Refrigerator				
Washer and dryer				
Other				

Ask a contractor or check the manufacturer for the expected life of each item, and use local quotes for the cost. The Money Basics book covers building a savings plan.

Your Next Step

Fill in the year-installed column for the items you know.

The Year at a Glance

When	Tasks
Every month	Test smoke and CO alarms and GFCI outlets; check extinguisher; check HVAC filter; look for leaks under sinks and around the water heater, washer and fridge; listen for running toilets; walk around the outside
Every 3 months, at least	Change the HVAC filter
Spring	Cooling tune-up or cooler start-up; roof and gutter check; reconnect hoses; sprinklers; caulk and weatherstripping; garage door auto-reverse; attic and crawl space check
Summer	Clear around outdoor AC unit; paint and seal; trim weeds; check attic ventilation
Fall	Heating tune-up; drain hoses and outdoor faucets; winterize sprinklers and cooler; clean gutters; chimney; test T&P valve; check main shutoff
Winter	Keep vents and gas meter clear of snow; watch for frozen pipes and ice dams; indoor projects
Once a year	Clean dryer vent duct; vacuum fridge coils; drain sediment from the water heater (about a quart every 3 to 6 months, or as the manual directs); replace alarm batteries; trip each breaker off and on; turn the main water valve off and on
Every 10 years	Replace smoke alarms (from the manufacture date)

Home Log

Date	Task	Done by	Cost	Next due

Date	Task	Done by	Cost	Next due

House Information Sheet

Main water shutoff location: _____

Gas shutoff location: _____

Electrical panel location: _____

Furnace filter size: _____ Cooler pad size: _____

Refrigerator water filter model: _____

Water heater: gas / electric, _____ gallons, installed _____

Furnace installed: _____ Air conditioner or cooler installed: _____

Roof installed: _____ Last exterior paint: _____

Smoke alarm manufacture dates: _____

Plumber: _____ Phone: _____

Electrician: _____ Phone: _____

Heating and cooling: _____ Phone: _____

Gas company emergency line: _____

Glossary

Angle stop. A small shutoff valve under a sink or behind a toilet.

Backer rod. A foam rope pushed into wide gaps before caulking.

Breaker. A switch in the electrical panel that shuts off a circuit when it is overloaded.

Condensate line. The small pipe that drains water from an air conditioner's indoor coil.

Flapper. The rubber seal at the bottom of a toilet tank.

Flashing. Metal strips that seal joints on a roof, such as around chimneys and vents.

Flue. The vent pipe that carries exhaust from a gas appliance outdoors.

GFCI. Ground fault circuit interrupter: an outlet or breaker that cuts power quickly to prevent shock.

Ice dam. A ridge of ice at a roof edge that traps melting snow behind it.

Ladder fuels. Low plants and branches that let fire climb into trees.

T&P valve. The temperature and pressure relief valve on a water heater.

Weatherstripping. Seals around doors and windows that block drafts.

Acronyms

CO. Carbon monoxide

GFCI. Ground fault circuit interrupter

HVAC. Heating, ventilation and air conditioning

NFPA. National Fire Protection Association

CPSC. U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission

T&P. Temperature and pressure

UGA. University of Georgia

USFA. U.S. Fire Administration

Sources

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About This Book

Home Maintenance, Step by Step is part of a set of free plain-language guides from Trinfinity Enterprises. It draws on the author's general experience in project management. Facts were checked against the sources listed as of November 18, 2026. Follow your equipment manuals and local codes, which take priority over general advice. If you find something that has changed or needs correcting, please write to andrew@trinfinityenterprises.com.