

Save Money By Winterizing Your Home

By Michael Kling

With winter approaching, temperatures will be going down and heating bills will be going up. Heating and cooling account for about 56% of energy use in a typical American home, making it the largest energy expense for most homes, according to the U.S. Department of Energy. Many heat-saving tricks can also save cooling costs in the summer. And they help the environment in addition to helping your pocketbook.

To stop your money from flowing out your windows, under your doors and through your electric outlets follow these tips.

Find Energy-Sucking Culprits

Pass your hand around windows and doors on a cold day to find cold spots. Other heat-loss suspects include window-mounted air-conditioning units, dryer vents, outdoor faucets, cable TV and phone lines, and electric and gas service lines.

On a cold windy day, turn on bathroom fans and stove vents then walk around the house holding a burning incense stick. Drafts will blow the smoke. Or turn off the lights at night and have a friend shine a flashlight around door and window edges and electric sockets. You can see light through larger cracks. Close a window or door on a piece of paper. If you can pull it out without tearing it, you're losing heat.

You can also ask your electric company if they offer free energy audits. An inspector might point out energy saving tips you'd never think of yourself. (The average family spends \$1,600/year on utility bills.)

Windows Are Heat Losers

Close drapes and blinds at night. Open them during the day, especially for south-facing windows, to let the sun in. Heavy drapes can also help, and make sure your storm windows are closed. If you have older windows, replacing them with new energy-efficient ones is a large investment but worth the cost in the long run.

A cheaper, temporary alternative is to buy window insulator kits to cover the window with a sheet of clear plastic. Attach the sheet to the window frame with

double-sided tape then shrink wrap it with a hair dryer.

Seal The Air

You don't always need to spend a ton to save money. Air sealing, done with caulking and weather stripping, is one of the biggest energy efficiency improvements you can do. And it not only cuts heating costs, it also improves your home's comfort and durability, according to the U.S. Department of Energy.

To judge how much weather stripping you'll need, measure the window and door frames and add 10 to 15%. Think about the location and expected wear and tear when picking the type of weather stripping. Felt and open-cell foams are less efficient and more visible but are cheaper and easy to apply, making them fine for low-traffic areas. Vinyl, though slightly more expensive, holds up well and resists moisture. Metals such as stainless steel or aluminum last longer and are affordable.

Caulk is usually sold in disposal cartridges and applied with a caulking gun, but you can also buy aerosol cans, squeeze tubes and ropes for easy application, which is especially good on small jobs. (Find out how to reduce your costs with these inexpensive tips.)

A draft dodger, a snake-like piece of cloth wrapped around sand, placed at the bottom of a door will block the cold. The ones sold at stores may look like cute little animals, but a rolled up towel will also do. Unscrew outlet covers on outside walls and put foam gaskets on the outlets or reseal them with caulk.

Don't Let Santa In

Close your chimney flue damper if you have one. Consider installing glass doors on the fireplace if you don't have them now. Or think about buying a new rubber damper for a tighter seal.

You could also buy a fireplace chimney balloon, a plastic balloon that goes under the damper. Measure your fireplace to get one that's the right size. (You can enjoy the festive season without a jolly increase in your energy costs.)

Insulation Investment

Make sure your heating system is serviced. Replace the filter monthly. Check that vents, including return ducts, are not blocked by furniture, toys or piles of clothes. Cover your air ducts with insulation if they're not already. Drain your sprinkler pipes if you have them to make sure pipes underground don't freeze and break.

Check for old, dirty insulation in the attic that needs to be replaced. You can add new insulation on top of old, if you don't add the kind with paper backing (the

paper side faces down, by the way). Determining the proper the proper amount of insulation is tricky. A quick guide is that you should have at least 12 inches, enough to cover the ceiling joists.

The final tip that everyone already knows is to watch your thermostat. Make sure the house really is too cold before you crank it up; try grabbing a sweater first. Those winter heating bills can really add up but luckily, so can these simple tips. Get proactive about saving energy and you'll not only help the environment, you'll help out your wallet.