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Save energy (and money) around the house

By Tom Watson

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Now more than ever, we're bombarded with energy conservation tips. But many of these energy-saving methods have mixed results.

Let's take a closer look at the costs and potential pitfalls of four common strategies to save energy:

Use compact fluorescent (CF) bulbs. Some people have had problems with CF bulbs burning out earlier than advertised, not working in certain types of fixtures, or giving off a different kind of light than consumers are used to. But the quality of CF bulbs is rapidly improving, and many different types are now available. "You do need to pay attention to using the right type and wattage," says Mary Smith, manager of residential energy efficiency services for Puget Sound Energy (PSE).



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Seattle City Light provides a helpful guide at www.ci.seattle.wa.us/light/conserve/resident/cv5_1w2.htm.

Save receipts and packaging, and return the bulbs if they don't last as long as promised. Front porches and kitchens are ideal locations for CFs. And remember, CF bulbs contain mercury, so don't toss your dead bulbs in the trash. A list of retailers who accept CF bulbs for recycling is at www.productstewardship.net.

To make CFs more affordable, a Northwest Energy Star program, "Savings With a Twist," offers CF bulbs for 99 cents at selected retailers through Dec. 31. See the list of participating stores at www.northwestenergystar.com/index.php?cID=435.

Other area utilities, including PSE, also offer coupon or rebate programs for CF bulbs and energy-efficient lighting fixtures.

Seal or replace your windows. Replacing old windows with energy-efficient windows will make your home more comfortable. But you won't see your replacement costs paid back (through reduced energy bills) for 20 years or more, according to Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory.

As a low-cost alternative, consider window insulator kits. They cost \$2 or less per window at most hardware stores. With these kits, you tape a sheet of clear plastic (you can see through it fine) on the inside of your window and use a hair dryer to shrink the plastic to make a tight seal.

Weather-stripping and caulking your windows can also make your house cozier and reduce heating bills.

Install a programmable thermostat. This makes the most sense if you often forget to turn the heat down when you go to bed or leave for work. When used properly, it can pay for itself in just six months, according to Energy Star program estimates.

A programmable thermostat costs \$35 to \$100. You can install it yourself or have a contractor install it for \$200-\$350.

Increase your insulation. A Department of Energy (DOE) survey of homes built before 1980 found that only 20 percent were well-insulated. For the biggest bang for your buck, Smith and King County Resource Conservation Manager Lori Moen recommend adding insulation in the attic.

Insulation is rated by "R-value," which refers to heat resistance. Homes in the Pacific Northwest should have attic insulation of R-38. To achieve that level with batt or blanket insulation, you need about 11 inches, according to the Bonneville Power Administration.

Don't forget heating ducts. Typical duct systems lose 25 to 40 percent of the heating energy put out by the central furnace, says the DOE. Most experts recommend insulating your heating ducts in an unheated basement.

Seal any gaps or holes in your ducts. Leaking ducts waste an enormous amount of energy. Don't use duct tape for this job — ironically, it's a bad choice. Experts suggest using water-based "duct mastic," a thick paste that makes a permanent seal, although it may be hard to find. But unless you're especially handy, Smith advises having a contractor seal and insulate the ducts. This may cost you several hundred dollars, but should pay off in the long run.

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Watch for more EcoConsumer resources from King County at www.KCecoconsumer.com

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