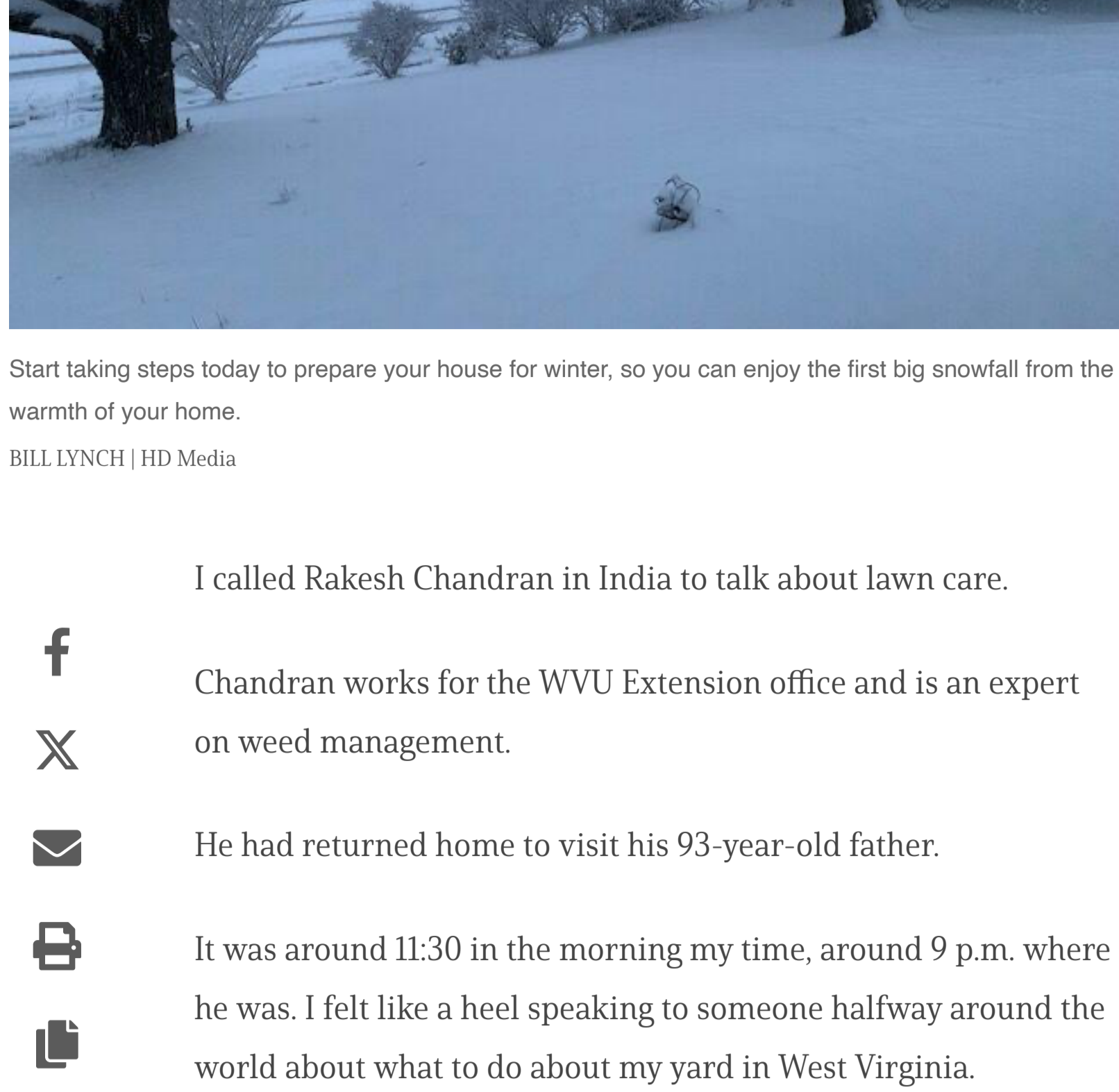


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One Month at a Time: Experts weigh in on preparing for winter

By BILL LYNCH lynch@hdmediallc.com Oct 26, 2024 4 min to read



Start taking steps today to prepare your house for winter, so you can enjoy the first big snowfall from the warmth of your home.

BILL LYNCH | HD Media

I called Rakesh Chandran in India to talk about lawn care.

Chandran works for the WVU Extension office and is an expert on weed management.

He had returned home to visit his 93-year-old father.

It was around 11:30 in the morning my time, around 9 p.m. where he was. I felt like a heel speaking to someone halfway around the world about what to do about my yard in West Virginia.

But it was all part of the winter preparation project I'd been working my way through, and Chandran was the name I'd been given.

Almost by way of apology, I tried to explain why I was bugging him from nine time zones away.

"So, I sort of react to things after they happen instead of doing a lot of planning," I told him. "A year after I moved to my house, we had a derecho, and the power was out for nearly two weeks."

I told him that taught me to keep electric lanterns around the house because they don't produce heat, which you don't want during a parched June.

"I'm trying to do better," I told the extension agent. "We just came out of a very dry summer, and I started thinking about how to best take care of my grass over the winter."

Chandran took it all in stride but reminded me that his specialty is weed science.

I told him that was perfect. Weeds were the only thing that grew during the drought. The rest of the yard was the color of cardboard.

"There were many places in West Virginia where the drought stressed the turf," he said. "It was like straw."

I told him we'd had some rain this way, but we're still in a drought.

The lack of water affects what I can do. I should avoid adding to the stress of the yard, he said.

"So, your lawn would benefit from irrigation," he said.

Letting the grass drink will help it rebound, and once it's looking a little greener, he recommended I use fertilizer.

"One to two pounds of nitrogen per 1000 square feet," he said.

But if I have to wait for rain, the fertilizer should wait, too.

"And you should get up whatever leaf debris," he said. "If you leave too many leaves, you can run the risk of winter mold, which can kill off sections of the lawn."

"But what if I just run the mower over the leaves?" I asked.

Who likes raking leaves?

Chandran said that's fine if there aren't a lot of leaves. Mulched leaves can be beneficial to the grass. A dusting is fine. A thick paste made of dead leaves isn't great.

He also said I can cut the grass and lower the mower blade to a height of about 2 1/2 from 3 1/2 inches, which sounded OK, except I don't know what height I have the blade set for currently.

But I shouldn't mow until the grass looks like it has rebounded.

There isn't really a deadline on that. As long as the grass is growing, I can mow all the way up until New Year's, if I want. Just not right now.

"You don't want to make it worse," he said.

Horticulturist Lewis Jett, also with the extension office, gave me some advice, too.

He loves that I garden. More people ought to do it, he said.

"We're always encouraging people to have a garden," Jett said. "It's a rewarding hobby and it's good to grow some of your own food."

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I did not mention that I was kind of a bad gardener.

Every year, I start full of hope and ambition. I buy seeds. I make plans. I plant, and then I'm lazy about the weeding, the watering and every part of caring for the garden, except for complaining about the deer.

Jett told me there are several strategies for prepping for the winter, but most of them begin with just pulling the garden debris from the past season.

"And that's kind of a dirty job," he said. "Nobody likes picking up old, rotten tomatoes or slimy melons."

But it is necessary to pull everything out so that it doesn't cause problems in the spring. Sure, an old tomato might go to seed and give you a plant you didn't plan on, but it could also carry disease that might cause trouble for whatever you do plant.

A good compost pile can break down weeds and a lot of disease.

I do not have a compost pile. Maybe I ought to start one, I thought.

"For some people, clearing the garden is enough," he said. "But you can also plant rye or clover to overwinter — or you could try a winter crop like kale or spinach."

I wouldn't have to dig for that. I could just go out and spread it out over the ground. That would work fine.

Leafy greens serve the same purpose as the grasses. They anchor the soil from erosion while also adding nitrogen, which is a good way to prepare for spring gardening.

And you can also eat the greens.

"I've seen winter gardens here among the Amish, and they'll have a field of spinach going," he said.

I can also till the ground, if I want, and aerate the soil. This is a good way to get rid of a few pests and creates pathways for air, water, and nutrients to reach plant roots. But it isn't necessary. The main points are to clean up and cover the bare earth so it will be ready come springtime.

My last call was with Tom Martin at Montani Mechanical Group.

I've known Tom Martin almost as long as I've been in Charleston, though we've lost touch here and there a couple of times.

Two years ago, Tom's company came to my rescue when my Reagan-era heating and cooling system finally just died.

In February.

I lucked out. The heat went out during a mild stretch of weather. The nights were bearable with a space heater in my bedroom. Tom's guys installed a new heating and cooling system before temperatures took a dive.

They did not do this out of the goodness of their hearts, of course. Tom runs a business, but the job got done fast. The rest of my winter was warm and, for the first time in a couple of years, I enjoyed a cool summer.

On our call, Tom told me that now is a good time to have my furnace checked.

"This isn't a sales pitch for us. Most any heating and cooling company can do it, but you want to get somebody to come out and make sure your heat works," he said. "Most any heating company is going to have a service contract you can sign up for."

He said the company would send somebody out to check the parts and look for issues.

"Get it identified before it fails," he said.

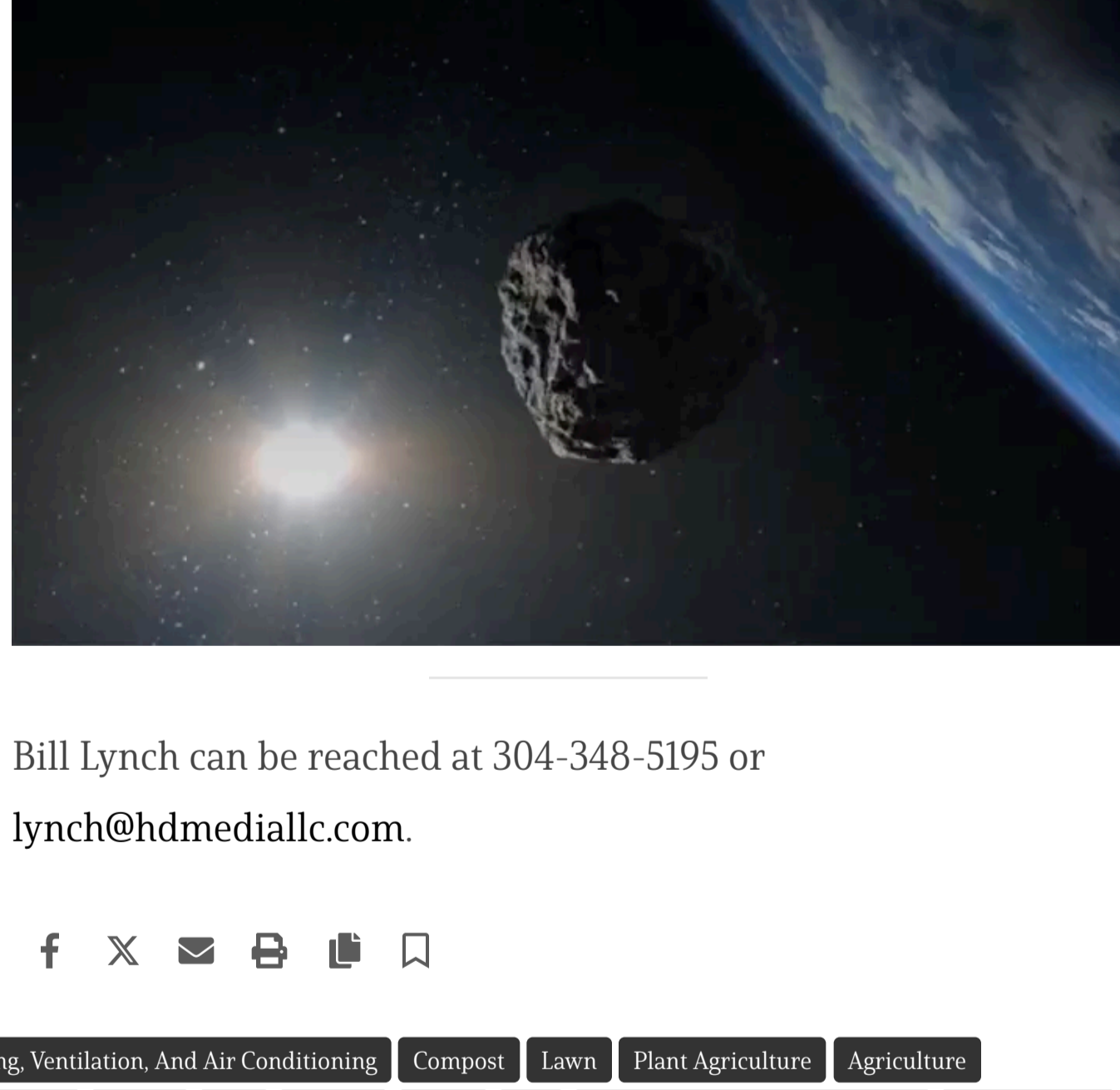
And check the carbon monoxide detector. Make sure it's working.

"Carbon monoxide is odorless, colorless and can kill you," he said.

Carbon monoxide poisoning isn't always easy to notice, either. Sometimes, symptoms begin as a headache.

For plumbing, Tom recommends wrapping any pipes that are located along exterior walls with heat tape and shutting off the water to the outside spigot, if possible.

"And make sure the vents to your crawl spaces are closed," he said. "Just keep the cold out."



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