

Old Man Winter

By Andy Bailey

Approximately half of my clients over the last five years have built a new home here in the mountains with the intention of making it their primary, year-round residence. Some already reside here, others plan to retire here some time in the future, while still others are eager to jump right in to full-time mountain living.

If you are planning to live in your new home over the winter, it is crucial that you plan for certain inevitable contingencies. Loss of power, water, heat, cooking, and even the ability to leave the house are all potential circumstances that you *will* encounter at some point during your tenure in this part of the world.

I grew up outside Atlanta, where a mere dusting of snow meant no school, simply because it does not make good fiscal sense for the city to spend money on something that may or may not happen each year. The occasional ice storm was even more crippling for Atlanta residents, many of whom were ill prepared to subsist for more than a few hours without power.

In sharp contrast was the time I spent living in New England, in a small town between Boston and Cape Cod. There I would see two feet of snow fall overnight, as often as four times a season; with many more snowfall events of six, twelve, eighteen inch totals. None of my fellow residents expected to be excused from work or school. I would rise from my warm slumber at five in the morning and plunge headlong into the brutal chill, gather my snow shovel and walk a few blocks to the town's public library, where I had taken on the task of shoveling snow and ice from the sidewalks surrounding the building and parking areas.

While it is comparatively uncommon to experience a two-foot snow event here in the southern Appalachians, even the recent 12 to 16 inches of snowfall proved to be more than just a mere inconvenience. A heavy, wet snow fell at a rate of one inch per hour, weighing down trees and power lines. My home was without power for 72 hours but fortunately I was prepared.

Many homes here are outside the reach of public utilities and services. Living at high elevations and on rural roads means that you must sacrifice certain comforts to which you may have become accustomed. Even if you have known more severe winters elsewhere, here you will find a different set of challenges to overcome.

For those of us using a well for our water, loss of electric power means loss of fresh water. Foreseeing this event, I filled clean containers with water for drinking and cooking, and filled my bathtub with water for bathing and flushing. I heat my home with propane-warmed water that radiates through the floors; however a loss of power means a loss of the electric pumps that drive the flow. It is for this reason that I consider the wood stove to be my primary source of heat. In early spring I collect and split oak, locust, and other hard woods, stacking them to dry and age in time for the cold weather to begin.

Many homeowners in this situation use a gasoline powered generator to drive the electric systems that control water and heat. While this is an excellent short-term solution, running out of gasoline means you will have to rely on your vehicle to get you safely to the gas station and back. Temperatures here may not rise above freezing for several weeks, meaning that without chains or a plow, you may be stranded at your home until the ice melts from roads.

For these reasons it is wise to be prepared to be comfortable in your home for an extended period. Consider the following:

- Ponder the sun's position when planning your new home and driveway. I have observed first hand that more ice melt occurs in direct sunlight with an ambient air temperature below freezing, than will occur in shade with an air temperature in the fifties.
- Keep your pantry well stocked, including foods that can be eaten with little or no preparation.
- Provide a back-up heating system *for your back-up heating system.*
- Always have a reservoir of water available.
- Get to know your neighbors; even if they are half a mile away, they are still your neighbors who may need your help or help you if necessary.
- If you have little or no experience driving in wintry conditions, do not attempt to learn on a rural or steep mountain road!

The crippling winter events of recent weeks don't happen every year, but they do happen. The beauty of our western North Carolina mountains attracts many, but one must also appreciate that our climate can be extremely harsh and overwhelming.