

Many Tricks Can Save Electricity

February 23 2009, Gary Gray

The electric bill this winter is more than a car payment, and you've decided to take action. But if you're not well-schooled, it's best to take some advice from the pros before stalking heat-saving products up and down the aisles of your favorite home supply store.

Don't hesitate; insulate

"One of the first things you want to do is think it out and come up with things you can do that are most cost effective, and that begins with insulation," said Kevin Meade, operations manager of Lowe's in Bristol, Va. "Our insulation sales are way up, and that not only includes the type that's rolled or blown into walls and attics, that includes insulation for pipes and water heaters and weather stripping for windows and doors."

Insulation for ceilings, walls and floors is rated by thickness. Ceiling insulation is the thickest and has an R-30 rating. Heat rises, and the ceiling is a place you want to cap the heat or cool air that's trying to escape the home.

Typically, a roll of R-30-rated insulation is sold in 80- to 90-square-foot sections and costs about \$60.

Insulation for walls and floors is normally rated R-19, nearly half the thickness of ceiling insulation. R-19 also comes in packs of 2-foot-by-4-foot pieces, which make the material easier to handle. A 15-foot section of R-19 sells for about \$10.

Ernie Odum, hardware supervisor for The Home Depot in Bristol, Va., said it is important to properly insulate a house and seal cracks and holes, but "a house still has to breathe."

Odum is talking about the need for moisture to escape, which it does mostly through attics. If not, mold could begin to grow.

He also said people should be thinking now about installing roof vents that allow warm air to escape a house during warmer weather.

Whir, spin and save

Once the house or apartment is properly insulated and cracks and holes are filled, Meade said the next step includes buying ENERGY STAR products such as washers, dryers and refrigerators.

ENERGY STAR is a joint program of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Department of Energy that sets guidelines and allows for an ENERGY STAR seal on products known to increase energy efficiency. Consumers who buy and install these products might be eligible for Home Energy Efficiency Improvement Tax Credits.

ENERGY STAR products range from new, high-tech washers and dryers to lighting systems and ceiling fans.

"If you're looking long term, the washers and dryers are definitely a good investment," Meade said. "Most people aren't going to make this investment unless theirs stops working. You may be paying a little more for these, but you're going from a Pinto to a Cadillac."

A step up to a new energy-efficient washing machine will set you back between \$750 and \$1,000, compared to about \$400 for a traditional

replacement.

The new, high-tech, energy-saving dryers run from \$750 to \$1,300, with the high-end models saving consumers about 70 percent of the energy used by traditional dryers.

The ENERGY STAR dryers have sensors that measure moisture and humidity in clothing. When the conditions are right, the dryers shut off. The energy-efficient washers have finely tuned controls that adjust water temperature and water use more precisely.

Meade said the efficiency rating is not limited to one brand, but to any company that produces a substantial energy savings. Refrigerators now on showroom floors are one example; many can operate for a full year on what it costs to run a 75-watt, traditional incandescent light bulb for the same length of time.

Let there be savings

Two more energy-saving products are newly engineered light bulbs and programmable thermostats. Both are easily installed, relatively inexpensive and result in substantial savings.

The compact fluorescent light bulbs first appeared in the early 1990s and were seen by many as a novelty. But over time, the CFL bulb was found to use about 75 percent less energy and last much longer than traditional incandescent bulbs -- burning bright for as long as nine years.

The average lifetime for a CFL bulb is 8,000 hours, four times that of a traditional bulb.

But the CFLs cost more.

A pack of two incandescent bulbs, both the 60-watt and 75-watt versions, costs about \$3.50 and last about 2,000 hours. A two-pack of the 60-watt CFL bulbs goes for about \$5.50, and two 75-watt bulbs sell for about \$6.50.

Another popular and cost-effective product is the programmable thermostat. Depending on the type, the cost ranges from \$30 to \$100. The thermostats can be set to turn on and off at specific times, which saves energy.

"A traditional replacement will cost customers as little as \$15," Meade said. "But customers are buying more and more of the top-end thermostat, which you can program out for seven days. People love these. You can program them to heat less when you know nobody will be home and to kick up slightly when you are at home. It beats setting it at 68 or whatever, because a few degrees here and there really can save you money."

Heat helpers

When asked what advice he'd give to those who want to start saving money on their energy bills, Odum said: "Start out by knowing what areas you want to heat. Make note of what type [heaters] they are and how much energy they use and then look at the products available to see if you want to upgrade."

When it comes to alternative and supplemental heating, most retailers offer a wide range of products.

The most popular portable heater is the radiator-type metal heater equipped with a programmable shutoff. The units sell for about \$40 and can make most small rooms warm and comfy, he said.

Kerosene heaters will help heat a room or a small garage, but customers are not buying many, mainly because of the caustic fumes they produce, he said.

"We do sell a few, but people buy them as a backup in case their power goes out," Meade said.

Kerosene heaters range in cost from \$60 to \$100, and electric ceramic heaters range from \$25 to \$50.

"A lot of people are trying to heat only certain rooms to save money, but you've really got to be careful," Meade said. "To do that, folks tend to use too many electrical cords, and the fact is we've been selling lots of propane and natural gas room heaters that put out from 1,000 to 1,500 BTUs."

Other stuff

Meade said people should think of their homes as cocoons. The better the cocoon is sealed or insulated, the less it will cost to make additional cost-saving adjustments.

Other products that won't break the bank are available, including sealants and nail-on moldings that fit around windows. Another big seller is a thin, plastic material that, when heated with a hair dryer, shrinks and seals any cracks around windows.

About \$3 will get you enough foam tape stripping to seal one window or door. To seal that garage door with new vinyl weather stripping, you need to shell out about \$12 to \$15.

The cost stays in the single digits for "Window Shrink," the plastic wrap sealant, at about \$6 for enough to seal a window and \$7 for a patio door.

"One thing most people are doing is upgrading their windows from single to double pane and replacing old or broken doors," Odum said. "We're selling a lot of sealants, nail-in moldings and garage door seals."

Customers also are stocking up on duct and pipe insulation that is form fitting and keeps air and water warm. The pipe insulation is sold by the foot and is usually no more than \$1 a foot.

Even ceiling fans

Ceiling fans also have been moving off the shelves.

"If kept at a slow speed, they will push the warm air back down, and as you know, warm air rises," Meade said. "They also help circulate the warm air."

Some ceiling fans come with the ENERGY STAR label and can be had for about \$30 to \$50 for a two-speed unit. Depending on the desired size and style, people can pay

more than \$300 for a ceiling fan.

"Everyone is watching their dollar a little closer and may not come in here to buy a big-ticket item such as a new washer and dryer," Meade said. "But they're getting smarter, and most folks that come in know what they want."

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