

Winter camping and staying warm while sleeping

Looking back at my life, I realize that I have been very fortunate to spend most of my time outdoors for both career and personal recreation.



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay



Looking out my office window at this view hardly puts me in a mood for camping. If you decide to camp in the cold months, there are a few things you can do to stay warm. (Special to the Montrose Daily Press/Mark Rackay)

Mother Nature and her ever-present sidekick, Murphy, of Murphy's Law fame, have always been around and taking part in whatever proceedings I have been involved with. Hard as they try, they have not been able to stop me in my pursuit of all things outdoors.

I realize that most of the activities that caused me some form of bodily harm were self-induced. Some were actually described as "mind boggling acts of idiocy" by witnesses. None, however, come close to the idiocy of my going camping in the dead of winter.

I should start out by saying when I refer to "camping," I don't mean setting the brake on the motorhome and bumping up the thermostat a couple notches. I am referring to full-blown, sleep in a tent and cook over an open fire type of camping.

Over the Christmas break of my 11th year of life, and seemingly, my 100th year of school, a couple friends and I decided to go camping. A grumbling parent was enlisted to drive us up into the mountains, drop off our camping stuff and our scrawny teenage carcasses, and not return for three days.

Day one, nature saw fit to drop 2 feet of snow on us. This was mild compared to Day 2 when it cleared off and the temps fell below zero. We would have stayed close to the fire, if there were one. I had not yet mastered the skills of building a fire in 30-knot winds that don't die down even with nightfall.

Bedtime was more misery because my little K-Mart cowboy sleeping bag was useless. That thing was probably good enough to lay on while watching cartoons in the living room, but worthless in the great out back.

By the time we were picked up, I probably looked like a young Jack Nicholson from the final scene in *The Shining*. The ride home, with a chortling parent who "drew the short straw" was humiliating, albeit warm by the car heater. I left the incident alive, and just a wee bit smarter.

Winter camping does not have to be a test of your misery meter. All it takes is the proper equipment, knowledge of how to use it, and a big dose of luck. The luck part is what has always eluded me.

Staying warm during the day is much easier than when you go to bed for the night. All of the activities that brought you outdoors in the winter,

coupled with the right layered clothing and footwear, should be sufficient to warm you through an outdoor day. The problem arises as the sun begins to set.

There is an outdoor myth that you should not fall asleep in the cold because you will die of exposure. It is true that your core temperature does drop some while you sleep, but it is not a problem unless you are already suffering from hypothermia. If you get cold during your sleep, the shivering will wake you. In a survival situation, it is a mistake to avoid sleep in the cold.

The sleeping bag you bring is made to trap heat, but it does not create it. Just like a thermos, if you are cold when you climb into the bag, you will stay that way. The trick is to get warm before you climb into the bag.

To get warm before bed, you could sit close to the campfire, have a warm drink and snack, or do a few minutes of exercise. Don't build up a sweat; just get the body warmed up.

I like to put on fresh clothes before climbing into the bag. Keep a set of long underwear in the sleeping bag that is reserved just for sleeping. I also keep a pair of warm socks and a watch type of beanie hat. Don't over dress or sleep in the same clothes you wore all day. Wearing too many clothes compresses the bag and takes away the "fluff" and reduces the bags ability to trap heat.

Speaking of your sleeping bag, proper storage is essential. If you keep the bag all rolled up and compressed in the compression sack they come with, it will make your bag less insulated for the next time you use it. Use a large storage bag or hang it in the closet if you have room. A mesh laundry bag works well for storage.

Some people like to put a warm water bottle, wrapped in a towel, in the bag with them. I am not one of them. Once I had a bottle leak and completely saturated my bag. When I awoke in the middle of the night, I thought I had done something I had not done since I was 3. One of those air-activated body warmers on your chest would probably out do the water bottle.

Remember that the heat of your body warms the air space in your bag. You must have this

air space, but too much space is a bad thing. If you are in a bag that is too large, try stuffing some loose clothes into the bottom of the bag to reduce the air space. This will leave less area your body has to heat.

Get something between your bag and the ground to insulate you from the cold. I have never been a fan of air mattresses. Every time I use one, it springs a leak or slowly loses air throughout the night so I awake on the ground. Look for a sleeping pad that has a solid closed cell type of foam construction.

Pads all come with an R rating which describes the pads ability to resist heat flow. An R-value of 1 means that it is fine for a sleepover for the kids while a R-value of 10 would be best for winter camping outside.

While we are discussing the right sleeping pad, make sure you choose the right sleeping bag. Obviously, your summer slumber bag will be useless come January, just as your winter bag would be a sauna bag during your July outing.

Bags come in several styles. Some are the "mummy type" which leave an opening for your face to stick out. These kind drive me nuts because of my frame, I can't get out of them. I prefer the "open top" bags that allow more room for me to toss and turn throughout the night.

Bags today come with a temperature rating. Pay close attention to the rating of your bag and the expected temperatures on your outing. Bags that are rated for 32 degrees are probably acceptable for early fall camping, but will not hack it for January. Opt for a bag that is rated for much colder than you expect because you can always unzip the bag if you get too warm.

Before you hit the sack for the night, grab a fatty snack. Your body creates heat by metabolizing foods. Foods high in fat content take longer to metabolize, thereby creating more heat and for a longer time. You can go back to eating healthy in the morning.

There are several types of heaters you can bring into your tent at night but these come with a score of other potential problems. You must keep the tent ventilated, lest you succumb to carbon monoxide poisoning.

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The wonders of cover crops

I'm getting so anxious to get out in the garden and enjoy the early spring days. The smell of the fresh spring soil and the feel of that great soft fluffy loam is something that's hard to beat. But I bet whether you're new to the Montrose area or have been gardening here for years, you don't have to dig deep to know that fluffy loam doesn't really describe our native soils.

Most of the soils in our area are compacted clay and don't have much organic matter in them. This is the reason that it sometimes feels like we're digging in concrete rather than soil. Take heart though. There really are ways to get around this and it's possible to have the garden of your dreams.

A soil that is ideal for plant growth typically contains about 5% organic matter. Comparatively, most soils in our area contain less than 1% organic material. So we "amend" the soil, or try to make it a better environment for plants to grow.

This can be done a few different ways. One way is by adding compost or other organic soil amendments and tilling it in. But there's another way to improve the soil. Soil scientists have discovered the amazing benefits of using cover crops to improve the soil.

Research has shown that the use of cover crops will actually speed up the natural soil-building process, can reduce weeds, and help the soil absorb and hold valuable water. They also improve conditions that are beneficial for soil microorganisms and earthworms, which are the real workers in the soil.

Annual ryegrass, Sudan grass, oats, buckwheat and legumes, such as peas, beans, alfalfa, clover and vetch can all be used as a cover crop. Leguminous plants have the capability of taking nitrogen from the air and making it usable to plants.

My favorite thing to use as a cover crop is nitro, or tillage, radishes. These are not your typical radishes. These guys are like the King Kong of the garden world. They're huge! The radish is a fast growing edible root. The large taproot can extend a foot or more deep! They should ideally be planted in July or August and will freeze with frost.

Just try to picture the large pathway that was created by the huge root. As it decomposes it leaves behind a large root channel that's rich in nutrients, releasing nitrogen back into the soil. The next season, your crop's roots will follow the path of the decomposing radish through the compacted soil layers. The decomposition of the radish also produces biofumigates in the soil, which can reduce pest and harmful nematode populations. How great is that!



Gardening A to Z

By Linda Corwine McIntosh

You can use any of the above-mentioned cover crops along with your tillage radish. Cover crops can be planted along side of the vegetables in your garden or in an unused area.

One example of using a cover crop

in your garden would be to first plant peas in the spring, harvesting them as early as possible then turn under the vines or cut them off. Next, plant snap beans or another legume, harvest, and till them under or cut them off. Finally, clear away your vegetables after they're killed by frost. Then plant winter or perennial rye at the rate of two pounds per 1,000 square-foot area. Rake the soil lightly to cover the seed, then water. Generally, two or three fall waterings will be enough to germinate and establish rye.

It's pretty cool that rye grass will germinate with the warm days of winter. By spring they will be about a foot tall. You can then mow it or chop them up and turn it under.

However, depending on the cover crop you use, it may die over the winter, so as you see, there are no hard and fast rules. Just keep in mind, the ideas behind cover crops are to try to minimize soil disturbance, which can be harmful to the soil, microbes, and earthworms. It's also beneficial to your soil to have no or minimal bare ground, even during the winter months!

It's important not to let your cover crops go to seed or they may become weeds, growing where they're not wanted! If this sounds like something you would like to try, you can purchase cover crop seeds online, at local nurseries, catalogs, or the local co-ops.

We're just starting to realize how important large and small soil organisms are to soil health and crop productivity. And we definitely know that healthy soil has a large and diverse population of microorganisms. As the saying goes "Healthy soils produce healthy roots. Healthy roots produce healthy plants, and healthy plants make happy gardeners!"

If you want to know more about cover crops and healthy soils, you're in luck. The 10th Annual Soil Health Conference is being held in Delta today, Feb. 21 at Delta Center for the Performing Arts, from 8 a.m. - 12:30 p.m. Walk-ins are welcome. There will also be a series of free classes at the Montrose Public Library through April 6. Your local C.S.U. Extension office can also provide you with information, or you might want to stop by the Home Garden and Business Expo and visit the CSU master gardener's booth.

Linda Corwine McIntosh is an advanced master gardener, ISA-certified arborist and licensed commercial pesticide applicator.

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