

Going Away on Vacation? Take Precautions so That Coming Home is Just As Sweet

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Case the joint yourself.

Think about how you would get into your house if you were a criminal. Test the window jambs and the locks. Examine the structure inside and out.

Don't leave a spare key outside. They're easier to find than you think.

Remember to lock the garage door before you leave.

This may sound obvious, but Federal Bureau of Investigation statistics show that 27.8 percent of the total burglaries committed in the United States in 2006 were no-force entries.

This means that in more than 607,000 burglaries that year, the thieves simply opened an unlocked door or window and went right in.

Check alarms.

If you have an alarm system, put it on. Check to see if it's working.

Alarm company employees have sensitive information about you. Make sure the company screens employees.

Even if you don't have a security system, buy a sign and stick it in the yard.

Install lights.

Install motion lights in the front and back of the house. To be extra cautious, try to position the lights at the corners of your residence so the motion detectors can catch someone approaching from the side.

Make sure the lights are high enough that the bulbs can't be unscrewed by a criminal.

Trim greenery.

Make sure all bushes and trees are trimmed back so a burglar can't be concealed while trying to open a window or door.

Do the driveway dodge.

Keep a car parked in the driveway so it looks like someone is home. Even better, ask a neighbor to park in your driveway so the car will come and go.

Lock tools and things away.

Don't leave anything around the yard that might help a burglar get into the house.

Ladders, boxes and garden tools should be put away in a locked cabinet.

Many burglars have used the property owner's own tools to break into a home. Don't place outdoor furniture tables near the house. These could become an easy stepladder to get on the roof.

Make the backyard inaccessible.

Padlocking your gates when you are at home can be inconvenient, but the advantages of doing it while you are on vacation are major. It not only makes getting into the backyard more difficult, but it seriously hinders getting out while carrying items such as stereos and computers. The difficulty level acts as a strong deterrent.

Secure the windows.

Though windows are fairly easy to break, the loud noise of shattering glass will deter a thief if your house is near others.

Don't leave windows and doors open when you're away. Many people will leave second-floor windows open.

Basement windows are an easy target, because they're low and usually well-hidden. Wedge a steel bar across the window, or install a metal grate.

Place vertical bolts or a piece of wood, such as a broomstick or metal rod, in the tracks of sliding doors. Whether you're traveling to Paris, France, or Paris, Texas, the last thing you want to have to worry about is your home being burglarized while you're on vacation. By doing a few simple things before you hit the road, you can make your house as intruder-proof as possible.

A little help from your friends ...

A house-sitter is one way to ensure that your home will be safe, but if you can't find a friend to stay in your home, ask someone to check on your home every day. This person should also have your cell phone number or hotel numbers for where you'll be each day you're away.

... and neighbors.

Remind your neighbors to call 911 immediately to report any suspicious activity.

Quiet the phone.

Don't change your answering machine message to say anything like, "We are out of town for two weeks," or indicate that you're away.

Turn down the ringer volume on your phone. This avoids having someone hear it go unanswered.

Leave all things as they were.

Keep blinds, shades or curtains the way they are when you are home.

Timing is everything.

Set up timers around your home to turn TVs, lamps and radios on and off at appropriate hours. This helps the house look and sound not-so-empty. The best plan is to set up alternating timers in different rooms.

Protect your valuables.

Don't leave your valuables such as the stereo, computer and jewelry visible from a window. Consider putting up draperies and blinds.

Make a list of valuables. Keep photographic or videotaped records, if possible, then store the inventory list somewhere else.

This helps both the police and the insurance agent to identify stolen goods.

Use an engraving pen to mark items in an inconspicuous place.

After the holidays, be sure to include in your home inventory a list of all your newly acquired gifts such as stereo equipment, computer, VCR, jewelry, and so forth. Make sure your insurance policy includes the amount of your new items should they ever be stolen or damaged by fire. If you don't update the policy, some of your valuables may not be insured.

It's called a safe for a reason.

Buy a floor safe. This hinders the "smash and grab" intruders from obtaining valuables.

Or consider putting valuables into a safety deposit box.

Watch those loose lips.

Be careful about who you tell that you're going to be leaving town. If you're at the gym or in a coffee shop talking about your three-week excursion, someone may get ideas. It's especially important to not talk to strangers about your trip.

Leave it humming.

Leave the air conditioner on. A silent compressor on a hot day is a good indication you aren't home.

See Spot work.

A barking dog is one of the best security systems available. Instead of sending the dog to the kennel, hire a trustworthy pet-sitter.

Sources: University of Louisville; Minneapolis police; Insurance Information Network of California; How Stuff Works; No Nonsense Self- Defense; Southern Living; AAA

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