



Winter has a way of exposing weak points in a landscape. A bed that looked tidy in October can turn soggy, compacted, and stripped bare by January. A healthy lawn can emerge in spring with snow mold, salt burn, and rutted edges from repeated foot traffic. Trees that seemed stable all year can split under wet snow or suffer bark injury from sudden temperature swings.

That is why winter landscape maintenance matters so much. It is less about keeping everything pretty during the coldest months and more about protecting long term plant health, hardscape integrity, drainage performance, and the investment already made in the property. In cold climates, the work done before and during winter often determines how expensive spring will be.

Well planned Landscape Maintenance in winter is practical, preventive, and highly site specific. A shaded urban courtyard has very different risks than an open suburban lot, and both behave differently than a commercial property with plow piles, sidewalks, and heavy deicing. The best winter plan does not come from a generic checklist. It comes from understanding what winter actually does to soil, roots, wood, paving, water, and traffic patterns.

## **Winter damage usually starts before the first storm**

Most winter problems are set up in late fall. Soil goes into the cold season either too wet or too dry. Turf either enters dormancy healthy or stressed. Trees either have a balanced canopy or one full of weak, overextended growth. Drainage either works or it does not. Once freeze and thaw cycles begin, those conditions get amplified.

I have seen properties where the visible winter damage looked sudden, but the real cause was months earlier. One common example is overwatering into late autumn. When irrigation schedules are not reduced in time, planting beds stay saturated. Then the first hard freeze locks excess moisture into the root zone. Fine roots of shrubs, especially broadleaf evergreens and newer plantings, can be injured even when the top growth appears normal for a while. Another common issue is delayed leaf cleanup. Wet leaf mats trap moisture against turf, encourage fungal pressure, and create bare patches that are easy to mistake for cold injury later.

Winter is also hard on surfaces. Concrete, pavers, retaining walls, edging, and steps all feel the effects of trapped water. If joints are open, grades are poor, or downspouts dump too close to hardscape, expanding ice can push, crack, and displace materials. That kind of damage rarely comes from one freeze. It comes from repetition.

## **The first priority is managing water**

If I had to name one principle that prevents more winter damage than any other, it would be water control. Cold alone is not usually the worst enemy. Water that sits where it should not, then freezes and expands, is what causes many of the most expensive problems.

Start by watching how the site drains after a late fall rain. Pay attention to downspout outlets, low lawn areas, planting beds near foundations, and paved surfaces that hold water overnight. Even shallow puddling matters when temperatures swing above and below freezing. Repeated icing can suffocate turf, heave pavers, and turn walkways into liability zones.

Mulch plays a role here, but only when used correctly. A moderate layer, often around two to three inches, helps buffer soil temperature and reduce winter moisture swings. More than that can be counterproductive, especially

if mulch is piled against stems or trunks. Thick, wet mulch can keep crowns too damp and invite vole activity around woody plants. The goal is insulation and moisture moderation, not burial.

On many properties, the simplest fix is redirecting roof runoff before winter. Extending downspouts, cleaning drains, and opening blocked swales can prevent a season of ice buildup. It is not glamorous work, but it saves lawns, foundations, and hardscape.

## Trees and shrubs need protection from more than cold

People often assume winter kill happens because temperatures drop below what a plant can handle. Sometimes that is true, but cold injury is only part of the story. Desiccation, snow load, sunscald, salt exposure, and animal damage are just as common.

Broadleaf evergreens are a good example. Plants such as boxwood, rhododendron, and cherry laurel can lose moisture through their leaves even when the ground is frozen and roots cannot replace it. In exposed sites, winter wind can bronze foliage badly. Anti [Landscape Maintenance](#) desiccant sprays are sometimes used, though results vary by species, timing, and weather. In my experience, proper fall watering and physical wind protection are usually more reliable than relying on a spray alone.

Young trees face their own set of risks. Thin bark on species like maple or fruit trees can heat up on bright winter afternoons, then cool rapidly after sunset. That temperature swing can lead to sunscald and frost cracking. Tree wraps can help in some cases, especially for younger specimens during their first several winters, but they should be applied properly and removed in season. Leaving wrap on too long can trap moisture and create habitat for pests.

Snow and ice loads are another matter of judgment. It is usually best to leave light snow alone, but heavy wet accumulation on multi stem evergreens or weak branched ornamentals can tear plants apart. Shaking branches aggressively often causes more damage than the storm itself. Gentle brooming upward from beneath can help dislodge snow from certain shrubs, but ice should generally be left to thaw naturally unless there is an immediate safety hazard.

Pruning also matters. Winter is not the time for routine shearing of every shrub in sight. Late season pruning can stimulate tender growth if done too early in fall, while midwinter pruning on certain species can expose plants to unnecessary stress or remove flower buds. Structural pruning of dormant deciduous trees can be beneficial, but timing and species matter. This is where professional judgment earns its keep.

## Lawns suffer quietly in winter

A lawn can look dormant and still be taking damage. The most common issues are compaction, crown injury, snow mold, salt exposure, and smothering from piled snow or debris.

Foot traffic is a bigger problem than many owners realize. Frozen grass blades become brittle, and repeatedly walking the same route across frosty turf can injure plant tissue and compact the soil beneath. On commercial sites, this usually happens where people cut corners instead of staying on sidewalks. On residential properties, it often happens between the driveway and front door, especially after snow makes the shortest route feel obvious. By late winter, the path is visible even before the grass greens up.

The lawn near streets and walkways also takes a beating from deicing practices. Salt spray and salty meltwater draw moisture from plant tissue and alter soil chemistry. Cool season turf can recover from minor exposure, but repeated applications in the same areas can leave thin, straw colored edges that linger well into spring. Ornamental grasses, perennials, and low shrubs near these zones are vulnerable too.

Mowing height going into winter deserves a balanced approach. Turf cut too short before dormancy is more exposed to cold and traffic damage. Left too tall, it can mat under snow and create conditions favorable to snow mold. For many cool season lawns, a gradual reduction to a moderate final height works better than one severe cutoff. Exact height depends on species and local conditions, but extremes on either side tend to create problems.

## **Hardscape needs winter attention too**

Landscape maintenance in winter is not only about plants. Paths, patios, retaining walls, edging, irrigation components, and lighting systems can all be damaged if neglected.

Freeze thaw cycling is especially hard on any surface where water infiltrates small gaps. Polymeric sand joints in pavers that have broken down, loose step stones, cracked mortar, and settled sections of walkway all become more vulnerable in winter. Ice expands, materials shift, and a small imperfection becomes a trip hazard or a larger repair by spring.

Snow removal practices matter here. The wrong plow edge can chip pavers and curbs. Repeated scraping across decorative concrete can scar the surface. Snow should never be piled thoughtlessly onto fragile planting beds or against young shrubs. I have seen evergreen screens crushed not by snowfall, but by where the plowed snow was stacked week after week.

Landscape lighting is another overlooked item. Fixtures that sit low to the ground can be buried, knocked loose, or severed during snow removal. Winter is a good time to mark fixture locations before the first major storm, especially on commercial properties where plow operators may not know the site well.

## **Irrigation winterization is nonnegotiable**

A poorly winterized irrigation system can turn a routine spring startup into an expensive repair project. Water trapped in lines, valves, manifolds, or backflow assemblies expands when it freezes. Cracked components may not be obvious until pressure is restored months later.

Professionals usually blow out systems with compressed air, zone by zone, using pressure appropriate for the layout and components. Too little air leaves water behind. Too much can damage the system. This is not an area where guesswork helps. Even on smaller properties, proper shutdown includes more than simply turning the controller off.

Drip irrigation deserves equal attention. People forget about it because it is tucked under mulch or hidden in planting beds. Yet clogged emitters, split tubing, and trapped water in low spots are common spring discoveries when winterization was rushed.

## **Salt is useful, but it is not harmless**

Deicing keeps people safe, and safety has to come first. Still, the material chosen and the way it is applied have a direct effect on nearby landscapes.

Sodium chloride is common because it is inexpensive and effective within a familiar temperature range. It is also tough on soil structure and plant roots when used heavily. Calcium chloride and magnesium chloride have different performance characteristics and may be preferable in some conditions, though they come with cost and handling considerations. Sand improves traction but adds cleanup and can clog drains. There is no perfect answer for every property.

The smarter approach is targeted use. Apply the least amount that achieves safe walking conditions. Calibrate spreaders. Pre treat when conditions support it. Sweep excess material off paved surfaces before it washes into planting beds. On high visibility properties, this alone can reduce winter plant injury significantly.

If salt sensitive plantings sit close to walks or roads, physical barriers such as burlap screens can help block spray. They are not attractive in every setting, but they can save a hedge that would cost far more to replace.

## **What to handle before deep winter sets in**

A rushed response after the first major freeze is rarely as effective as steady preparation during late fall. The properties that come through winter with the fewest problems usually have a few basics handled in advance.

1. Clear leaves and debris from lawns, beds, drains, and hardscape joints.
2. Adjust irrigation, then winterize the full system properly.
3. Mulch planting beds to a moderate depth, keeping material away from trunks and crowns.
4. Identify vulnerable plants, hardscape edges, and drainage trouble spots before snow covers them.
5. Plan snow storage and deicing routes so plows, shovels, and meltwater do not repeatedly punish the same areas.

This kind of preparation does not eliminate winter stress, but it changes the outcome. A prepared site still experiences storms. It simply absorbs them better.

## **Evergreens, perennials, and ornamental grasses all need different treatment**

One of the easiest mistakes in winter landscape maintenance is applying the same rule to every plant type. They do not respond the same way, and a practice that helps one category can hurt another.

Evergreens often benefit from protection against drying winds, particularly in exposed sites or during the first year or two after planting. Deep watering before the ground freezes can make a visible difference in winter color retention and spring recovery. What they do not need is mulch piled into cones around the trunk or snow piled on top of the root zone all season.

Perennials are more nuanced than many homeowners expect. Some should be left standing through winter because their crowns benefit from the protection, their stems catch insulating snow, [Learn here](#) and their seed heads support wildlife. Others are better cut back because diseased foliage can carry problems into spring. The right call depends on species, local disease pressure, and whether the planting is formal or naturalistic.

Ornamental grasses can be left standing for structure and winter interest, but in heavy snow regions large grasses may collapse and spread into walkways or onto neighboring plants. Tying them loosely can help hold the clump together until late winter or early spring. That said, tightly wrapping grasses can trap moisture and create a different set of issues. As with most winter care, moderation works better than overcorrection.

## **Wildlife pressure rises when food gets scarce**

Rabbits, deer, voles, and mice do more damage in winter than many people realize. When easier food sources disappear, bark, buds, and stems become fair game. Snow cover can make the problem worse by giving animals easier access to portions of shrubs and trunks they could not reach earlier in the year.

Young trees are especially vulnerable to gnawing at the base. Guards can help, but they need the right fit and regular checks. A guard packed tightly with mulch or left in place without inspection can create moisture and pest problems of its own. Deer browse is harder to manage, especially on open properties near natural areas. Repellents have mixed results in wet or snowy weather, so physical exclusion is often more dependable where pressure is high.

Voles are stealthier. They tunnel under mulch and snow, feeding on roots and bark near the soil line. By spring, a plant may leaf out weakly or fail outright. Heavy mulch pushed against trunks gives them cover, which is one more reason to keep mulch rings neat and breathable rather than thick and mounded.

## **Snow removal strategy can preserve or ruin a landscape**

A lot of winter landscape damage is not caused by winter itself. It is caused by how people respond to winter. Snow removal crews, property staff, and even homeowners with a single shovel can unintentionally create patterns of damage that repeat every year.

Plow blade height matters near lawn edges, gravel shoulders, and paver transitions. One operator who rides the edge too low all season can peel sod away from the curb line or catch hardscape corners repeatedly. Marking vulnerable edges before snowfall helps, particularly in commercial sites and large residential properties.

Snow storage locations are equally important. Piling snow on the same lawn corner every storm compresses turf, increases salt concentration, delays spring thaw, and leaves that area waterlogged for weeks. Piling snow against shrubs can snap branches and keep root zones saturated long after surrounding ground has dried. If there is enough room, rotate storage zones and prioritize durable surfaces or reinforced areas designed to handle the load.

Hand shoveling presents a different issue. People naturally throw snow onto the nearest bed. Over a season, that bed receives not just snow, but concentrated deicing residue and repeated compaction at the edge. It is a small pattern with large consequences.

## **Midwinter inspections catch problems while they are still small**

Once winter settles in, landscape maintenance shifts from preparation to observation. Conditions change quickly. A property that handled December well can struggle in February if drainage paths ice over, snow piles grow too high, or a thaw refreezes in all the wrong places.

I like to check landscapes after major events rather than on a rigid calendar. A wet snowstorm calls for looking at branch loading. A thaw followed by a freeze calls for checking low spots, drains, and walkway icing. A windy cold stretch calls for reviewing evergreen exposure and burlap screens. These inspections do not need to take long, but they should be purposeful.

Watch for a few specific warning signs:

1. Standing water that lingers near pavement, foundations, or planting beds.
2. Split branches, leaning stems, or bark cracks after snow or ice events.
3. Salt crusting along turf edges or on soil surfaces near walks.
4. Repeated footpaths forming across dormant lawn areas.
5. Mulch displaced from crowns or piled tightly against woody stems.

Catching these early can mean the difference between a small adjustment and a spring replacement.

# Commercial properties have a different risk profile

Residential winter landscape maintenance often focuses on plant preservation and curb appeal. Commercial sites have those concerns too, but they also deal with liability, high traffic, visibility, and the demands of snow contracts. The landscape has to survive while the site remains safe and functional every day.

That changes priorities. Pedestrian routes need sharper attention. Lighting must stay visible and operational. Plantings near entrances are more exposed to deicers and piled snow. Turf islands in parking lots often suffer because they receive runoff from all sides, including meltwater loaded with salts and grit. Tree pits can become compacted and contaminated fast.

For commercial managers, communication between landscape and snow teams is critical. If the snow crew is not told where irrigation heads, drain inlets, tree rings, paver transitions, and vulnerable shrubs are located, avoidable damage is almost guaranteed. A pre season site walk with maps or marked zones prevents a surprising amount of trouble.

## Spring success is built in winter

The healthiest spring landscapes usually do not come from heroic recovery work in March or April. They come from disciplined winter care that reduced stress, limited breakage, managed water, and protected the most vulnerable features of the property.

That is the real value of winter Landscape Maintenance. It protects roots you cannot see, surfaces you do not want to rebuild, and plants that take years to mature. It also protects budgets. Replacing a hedge, repairing a shifted walkway, or reseeding salt burned turf costs far more than a thoughtful winter plan.

Every site has its own weak spots. On one property it may be sunscald on young trees. On another it may be plow damage at bed edges or ice buildup from poor drainage. The goal is not to fight winter on every front. It is to know where winter usually wins, then strengthen those points before the season does its worst. That approach is less dramatic, more methodical, and far more effective.

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## **FAQ About Landscape Maintenance**

### **What is landscape maintenance?**

Landscape maintenance is the ongoing care, cleaning, and upkeep of outdoor green spaces to keep them healthy, safe, and attractive.

### **Is \$100 an hour too much for landscape work?**

An hourly rate of \$100 is not too much for specialized or professional landscape work, though it sits at the higher end of the standard pricing spectrum.

### **How much do landscapers charge for maintenance?**

For professional landscaping maintenance, homeowners typically pay \$100 to \$410 per month for recurring services, or an hourly labor rate of \$50 to \$100 per hour per crew member.