

Winterizing your Pets

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Winter has descended on us. Here on the Hill, we're just through the holiday season and the winter's first storms and wondering what the next few months will bring. Leafing through the January LL Bean catalogue to find the best way to stay warm and dry is easy for us (up until that payment page). But what about our pets? How do we tell if they're warm and safe enough to ride the winter out?

Here are a few suggestions: First and foremost, never, ever, ever leave your pets outside in the cold (or hot—we'll get to that article in a few months). Dogs need shelter and warmth. Their ear tips and tails can actually get frostbite if left outside too long. Remember, Max and Ginger will never tell you they want to go inside because for a dog, the party never ends! But you need to limit their time outside in the cold.

Puppies especially have a hard time with the winter cold. This may lead to housetraining challenges, but you'll get through it with some coaxing.

And this goes for cats, too. Cats are not impervious to dips in the mercury. Finding food or shelter can be especially difficult, so if you have a feral colony near you—and we have a few on the Hill—help by putting out food. Usually there are groups of volunteers who feed these poor cats; they'll gladly take the help if you can give it. And don't forget to let your local shelter know where these animals are so we can get them vaccinated, spayed and neutered.

Second, watch out for ice salts. Those ice melters on walks and stairs are essential for us to get around, but they can irritate the paws of dogs and cats when they get stuck between pads and nails. There are great alternative products out there that are pet-friendly, though, so look for that on the label. When your animals do finally come in from the cold, towel off those feet and the “undercarriage” to remove excess salt. We don't want our animals ingesting this stuff. A good toweling off will save your carpeting, too.

Third, ever notice how much more your animals eat in the winter? That's hard-wired. Animals need the extra calories because it takes more calories to keep their engines going and their body temperatures up. This is also true for us (my excuse for holiday binging).

Fourth, never leave your animals alone for prolonged periods in the car during the winter. It's just as bad as in the summer, and your car can become a freezer in no time. If you can leave the Hagen Daz in the back seat while you stop at Eastern Market, it's probably too cold to leave Honey and Roscoe there with it.

Finally, keep your animals groomed in the winter. A well-groomed coat is essential to proper insulation. But never bathe your dog outside (actually, you should never use cold water for this anyway). Most long-haired or full-coated dogs do fine in our winter with just their own, natural coats. But shorter-coated dogs need a dog coat to protect them from the wind, snow, and cold. Many people have figured this out already. Lincoln Park is a veritable Fashion Week in the winter with the new cold-weather gear being paraded around out there.

Ok, that's prevention. Now what about winter hazards? The biggest skull-and-crossbones of the winter is undoubtedly antifreeze. This sweet, fluorescent spill on roads and driveways attracts animals. Just a small amount can lead to irreversible kidney failure and death. This is nothing to treat lightly. So please clean up any spills when you're working on your car and keep those plastic jugs out of Marley's reach!

Finally, another concern is those portable heaters. They can be dangerous for our houses as well as our pets, causing severe burns. And this goes for heat sources outdoors as well. Cats like to seek a warm place out of the wind and cold, and they have been known to cozy up to a still-warm engine block. If you have outdoor cats in your neighborhood, tap on the car hood loudly before starting the engine. It's a simple thing to do, but it can avoid a real tragedy.

Ok, that's winter. Enjoy the snow, ice, and wind—all the things that make us pine for the cherry blossoms in a few months. It's up to us to make sure our animals can weather the winter's storms. We can be thankful that at least the thunder's on hold for a few months.



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